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Paul's Poetic License: Philippians 2:6-11 as a Hellenistic Hymn

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Paul's Poetic License:
Philippians 2:6-11 as a Hellenistic Hymn

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Which context influenced Paul the most, Hellenistic or Jewish? Could it have been both? Although this question might seem a bit triflingly academic, ultimately inconsequential to the church today, in fact it very much determines how the church began, how it developed, and how it will continue to evolve. When one asks for Paul's context, one must question what coexisting influences might have played a part in Paul's life. Although Paul was Jewish, and thus monotheistic, how did the Hellenistic, polytheistic world around him shape him as well as the developing Jesus movement? If Paul was influenced primarily by Hebrew and Aramaic traditions, and not the surrounding Hellenistic culture, what about other followers of Jesus that he encountered? What role did Christ play in a time when the deification of mortals was an accepted practice? What interacting influences were present in the life and writings of the early church?

It is questions like these which sometimes cause a significant amount of controversy among biblical scholars. Although it might feel as though every verse in the Bible might have been the subject of debate, I shall be focusing on just six of them. The passage is a short Christology, seemingly uncomplicated, a nice cohesive whole with a beginning, middle and end. With such a straightforward passage, what possible controversy could there be? One need only to ask what, exactly, is it, to find that these six verses have been confounding scholars for over a century. The passage in question comes from Paul's letter to the Philippians, in the second chapter, verses six through eleven. The translation I use is my own, which I have included below:

“⁶Who being in the form of God did not consider being equal with God a prize to be grasped,

⁷But emptied himself taking the form of a slave, becoming in the likeness of men; and being found in appearance as a man

⁸He lowered himself becoming subject even to death, death on a cross.

⁹Therefore God also exalted him exceedingly and granted to him a name above all names,

¹⁰So that every knee of those in the heavens and on the earth and under the earth might bend at the name of Jesus,

¹¹And that every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the father.”¹

This passage is commonly quoted, as it eloquently recounts Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection. The elevated style in which it was written prompts scholars to mark it as separate, different, from the prose around it. Arguments vary, identifying it as anything from an *encomium* to a lyric poem, although the majority of scholars today consider it a hymn. Nevertheless, it is difficult to identify with certainty, since Philippians 2:6-11 demonstrates characteristics of a diverse range of writing styles common to that time period. Complicating this controversy is the question whether or not Paul wrote this specific

¹ The 20th century scholar Ernst Käsemann, among others, has made strong arguments regarding the proper translation and interpretations of many of the Greek terms. I did my own translation to develop my understanding of the original text and to pick up any nuances that might have been lost in the English translation.

passage. Most scholars agree that Paul wrote the letter to Philippians.² This passage, however, is more difficult to attribute to him. In this investigation, I shall be focusing primarily on a unique thesis by Arnold Levin.³ He argues that Philippians 2:6-11 is indeed attributable to Paul, but asserts an even more intriguing point: that Philippians 2:6-11 is a lyric poem with an identifiable Classical Greek meter. However, whereas scholars have investigated the possibility of Philippians 2:6-11 having a meter, Levin argues that the passage follows a specific model, that of the ancient Greek poet Pindar. Although I disagree with Levin's methods and full thesis, nevertheless I think his emphasis on Hellenistic culture is a compelling point. Philippians 2:6-11 is a pre-Pauline hymn that does not have a clear meter in the style of Pindar, but regardless could contain elements of a looser, rougher meter.

Foundations of the Founder: Paul in his Context

Rather than diving directly into the extensive scholarship surrounding Philippians 2:6-11, it is helpful first to understand to some degree the author of the letter and the historical context in which he lived. Of the leaders of the developing Christian church, aside from Jesus Christ himself, the most prominent figure is Paul of Tarsus. Despite not being one of the original followers of Jesus, having joined the movement after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul is the Apostle primarily credited with the foundation and early growth of

² John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 33B, *The Anchor Yale Bible* (New Haven: Yale University), 2008, 8.

³ Arnold Levin was a former religion professor at Augustana College in Rock Island, IL. I learned of his work through a professor who had worked with him in the same department.

Christianity. Like many religious figures, what we know of Paul is a mix of tradition and a few historical facts.

Paul lived in a time and place heavily influenced by Hellenistic culture. The designation 'Hellenistic' is a term applied by modern scholars which comes from 'Hellene,' the name which the ancient Greeks called themselves. When Alexander the Great built his empire, he scattered Greek culture, language, and religion across the Mediterranean and Middle East. Upon his death in 323 BC, this empire collapsed but the Greek influence remained, encouraged by the Macedonian generals who took power in the remnants of Alexander's empire. Thus, Greek culture remained prominent while mixing with the local traditions. By the time Paul was born, the power of this former empire had crumbled further, but Greek culture had integrated itself enough into the area that *koine*, the common man's Greek, was spread across the eastern Mediterranean. At this time, the Romans had become the dominant power in Europe and the Mediterranean. As their empire expanded, the Romans took what they considered to be the best of Greek culture and incorporated it into their civilization. It was in this web of cultures that Paul lived and worked.

Written accounts of Paul narrate his life beginning when he is a young man, leaving his upbringing to hints in the texts, conjecture, and religious tradition. Although scholars do acknowledge certain aspects of Paul's life that are most likely historical, other parts of his background are not as easy to support with historical fact. Acts locates Paul's place of origin

at Tarsus.⁴ He was born and raised Jewish but later converted to be a follower of Jesus.⁵ He was a Pharisee,⁶ and according to the Book of Acts he was a Roman citizen by birth.⁷

Ambiguous as his life is, what is clear is that Paul's family was wealthy enough for him to obtain a certain degree of education.

In terms of Paul's education, the reader immediately notes that Paul must have been educated to a certain degree in order to be able to read and write. At this time, learning to read and write was the primary focus of Greek and Roman elementary education.⁸ Thus, Paul at least would have been exposed to Greek education up to this point. What level of education beyond this that Paul received, however, is difficult to determine. It is at this point that the scholar turns to conjecture and small hints in Paul's letters.⁹ If Paul progressed beyond the elementary level, he would have been exposed to the more influential Greek authors and poets.¹⁰ Although Homer's works, especially the *Iliad*, were dominant in Hellenistic education,¹¹ students did study other poets and writers including Euripides,

⁴Acts 21:39.

⁵ Jerome H. Neyrey, *Paul, In Other Words: A Cultural Reading of His Letters* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 26.

⁶ *Ibid.* 57.

⁷ Acts 22:28. Acts may or may not be a reliable source of historical fact regarding Paul's life. However, if Paul was a Roman citizen, he is more likely to have received a Hellenistic education in which he might have been exposed to Pindar's poetry.

⁸ Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. revised (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), s.v. "education, Greek," 508.

⁹ Ronald F. Hock provides a more thorough discussion on Paul's education, and investigates in depth some of the supporting textual evidence for a higher level of education. Ronald F. Hock, "Paul and Greco-Roman Education," in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 198-227.

¹⁰ *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 508.

¹¹ H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), 162.

Menander, Demosthenes,¹² Alcman, Alcaeus, Sappho, and Pindar.¹³ Paul is clearly an advanced enough writer to have written the letters that he did. Still, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how much of a formal education he received. Hock argues that Paul received up to the highest level of education due to rhetorical and compositional characteristics of his letters, seen especially in the length and complexity of Paul's writings.¹⁴ The possibility that Paul might have had some education regarding lyric poetry and Pindar in particular is what drives Levin's thesis. Paul's context, then, is especially important to investigate.

The Situation in Philippi

Philippi was a major city in the region known as Macedonia, in northern Greece. The culture differed slightly from Greek culture, but from the Macedonian perspective, was more or less still 'Greek.' These lines became more blurred after Philip conquered the Greek city-states, and subsequently his son, Alexander the Great, dominated Egypt and the Persian Empire. By the time the Roman Empire developed, Macedonian culture had more or less become Greek culture. In Paul's time, the area had recently undergone a series of major upheavals. In 42 BCE, it had been the site of a major battle in the war between Julius Caesar's successor, Octavian, and Brutus and Cassius, two of the men who assassinated Julius Caesar. Octavian had won the battle; Brutus and Cassius both committed suicide. By the time Paul was writing, Philippi had also become a Roman colony. One characteristic of

¹² *Ibid.* 164.

¹³ *Ibid.* 163.

¹⁴ Hock, "Paul and Greco-Roman Education," *Paul in the Greco-Roman World*, 209.

Roman colonization was the granting of land to Roman army veterans; this was certainly the case in Philippi immediately after the battle in 42 BCE.¹⁵ This practice introduced a new Roman population.

Due to this redistribution, the Greeks who lost their lands to the colonists moved into the city.¹⁶ The changes in Philippi's demographics over this period of time thus raise the question of who might have been the audience for Paul's letter. The letter itself gives some indication. Since it is written in Greek, the people receiving the letter would have been fluent in Greek, and very likely Greek themselves. Peter Oakes establishes a series of connections to argue that Philippi's congregants would have been more likely Greek than any other nationality. If one wants to build a church and following, one must go to the population centers, and Oakes argues that indications in the Epistles themselves situate most of Paul's churches within a city.¹⁷ With a concentration of Roman colonists in the countryside and displaced Greeks in the city, the majority of people Paul would have been able to reach would have been Greek.¹⁸ Thus, although there is the possibility of a few Roman citizens attending the church at Philippi, it is most likely that the majority of the congregants were Greek rather than Roman. The Jewish population in Philippi is more difficult to determine. Common consensus argues that there was little to no Jewish

¹⁵ Joseph Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi: Carmen Christi as Cursus Pudorum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 69.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 71.

¹⁷ Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

population in Philippi, due to the lack of evidence of many Jews in Philippi at the time.¹⁹ In other words, Paul's audience was primarily gentile and Greek, but not Jewish. Although identifying Philippi's demographic seems beside the point, it helps to provide further context for Paul's letter. Keeping Paul's audience in mind offers another angle at which to examine Philippians 2:6-11. Regardless of what the passage might be, it was intended to be relevant to its audience, and genre is one possibility by which it might be relevant.

Philippians 2:6-11: A Matter of Identification

Enigmatic as this passage is, it is widely quoted as a concise synopsis of Christ's life, as an example of the ideal Christian mindset, and as a praise of Christ's divine nature. Most of the letter to Philippians is what one might expect from Paul. One finds updates as to Paul's circumstances and well-being, advice and reassurances in the face of adversity, and appeals to Jesus Christ. What makes Philippians 2:6-11 so intriguing is the fact that it almost fits in with this general theme, but not completely. Chapter two begins with Paul describing his hopes and expectations for the church at Philippi. Interpretations vary as to how the Greek should be translated in verse five,²⁰ but it is translated and interpreted most often as an exhortation to imitate Christ.²¹ I have chosen to follow this translation.²² This verse marks a

¹⁹ Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 4. For a more extensive discussion on the Jews in Philippi, see H. W. Bateman IV, "Were the Opponents at Philippi Necessarily Jewish?," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (January – March 1998): 39-61.

²⁰ Ernst Käsemann, "A Critical Analysis of Philippians 2:5-11," *Journal for Theology and the Church* 5 (1968): 83 – 88.

²¹ King James Version: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus..." New International Version: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus..." New Standard Revised Version: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..." Barth, Hofmann, and J. Kögel have argued that one must supply

shift in the text, and an extended description of Christ's life, death, and resurrection follows.²³ Although it may not be all that out of place for Paul to recount the relevant characteristics of Christ as an example, it is unusual to continue that example beyond what is needed. Rather than tell the congregation only what seems to be the main point, to be like Christ who humbled himself, Paul forges ahead and recounts the remaining major points of Christ's death and resurrection, concluding with a declaration of Christ's glory. In addition to heightened, poetic language, this 'going overboard' points to Philippians 2:6-11 as something different from the surrounding prose. The scholar Johannes Weiss first made this distinction in 1899, and the issue of the passage's identification and arrangement has been a matter of discussion leading up to the present day.²⁴ Since Philippians 2:6-11 is more than just an over-exuberant outburst, several questions remain. If it is something different, did Paul write it at all? And, more importantly, what is it?

If Philippians 2:6-11 is distinct from the surrounding passages, it might be prose but it could also be from an entirely different genre. While the identity of one passage in Paul's letters might seem trivial, in fact it illuminates strong influences that might have shaped the early Christian church and thus our own understanding of Christianity today. I shall be

φρονεῖτε or φρονεῖν δεῖ, "to think" or "it is necessary to think," in place of the form of "to be" that is in the second part of the sentence. Ernst Käsemann, "A Critical Analysis of Philippians 2:5-11," 51.

²² Käsemann, "A Critical Analysis of Philippians 2:5-11," 83. The verb in the second half of the sentence is absent, thus making verse five's complete translation uncertain. Although an argument can be made that it should be translated differently, it made the most sense to me linguistically to assume the missing verb should be a form of 'to be.' This is a technique that can be found in both ancient Greek and Latin, and it would be unusual for the missing verb to be something else.

²³ There is a long tradition of debate over what these verses mean theologically. I will not be discussing these arguments at length. Although they are important to scholarship and theology today, they do not contribute significantly as to the identity of this passage.

²⁴ Ralph Martin, *A Hymn of Christ: Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation & in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 24.

exploring the most common identifications scholars support, as well as Levin's alternative argument which adds a new dimension to traditional scholarship. Many scholars argue for one of two different genres. The most prominent opinion is that the passage is an example of Hebrew-style poetry, which is similar to the Psalms and is recognized by its elevated style and parallelism in ideas between verses.²⁵ Another, less popular, position is that Philippians is an *encomium*, which is a Greek genre used to praise a person, usually living, in prose. In contrast, the alternative argument posits that Philippians 2:6-11 is set to a Greek lyrical meter.

Complicating this identification is the question of authorship. While it is widely acknowledged that Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians, he did not necessarily compose verses six to eleven in the second chapter. Thus, although the identity of the author does not definitively determine the identity of the passage, it may help support or challenge the various arguments. One finds arguments suggesting that it was composed by Paul, that it is a pre-Pauline composition, that it was written by the Philippians, or that it is pre-Pauline with changes added by Paul. Although I will briefly address authorship of the passage, I will be focusing primarily on determining its identity. Many scholars have contributed to the discussion concerning Philippians 2:6-11, but there are several in particular who have contributed the most to scholarship on the passage. Each thesis concerning the identity of the Philippians passage has its strengths and weaknesses. Due to lack of information and

²⁵ Matthew E. Gordley, *The Colossian Hymn in Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 52.

evidence, however, none of the arguments has been able to completely discredit all other proposals.

Of the two major identifications of Philippians 2:6-11, the most influential interpretation came from the German theologian Ernst Lohmeyer, who classified it as a hymn. He published his pivotal work in 1928, when he proposed that Philippians 2:6-11 was a pre-Pauline hymn stemming from the Hebrew poetic tradition.²⁶ Building upon previous scholarship that suggests Philippians 2:6-11 as a rhythmical hymn, he divides the passage into six strophes of three lines each.²⁷ He agrees with earlier scholarship that the entire passage consisted of a single, quoted work, citing verse five as a standard introductory phrase to a quotation.²⁸ In addition, as the passage divides into two clearly identifiable parts at line nine, it appears to be a deliberate composition rather than a hurried synopsis.²⁹ Lohmeyer's identification of the passage is closely tied to and supported by his identification of the author. He argues that the Philippians passage is a pre-Pauline hymn originally written in a Semitic language, citing non-Greek aspects in the language as well as Old Testament words and expressions.³⁰ Thus, according to Lohmeyer, the passage in Philippians was a hymn already known to the early Jewish-Christian community, originally composed in Aramaic or another Semitic language and later translated into Greek. In order

²⁶ Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 334. Scholars generally identify Hebrew poetry by the parallelism within the writing, both at the linguistic and literary levels. See Gordley, *The Colossian Hymn in Context*, 56.

²⁷ Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*, 25.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 26.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 27.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

to make his stanza structure work, and as further support for his argument that Paul was not the composer, he posits that the end of verse 8, “death on a cross,” is a phrase Paul himself wrote and attached to the hymn.³¹ Lohmeyer then reconstructs the context, suggesting that the venue for this hymn would have been the Jerusalem Church, sung at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper as a part of the Eucharistic liturgy.³² Although later scholars have since argued against this as well as other aspects of Lohmeyer’s thesis, nevertheless, “to him belongs the credit of the first detailed analysis of the verses and of general observations on the stylistic features which have orientated later study in a new direction altogether.”³³ Authors preceding Lohmeyer who divided Philippians 2:6–11 into stanzas include Johannes Weiss and Adolf Deissmann. Other authors who follow similar lines of thought are A.T. Robertson, J. Moffatt, and K. Grayston. H. Lietzmann also thought the passage contained hymnic characteristics. Authors influenced by Lohmeyer’s work, although not all agree with his entire argument, include M. Dibelius, L. Cerfaux, W. Michaelis, E. Stauffer, and J. Jeremias.³⁴ Lohmeyer’s work inspired his contemporaries to re-examine Philippians 2:6–11, which led his one of his colleagues to write an argument of his own.

Of the biblical scholars in the early 1900s, the other key figure is Ernst Käsemann, a contemporary of Lohmeyer. In response to Lohmeyer’s as well as others’ work, Käsemann wrote a detailed analysis of Philippians, entitled *A Critical Analysis of Philippians 2:5–11*.

Although Käsemann is most concerned about the meaning and interpretation of Philippians

³¹ *Ibid.* 26.

³² *Ibid.* 28.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.* 24–35.

2:6-11, he does discuss his thoughts on its identity as it relates to his argument. In contrast to Lohmeyer, he emphasizes a Hellenistic context to the hymn, but exclusively in how the words themselves should be translated and interpreted and how the theology of the passage is affected by this interpretation.³⁵ His primary focus, then, is the overall purpose of the passage in Philippians, rather than its background. Thus, whereas Lohmeyer provided the identification, Käsemann helped to continue its circulation and added significant analysis to as to the passage's meaning. Whereas most scholars up to this point, and even a few scholars after Käsemann published his article, argued for an ethical³⁶ interpretation of the passage, Käsemann strongly disagrees with this view. Instead, he argues that it is a retelling of a "drama of salvation."³⁷ The point is not to imitate Christ in his humiliation and subsequent glorification. Rather, it is to know and understand the various stages Christ undergoes before his glorification. For Käsemann, it is odd that Paul includes the second half regarding Christ's resurrection if he were simply making a point to use Christ's humility as a model for a Christian life.³⁸ Given that the nuances of the words alone are hotly debated, one can see how the entire passage might invite controversy. As seen above, biblical scholars have debated the overall message for years. Nevertheless, the focus here is on the format of the message, rather than the message itself. Although Lohmeyer and Käsemann established the

³⁵ Käsemann, "A Critical Analysis of Philippians 2:5-11," 59 – 62.

³⁶ In this case, the category 'ethical' refers to the use of Philippians 2:6-11 as an example for proper behavior. Käsemann argues that this interpretation is wrong.

³⁷ Robert Morgan, "Incarnation, Myth, and Theology: Ernst Käsemann's Interpretation of Philippians 2:5-11," in *Where Christology Began*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 43.

³⁸ Käsemann, "A Critical Analysis of Philippians 2:5-11," 88.

basis for modern scholarship on Philippians 2:6–11, among more recent scholars there is a more contemporary standard reference point.

Ralph P. Martin provides a more exhaustive study on Philippians as a hymn. His work is often cited in modern writings on Philippians, and as biblical scholar Matthew Gordley states, “Ralph Martin has made the most extensive case for reading the passage as a preexisting hymn of the early church.”³⁹ Overall, he accepts most of Lohmeyer’s theory in regards to its identity as a hymn.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, he still notes that “of all the attempts at literary analysis which have been surveyed there is none which meets with general agreement.”⁴¹ Although he does discuss counterarguments somewhat, Martin also finds credibility in Lohmeyer’s proposition that the hymn might have originated in Aramaic.⁴² For Martin, the remaining problems then lie in how the hymn was divided, and for what purpose it was intended both originally as well as in Paul’s letter. He carefully details a number of authors’ analyses of the hymn, citing evidence for and against their interpretations.⁴³ In terms of the purpose of the poem, he agrees with Käsemann that the ethical argument is severely flawed.⁴⁴ Instead, he concurs that it is rather an account of the stages of Christ’s incarnation on earth, death, and resurrection, and that the community of

³⁹ Matthew E. Gordley, *Teaching through Song in Antiquity: Didactic Hymnody among Greeks, Romans, Jews and Christians* (Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, Germany 2011), 280–1.

⁴⁰ Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*, 28.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 36.

⁴² *Ibid.* 40.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 24 – 35.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 291.

Philippians should be one that behaves in a way that would be worthy of such a savior.⁴⁵ For Martin, the passage in Philippians makes the most sense divided into six pairs of couplets,⁴⁶ and originally would have been chanted⁴⁷ in a baptismal context.⁴⁸ Although this is one of the most widely accepted arguments, other scholars interpret Philippians as a related, yet separate genre. According to Martin, “We are on firm ground in stating that Philippians ii. 6-11 represents a hymnic specimen, taken over by Paul as a *paradosis* from some early Christian source with a Jewish background but slanted to address questions that faced the church as it moved out to confront the larger Hellenistic world of Graeco-Roman society.”⁴⁹ Martin is confident in his analysis, announcing that “the poetic or hymnic character of the verses remains a virtual consensus in recent debate, with no serious attempt to overturn it.”⁵⁰ Nevertheless, he is not completely correct in assuming that all scholars agree that Philippians 2:6-11 is a hymn.

John Reumann, the author of the Philippians *Yale Anchor Bible Commentary*, “agrees that the composition is a preexisting praise composition but prefers to call it an *encomion* rather than a hymn.”⁵¹ Thus, although the argument in favor of Philippians as a hymn is popular, there are scholars who argue otherwise. As an *encomium* is normally prose, there would be no significant poetic characteristics, but because they are written in honor of an

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 292.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 36.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 292.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* xxiv.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* xvi.

⁵¹ Gordley, *Teaching through Song in Antiquity*, 281. Footnote number 47.

individual they do share the concept of praise with hymns. However, whereas hymns often celebrate divine figures, *encomia* usually praise human subjects. Gordley provides a helpful synopsis of the role of *encomia* in the ancient world:

Rulers, benefactors, and heroes were praised for their accomplishments, their victories, their virtues, and their generosity. Through hymn-like compositions known as *encomia*, honor was given to those who were thought deserving of it by those who were recipients of their benefactions or by professional poets who were commissioned to write poems of praise... The ancients themselves tell us that, in terms of composition, contents, and themes, there is very little difference between praise of god (a hymn) and praise of a person (an *encomium*). The primary difference in terminology relates to the nature of the one addressed.⁵²

Major proponents of the *encomium* argument include John Reumann and Adela Yarbro Collins. In his commentary, Reumann concludes that Philippians 2:6-11 is an *encomium* composed by the congregation at Philippi that they sent to Paul, and that Paul sent back with his own revisions.⁵³ He uses criteria established by Berger to define the usual contents of *encomia*, listing “(divine) origins; deeds or acts, service on earth; and fame, including any titles bestowed.”⁵⁴ Looking over the text, one might see how “being in the form of God” in verse six and “becoming in the likeness of men” in verse seven can be interpreted as Christ’s origins. Following the formula, deeds, acts, or service on earth might be seen in “he lowered himself becoming subject even to death” in verse eight, and titles bestowed in “name above

⁵² *Ibid.* 100.

⁵³ Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 362 – 376.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 364

all names” in verse nine and “Jesus Christ is Lord” in verse eleven. Reumann suggests that as an *encomium*, this passage provides an alternative Caesar as hero or leader for the Philippians.⁵⁵ This interpretation further differentiates itself from Lohmeyer and Käsemann’s work by asserting that the origins of the passage are Greco-Roman, not Jewish, as *encomia* first developed within Greek culture and continued as a practice into the Roman Empire. *Encomia*, thus, introduce a new concept into the conversation, that of Hellenistic influence.

Although the argument in favor of an *encomium* is attractive, it nevertheless remains in the shadow of the argument that it is a hymn. As Philippians 2:6-11 focuses on Jesus’ human nature primarily in relation to his ultimate divinity, a hymn is a better category. Additionally, while it is difficult to prove simply whether or not Paul wrote the passage he included in his own letter, it is even more difficult to prove that the Philippians wrote it instead. The categories for *encomia* do not fit completely, either. The passage is very vague, and Christ’s exact origins, whether they be heaven, Bethlehem, or anywhere else, and his specific achievements are not listed. In an interesting twist, Adela Yarbro Collins blurs the line between hymn and *encomium*, arguing that “this passage may be seen to fit well the ancient category of prose hymn or prose encomium, since it... does not conform to any Greek metrical pattern.”⁵⁶ A prose hymn is exactly what the name implies; it is a hymn written without any kind of meter.⁵⁷ Collins’s statement accepts both a prose hymn and an

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 376

⁵⁶ Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Psalms and Origins of Christology,” 119 – 123, cited in Gordley, *Teaching Through Song*, 281-282.

⁵⁷ Gordley, *The Colossian Hymn in Context*, 38. These already ambiguous categories become less defined still when one considers the technique of rhythmical prose which was also characteristic of the time period.

encomium as possibilities but eliminates a third possibility, that of a Greek lyric poem, while still acknowledging the potential of Hellenistic influence. However, this third possibility is not necessarily as quickly dismissed as Collins assumes.

Heavy emphasis has been placed on the Semitic origins of Philippians 2:6-11, with a smaller number of scholars supporting the potential of Greek origins. While the more popular argument of the passage as a hymn from the Hebrew tradition does have merit, it nevertheless ignore much of the prevailing culture at that time, that of the Greek community. The arguments in favor of an *encomium* do have a strong point in their acknowledgement of the influence of Hellenistic culture. Each region in the Roman Empire had its own native culture, and religion itself certainly lent an enormous influence. However, Greek influence at this point had been present for hundreds of years; it most likely had a certain degree of impact, especially given that education for the elite of the Roman Empire was, in essence, Greek.⁵⁸ The final identification of Philippians 2:6-11 that I examine brings this issue to light more fully. It is not a commonly acknowledged identification of the passage, mainly because there is no obvious meter. The thesis, that of Arnold Levin, comes at Philippians from an entirely new angle, emphasizing a heavier Greek influence than most scholars have suggested.

Rhythmical prose is the practice of inserting metrical patterns into prose speeches, usually at the end of the line. The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* provides a helpful synopsis of rhythmical prose on pages 1260-1. See H.J. Rose, "The Clausulae of the Pauline Corpus," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 1923, 17-43 for a full discussion on Paul's use of rhythmical prose.

⁵⁸ *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v. "Education, Roman," 508.

Levin's thesis relies heavily on several prominent aspects of Greek culture, and is very specific as to the form, function, meaning, and intent of this passage. He divides his thesis into ten major points, which can be summarized thus: Philippians 2:6-11 is a Pauline victory ode in the Greek style in aeolic meter, divided into two stanzas with seven lines each. It is an imitation of the lyric poems of epinician poets, especially Pindar, and was performed at the Isthmian games of 51 C.E. as a reaction against the cults of the Dioscuri.⁵⁹ Paul, then, quoted his own composition as he found it applicable to the discussion in his letter. Levin follows a similar route as those who support the argument that Philippians 2:6-11 is an *encomium*, stressing that the overall Greek culture is not to be disregarded. Levin's argument provides a new dynamic in the conversation surrounding Philippians, and furthermore requires some inquiry and explanation. His argument concerning the passage's meter supports his other points regarding the purpose, influences, and author of Philippians 2:6-11. Thus, I will focus most upon his discussion regarding potential meter and the specific cultural references he includes.

It's All Greek Meter to Me

Before continuing my discussion of Levin's thesis, it is necessary first to provide some background on Greek meter and scholars' analysis of it. Meter is a specific and intentional pattern of long (or stressed, in English poetry) and short (or unstressed) syllables used in poetry. Modern scholars use this pattern of long and short syllables to track how a poem is

⁵⁹ Arnold Levin, "Paul's Victory Song: Philippians 2:6-11," 18-19.

supposed to be read rhythmically; most often, it follows the natural phonetic characteristics that the word already possesses. It is important to note that in order for a poem to have a meter, it must have been written according to the rules dictating meter and with a specific meter in mind. The process of finding the long and short syllables in a meter, called scanning or scansion, is only applicable when an author has written the text with a meter. According to a common method, short/unstressed syllables are marked with the symbol ∪, and long/stressed syllables are marked with the symbol –. A well-known, modern English example of meter is found in Shakespeare’s works, especially notable in his plays.

Shakespeare uses a specific meter called iambic pentameter, shown here: ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ –. Each pair of short and long syllables (∪ –) makes up a single unit, known as an iamb.

For this meter, there are five such units per line. This pattern repeats for each line, as shown below:

Ī lēd thēm ōn ĩn thīs dīstrāctēd fēār, ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ –

Ānd lēft sweēt Pŷrāmūs trānslātēd thēre: ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ –

Whēn ĩn thāt mōmēnt – sō ĩt cāme tō pāss – ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ –

Tītāniā wāked, ānd strāightwāy lōved ān āss.⁶⁰ ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ –

Shakespeare’s meter relies upon the repetition of the same set of unstressed and stressed syllables. Greek meter, however, is ‘quantitative,’ meaning that metrical patterns are defined according to how long a syllable is vocalized rather than where the stress falls. The length of

⁶⁰ *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Barnes and Noble (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1994), 3.2.31–34. References are to act, scene, and line.

time spent pronouncing syllables is determined by whether a vowel or diphthong is naturally pronounced as long,⁶¹ and the number of consonants following a vowel, among other rules. Additional rules and poetic license allow exceptions and flexibility within the system. These rules and exceptions result in ‘patterns’ of meters that are less repetitive and much more complicated than Shakespeare’s straightforward iambic pentameter. Thus, Levin’s thesis presents a complicated issue that is not quickly resolved, since the rules and characteristics of Greek poetry allow for a certain degree of flexibility in a meter.

Several notable styles evolved in Greek meter. These styles, or traditions, became known for specific kinds of poetry. For instance, the dialogue sections in Greek tragedy come from the Ionian tradition of iambic poetry. The specific meter is iambic trimeter. In contrast to Shakespeare’s English iambic pentameter, Greek trimeter consists of three sets of units resembling two English iambs: x – ∪ – .⁶² Compared to English iambic poetry, one can see that long syllables are allowed where the anceps is located. To illustrate, I include an example first of the standard organization for a line in iambic trimeter, and also an excerpt from the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles:⁶³

x – ∪ – | x – ∪ – | x – ∪ – |

⁶¹ For example, the Greek letters ω (omega) and ο (omicron) have the same sound, that of the letter ‘o’ in English. However, ω is vocalized for a longer period of time than ο. Diphthongs, such as αι, are also spoken longer and so are usually considered long in a meter.

⁶² M.L. West, *Greek Metre* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 40. The ‘x’ indicates that a syllable is ‘anceps’ or ‘indifferent’; it could be either long or short. Additionally, the final syllable of a line in Greek meter always counts as long or can be treated as long.

⁶³ I have removed the breathing marks and accents from the Greek text in order to more clearly indicate the scansion markings.

ὦ τέκνα, Κάδμου τοῦ πάλαϊ νέᾳ τροφῇ, - - - - | - - - - | - - - -
 τίνᾳς πῶθ' ἔδρας τᾶσδε μοῖ θῶαζέεῖ - - - - | - - - - | - - - -
 ἱκτῆριοῖς κλάδοισὶν ἔξεστῆμμενοῖ;
 ...
 πρὸ τῶνδε πῶνεῖν, τίνι τροπῶ καθῆστατέ,⁶⁴ - - - - | - - - - | - - - -

One can see in the passage above the recurring pattern of short and long syllables, especially in the first line. However, as other Greek metrical rules come into play, the entire line itself does not consist of the simple short-long pattern. In the final line, the central set seems to break out of the pattern entirely. This change in the pattern, however, is due to a technique known as resolution, in which one long syllable is divided into two short syllables. Although resolution is common, it is not used in all types of Greek meter. Different traditions of Greek meter follow the same basic rules of determining which syllables are long and which are short. However, the meters follow different patterns depending on the genre and cultural setting.

The ancient Greek poet Pindar used several different styles of Greek meter to compose his poetry. Although the focus for this paper will be on Pindar's use of aeolic meter in his lyric poetry, he did use other styles, such as dactylo-epitrite.⁶⁵ Lyric poetry is a broad category that covers a range of genres, including hymns and victory odes, both of which

⁶⁴ Sophocles, *Sophocles: Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone*, "Oedipus Tyrannus," vol. 1 of *Sophocles*, ed. and trans. Francis Storr (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1912), accessed at Perseus Digital Library, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0191>, lines 1-3, 10.

⁶⁵ Dactylo-epitrite has metrical patterns of its own. Based on stipulations of dactylo-epitrite, there is no way Philippians 2:6-11 could have been written with that style of meter.

Pindar wrote. He uses aeolic meter in some of his victory odes⁶⁶ to athletes and other notable figures. In Pindar's poetry, he constructs multiple stanzas that are built out of different types of cola, or short metrical units. Within each strophe, he uses these cola in a 'theme and variations' or 'meditation on' technique, repeating and alluding back to earlier patterns by re-using and reworking the rhythmic patterns. These cola, and thus aeolic meter, revolve around a set of syllables known as a choriamb: – ∪ ∪ – . A frequently used metrical unit for aeolic meter is called the glyconic colon.⁶⁷ The glyconic colon works as follows: x x – ∪ ∪ – ∪ – . Other patterns in addition to the glyconic colon fall under aeolic meter, and they closely resemble glyconic in form due to the centrality of the choriamb to their structure. Also, Pindar normally uses a traditional choral lyric technique known as responsion, a rhythm that repeats between various stanzas. Levin argues that Philippians 2:6-11 was written with aeolic meter, and cites Pindar's Ode *Olympian 14* as an example of lyric poetry. I have included the first few lines of *Olympian 14* below, with the metrical symbols:

Κᾱφῖσιῶν ὕδατῶν

λάχοῖσαι, αἰτέ ναῖετέ κᾱλλίπῶλῶν ἔδραν,

ῶ λιπάρᾱς ᾱοιδίμοι Βᾱσιλεῖαι

Χᾱριτες Ορχόμενου, πᾱλαῖγῶνων Μίνυᾱν ἐπίσκοποι,⁶⁸

⁶⁶ A victory ode is praise in metrical poetry of an athlete or ruler's accomplishments. They commonly include an allusion to a relevant god or goddess.

⁶⁷ West, *Greek Metre*, 30.

⁶⁸ Pindar, *The Odes of Pindar Including the Principal Fragments with an Introduction and an English Translation by Sir John Sandys*, "Olympian 14," trans. by Sir John Sandys (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), accessed at Perseus Digital Library, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0161%3Abook%3DO.%3Apoem%3D14>, lines 1-4.

However, although marking the long and short vowels is usually a straightforward exercise, categorizing them into different cola is not. Although a poet might have intended a specific rhythm that abides by metrical rules, later scholars do not necessarily interpret that meter in the same way. As way of example, below are two different modern scholars' scansion of the above passage:

— — ◡ — ◡ —	— — ◡ — ◡ —
◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — —	◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — — ◡ — —
— ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — —	— ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — —
◡ ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ⁶⁹	◡ ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — — ◡ — ◡ — ⁷⁰

These modern interpretations differ from analysis of ancient scholars, such as Hephaestion and the authors of the scholia, who furthermore differ from each other.⁷¹ In his metrical analysis, Hephaestion often identifies a metrical unit he calls an antispast, or ◡ — — ◡.⁷² Modern scholars have since argued that the choriamb is the core recurring metrical unit in aeolic meters, rather than the antispast. To draw from the above example, one sees several choriambes underlined in line 4, marked by both Snell–Maehler and Itsumi, respectively.

◡ ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — — ◡ — ◡ —	◡ ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — ◡ — — ◡ — ◡ —
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⁶⁹ Pindar, *Pindari Carmina cum Fragmentis*, part I *Epinicia*, ed. by B. Snell, rev. by H. Maehler (Leipzig: Teubner, 1987), 48.

⁷⁰ Kiichiro Itsumi, *Pindaric Metre: 'The Other Half'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 359. One can see in Itsumi's interpretation, solitary syllables separating some of the metrical units in lines two and 4. This pattern is characteristic of dactylo-epitrite. This interpretation further illuminates the ambiguity of meter, as it is possible that Pindar could have employed an aeolic meter while borrowing from dactylo-epitrite.

⁷¹ A.B. Drachmann, ed., *Scholia vetera in Pindari carmina*, vol. 1 of *Scholia in Olympionicas*, Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana, (Leipzig: Teubner, 1903), 388.

⁷² Hephaestion, *Hephaestion on Metre: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. by J.M. van Ophuijsen (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 55.

With such variation between both ancient and modern scholars when scanning an acknowledged hymn, identifying a meter within a more uncertain text is a complicated move. However, a further dynamic is the trend of later poets, for example Isyllus, to use meter more loosely and less strictly to the classical metrical rules.⁷³ Although this might help the argument that a more ambiguous meter is possible in Philippians, one must still keep in mind that some semblance of meter is still identifiable in Isyllus. Partly in spite of and partly because of these ambiguities, Levin argues for a similar identifiable meter in Philippians.

The core of Levin's thesis is the potential meter of Philippians 2:6-11. Scanning the passage is relatively straightforward. He provides his own scansion, an example of which is shown below:

ὅς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπαρχῶν οὐκ ἄρπαγμὸν	υ - - - υ υ - - - - - -
ἠγῆσάτο το εἶναῖ ἰσᾶ θεῶ ἄλλᾶ εἰαυτῶν	- - υ υ - - υ - - υ - -
ἐκένωσεν μορφῆν δοῦλοῦ λαβῶν	^ υ υ - - - - - - υ -
ἐν ὁμοιωμάτι ἄνθρωπῶν γενῶμενός	υ υ υ - υ - - - υ υ υ - ⁷⁴

Levin's scansion relies heavily on two metrical devices, the use of a metrical unit known as a dochmiac and a poetic technique called synecphesis or synizesis. The basic form of a

⁷³ J.U. Powell, ed., *Collectanea Alexandrina: reliquiae minores poetarum Graecorum aetatis Ptolemaicae, 323-146 A.C., epicorum, elegiacorum, lyricorum, ethicorum: cum epimetris et indice nominum*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 133. Isyllus was a poet who lived around 300 BC. It is important to note that although meter had begun to change, the system itself had not disappeared and there were poets who still wrote according to ancient metrical standards.

⁷⁴ Levin, "Paul's Victory Song," 22. M.L. West includes a list of common meter and scanning abbreviations on pages xi and xii of his book *Greek Metre*. The caret symbol ^ is used to mark a syllable that would normally be present in a colon, but is missing in that line. The curved line below the text indicates instances of synizesis. West's symbol for synizesis differs slightly; the decision to use the line below the text is my own. Levin notes 17 instances of synizesis throughout the entire passage.

dochmiac appears as such: $\bar{\cup} - - \bar{\cup} -$.⁷⁵ In the lines quoted above, a dochmiac appears as the last metrical unit in line one, and as both metrical units in line four. Synizesis is the combination of several syllables into one single scanned syllable. When the work is read aloud, the final syllable is the only one that is pronounced; the first is not vocalized fully. For instance, what would normally be $\theta\epsilon\omicron\bar{\cup} \upsilon\pi\bar{\alpha}\rho\chi\bar{\omega}\nu$ becomes $\theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon \upsilon\pi\bar{\alpha}\rho\chi\bar{\omega}\nu$. As mentioned earlier, scanning can often have ambiguous results. Levin's thesis relies upon this ambiguity, which makes either proving or disproving it a complicated matter. What one notices, however, is a heavy reliance on identifying dochmiacs and synizesis, both of which are rarely, if ever, found in Pindaric poetry.⁷⁶ If Paul was trying to imitate Pindar, it is surprising to find such heavy usage of dochmiacs and synizesis. There are no repeating patterns of related cola, as would normally occur in Pindar's odes. Additionally, although synizesis is present in poetry, it is not a common technique.⁷⁷ However, Levin finds numerous instances of it. While one might argue that an inexperienced writer might overuse a technique, Levin's reliance on it makes the scansion as a whole problematic. More than the frequent identification of synizesis is Levin's emphasis that it is present in cases unusual for such a technique. For example, using synizesis to connect $\theta\epsilon\omicron\bar{\cup}$ to $\upsilon\pi\bar{\alpha}\rho\chi\bar{\omega}\nu$ in the first line, and to

⁷⁵ West, *Greek Metre*, xi. The combined long and short syllable markings indicate that a syllable is usually short, but in some cases could be long. Levin's scansion of the second stanza especially contains a high number of dochmiacs. Although it is possible for the author of Philippians to simply have been especially fond of dochmiacs, the issue lies in the flexibility of the syllables within a dochmiac. Several examples from Levin's scansion include | - - - - |, | $\cup\cup\cup\cup$ - \cup - |, | - - $\cup\cup\cup\cup$ - |, and | $\cup\cup\cup\cup\cup$ - |. Because of this flexibility, almost any combination of long and short syllables could be identified as a dochmiac. In his entire scansion of Philippians 2:6-11, Levin finds nine instances of dochmiacs.

⁷⁶ See M.L. West, *Greek Metre*, pages 108, 149, and 194.

⁷⁷ Raphael Kühner et al., *Ausführliche Grammatik der griechischen Sprache*, 3rd ed., 1.1 (Hanover: Hahn, 1890), 227.

εἰνᾶ ἰοῦ in the second line would be a surprising move for a poet, and so thus less likely to actually be present. Several instances are common places where synizesis is found, such as within words like θεῶν and εἰαυτῶν that are found in the second line.⁷⁸ Thus, although Levin does find legitimate instances of potential synizesis, the prevalence of it especially in untraditional usages makes his argument problematic. Levin's use of both modern scholarship and Hephaestion adds further complications. Given the contrasts between modern scholarship and Hephaestion, the fact that Levin relies upon both without differentiation rather than choosing one tradition to follow weakens his overall argument.⁷⁹ Although it is possible for Paul to have tried to write an imitation of Pindar using Hephaestion or another scholar's guidelines, and thus would have created a poor imitation metrically, he would not have known about modern analysis. Thus, using both to get the meter to fit makes Levin's argument problematic. Furthermore, the discrepancy in length between Pindar's odes and the Philippians passage make it difficult to see how Philippians would have been modeled on Pindar's poetry.

The broader form of the passage itself is problematic as well. Pindar's odes can be short in relation to other lyric poems. However, even Pindar's short poems come close to 100 lines. The Philippians passage, even rearranged in stanzas, is significantly shorter. Given the lack of a clearly identifiable meter, as well as a significantly shorter format, it is difficult to argue that Paul would have intended Philippians 2:6-11 to be a direct imitation of Pindar.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Levin, "Paul's Victory Song," 20-22.

Furthermore, there is no indication of responsion between the two stanzas, even though responsion is a standard Pindaric technique.⁸⁰ Thus, although meter in Philippians is a possibility, a specific aeolic meter imitating Pindaric victory odes is problematic. This argument concerning meter directly affects the other parts of Levin's thesis. At this point, Levin moves beyond the question of the identity of Philippians 2:6-11, and discusses its possible use.

Gods and Games: The Dioscuri and the Isthmian Games

In terms of Paul's cultural context, Levin's treatment stresses the importance of the Isthmian Games and allusions to the Dioscuri. He argues that Philippians 2:6-11 included an allusion to the Dioscuri,⁸¹ the twin gods known especially as protectors of men in battle, at sea, and in athletic games.⁸² This context provides a very different approach than that of Lohmeyer, Käsemann, and Martin. Nowhere does Semitic poetry play a part. Rather, it is the surrounding Greek culture that influences the Philippians passage. The Dioscuri were the twin brothers Polydeukes and Kastor. Polydeukes was fathered by Zeus and Kastor fathered by the mortal Tyndareus, king of Sparta. Upon Kastor's death, Polydeukes asked to share his immortality with his brother. Thus, the twins alternate between immortal life on Olympus and death in the Underworld. The strong themes of death, resurrection, and sacrifice hint at a tempting comparison with those of Jesus Christ. Cults were commonly

⁸⁰ It is important to note however that the *scholia* on *Olympian* 14 do not find responsion, unlike modern analysts.

⁸¹ Levin, "Paul's Victory Song," 32.

⁸² *Ibid.* 33.

devoted to the Dioscuri, which further encourages conjecture of a conflict between the Dioscuri cults and the followers of Jesus. Thus, according to Levin, Paul would have had significant motivation to produce a message counter to that of the Greco-Roman cults using a form already familiar to any recipients of a Hellenistic education.

Levin cites Pindar's poem *Nemean* 10 as a specific example that may have inspired Paul in his own composition.⁸³ He draws parallels between the events recounted in *Nemean* 10 and Christ's death and resurrection in Philippians, saying that "the most brilliant formulation of the incident and 'moment' which Paul alludes to in Phil. 2:6 is Pindar's recounting of the self-surrender of Polydeukes for the sake of Kastor, his brother."⁸⁴ Levin analyzes more than just this theme of sacrifice, but rather also finds parallels in the similar messages of divine reward. He states,

Pindar's story in *Nem.* 10 makes brotherly love the motivation for the self denial of Polydeukes but the story is also about the justice and faithfulness of Father Zeus who cares for Kastor and Polydeukes. The theme of the myth is announced at the end of the third epode: Truly, the race of the gods is faithful (*Nem.* 10:54). The care which the gods take for those whom they love is a point of considerable importance to Pindar (cf. *Nem.* 10:54). The parallel with the second stanza of Paul's song is noteworthy. God the Father

⁸³ *Ibid.* 32.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 34.

exalts Jesus upon his obedience and death by giving him a name above every name.⁸⁵

In addition to the theme of sacrifice in the first stanza of the Philippians passage, Levin finds the subsequent theme of divine reward in return for such sacrifice and loyalty. Although these are notable parallels, whether or not they are allusions is open to debate.

Comparing the text of *Nemean 10* to the sections Levin cites as allusions, one finds the two strikingly different. Pindar's allusion to the Dioscuri, beginning at line 49 and continuing until the end forty lines later, is clear. He names them explicitly, introducing them and their aid to a prominent athlete in lines 49 to 51 by saying, "Since Kastor came to Pamphaës' entertainment/ and Polydeukes his brother, it is no marvel/ that to be good athletes runs in their blood."⁸⁶ He continues on to describe the story of Kastor's death and Polydeukes' willingness to share both death and immortality with his brother.⁸⁷ In Philippians 2:6-11, if there is an allusion to the Dioscuri, it is well hidden. If there is an allusion, it is not done in imitation of Pindar. If so, the allusion would have prominently stated the names of the gods alluded to, and would have stretched for a significant portion of the passage itself. At least, in the terms of this criterion, Paul does not seem to be writing in direct imitation of Pindar.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 35.

⁸⁶ Pindar, *The Odes of Pindar*, 2nd ed, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), 131.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 131 – 133.

Assuming that Philippians 2:6-11 is meant to be a poem written in imitation of Pindar, it follows that Paul would have needed a venue at which to perform it.⁸⁸ The Isthmian games were an important event held near to Corinth, at which victory odes were commonly performed.⁸⁹ Thus, Levin suggests that Paul would have performed it at the Isthmian games, although he admits that there is no mention of Paul attending the games.⁹⁰ He nevertheless argues that Paul would have been present in Corinth in 51 CE while the games were going on, and that it is unlikely Paul would have missed out on such an important event that was taking place ten miles away.⁹¹ Whether Paul felt the need to attend such an event or not is impossible to determine. Although there is no evidence to suggest that Paul avoided the Isthmian games, there is also no evidence that he attended them. If he did, he made no mention of them in his letters that survive today. Thus, arguing that Paul would have performed a victory ode at the Isthmian games is a difficult point to prove given the lack of evidence. Nevertheless, this argument could be proven for either side, since there is no strong evidence suggesting that Paul did not attend the games while he was in the area.

Overall, Levin's thesis relies on his assertion that Philippians 2:6-11 has a meter. If there is no meter, there is no reason for Paul to perform anything at the games. Although his argument as to whether there are allusions to the Dioscuri is not fully dependent upon whether the passage has a meter, it would be unusual for Paul to include allusions imitating Pindar in something other than a Greek lyric poem. These preceding points, the meter and

⁸⁸ Victory odes were written with the expectation that they would be performed publically.

⁸⁹ Levin, "Paul's Victory Song," 42.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

form, allusions, and performance all act as the primary supports for Paul's authorship. Since they are problematic, it is difficult to prove that Paul wrote the passage by using these criteria. Other scholars may argue differently; however, in terms of this interpretation, authorship cannot be proven one way or the other.

A Hellenistic Influence

Problematic as Levin's thesis is, he nevertheless brings an important point to light. While the scholars that support the idea of Philippians 2:6-11 as an encomium do argue for a primarily Hellenistic background, nevertheless Levin combines the idea of the passage's Hellenistic origin with the thought of it being a metrical hymn. This thesis is not the only one of its kind; others, such as Barbara Eckman, have also argued in support of it having a Greek meter. Eckman stresses the lack of scholarship investigating the potential of Greek meter, stating that "while many commentators have observed the hymn's rhythmical nature, few have actually analysed it in metrical terms. These few metrical studies have been concerned exclusively with *stress-accentual* metre, often presupposing a Semitic origin."⁹² She raises an important issue to keep in mind; that, although there are more scholars who support the argument that the hymn is Semitic in origin, the evidence supporting the argument is not strong enough to be definitive, and it makes little sense to ignore other possibilities. Like Levin, Eckman argues that Philippians does have a meter, evident in five

⁹² Barbara Eckman, "A Quantitative Metrical Analysis of the Philippians Hymn," *New Testament Studies* 26 (1980): 258.

repeating metrical patterns.⁹³ Her scansion follows a similar vein as Levin's, although she also allows for adjusting the text to accommodate ancient Greek scansion.⁹⁴ Although, as with Levin's analysis, her scansion is problematic in that it relies too heavily on strict ancient Greek metrical standards, Eckman's contribution on the influence of Greek meter is important. Both Levin and Eckman's theses touch upon an idea that has not received enough attention by Philippians scholars, but that nevertheless has potential to change how the development of the early church is perceived.

Approaching Philippians 2:6-11 from an ancient Greek perspective requires a significant amount of conjecture given that the text itself provides very little decisive evidence. What a scholar primarily has is knowledge of the historical and cultural context; what would Paul likely have encountered in his travels and everyday life? Would he have known much about, or participated in, major holidays or festivities? How much would he have known about and taken part in ancient Greek culture? One can research the historical and cultural context and determine what was likely to have been Paul's experience, but it is difficult to state with certainty what it would have been. Nevertheless, Paul's context cannot be completely disregarded. The exchange of cultures, as well as evolution of literary styles over time creates a significant amount of ambiguity concerning this time period. Thus, finding one certain influence and identification beyond all doubt for Philippians is an

⁹³ *Ibid.* 259.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 259 – 260. One sees a parallel in this argument with Lohmeyer and others' identification of several phrases within the passage as Pauline additions.

impossible task. The other competing influences are still present, and so need to be acknowledged.

A Hymn from a Greek Perspective

Any position arguing a definitive identification of Philippians, whether as a prose hymn, *encomium*, or victory ode, is difficult to defend. Scholars must rely on a combination of what textual evidence they can find, conjecture, and adjustments to the text itself. The Philippians passage is somewhat of a chimera; it incorporates a range of characteristics from several genres and cultures, but not enough of just one genre to be immediately definable. As I have discussed earlier, genre itself was a fluid category at that time, with texts demonstrating characteristics of various different genres. The disagreements among scholars as how to interpret even easily identifiable texts attest to the ambiguity of this time period. Nevertheless, difficulties in identifying the Philippians passage perhaps also lie in the fact that not all influences upon it have been fully investigated. Philippians 2:6-11 is a pre-Pauline hymn from a Greek tradition, with a rhythmic set-up that invites the possibility of it having a rudimentary Greek meter.⁹⁵

I follow Lohmeyer, Käsemann, and Martin in arguing that the hymn is pre-Pauline. Paul makes no reference to its origins, but launches into it with an easily identifiable transition. For most scholars, the shift in language and rhythm between Paul's prose and the

⁹⁵ Since my focus primarily is on its identity, I will not argue for what purposes it may have been written, where or when it would have been sung, or what its message is. Although these questions are important and pertinent, they are better left for a separate essay.

hymn points to different authors.⁹⁶ However, there still remains the issue of whether it is a hymn or encomium.

Although the idea of Philippians 2:6-11 as an *encomium* is intriguing, ultimately the passage seems to fit better as a hymn. *Encomia* focus primarily upon human subjects, who, living or dead, remain mortal. Hymns allow for a divine subject. As Philippians 2:6-11 emphasizes Christ's ultimate divinity, it is better categorized as a hymn. However, if it were a pre-Pauline hymn, one still must determine which language and culture influenced the hymn most. In contrast to Martin, I emphasize that it is a Greek hymn, not Hebrew.

As mentioned earlier, Greek was the dominant language in the eastern Mediterranean at the time. Thus, although it is possible for the hymn to have been originally composed in Aramaic, there is also the significant possibility that it was originally composed in Greek. As there is no identifiable place of origin indicated by the hymn itself, one must rely upon the linguistic techniques and characteristics in Philippians 2:6-11. I argue that the hymn was originally composed in Greek, in keeping with the rest of my argument. The grammar for the majority of the passage follows traditional Greek linguistics. Greek was the common tongue for hundreds of years across the Mediterranean and into Turkey. Given the prevalence of *koine* Greek, it is very likely that many hymns would have been composed in that language. Martin himself describes that "the world into which Christ came was a world of intense religious questing which had known for centuries how to sing hymns to the

⁹⁶ Morgan, "Incarnation, Myth, and Theology," 50.

Greek deities.”⁹⁷ Hellenistic culture was firmly planted by the time of Paul; it would not be unusual to find its influence in the literary works of the time. I also use a similar method to Lohmeyer, Käsemann, and Martin, arguing that the form of the passage helps to identify the language in which it was composed. If Philippians 2:6–11 is set to any Greek meter, however untidy, the meter itself as well as the rules it follows roughly only work if the composition is in Greek.

As for the irregularities in the Greek which Martin and others find compelling, this argument assumes too much to be completely secure. By this time in history, Greek culture and language had been integrated into native cultures for hundreds of years. While one might assume that irregularities in the Greek grammar simply point to translation from one language to another, one might also just as easily assume that these irregularities are due to an Aramaic-speaking writer’s error composing in Greek. Since there is no textual allusion to where this hymn might have originated, this kind of linguistic error is entirely possible if the hymn were to have come from one of the Aramaic-influenced provinces of the Roman Empire.⁹⁸ Simply translating the passage into another language is not a reliable method to determine that it was originally composed in that language, especially if there is no undeniable indication that it had originated in that language.⁹⁹ Although it can certainly be

⁹⁷ Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*, 17.

⁹⁸ E.A. Sophocles, “A Glossary of Later and Byzantine Greek,” *Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* New Series 7 (1860): 6, <http://fulla.augustana.edu:2071/>.

⁹⁹ For example, it is for this reason scholars do not assume that the Gospel of Thomas was written in Greek, since the only copies available are written in Coptic. This example proves complicated, however, since scholars know that at the very least, Jesus did not speak Coptic, and his sayings must have been translated at some point.

argued that Philippians 2:6-11 was originally composed in Aramaic, this position is not completely without its faults. Eckman brings up a related point, that “the original hymn may have been altered, before ever reaching Paul, in the course of its transmission from one community to another.”¹⁰⁰ In a world of intermixing cultures and languages, in which oral tradition was the primary means of communicating, errors, grammatical inconsistencies, and changes are very much a possibility. Linguistic irregularities are not sufficient to prove that this text was written in Aramaic, and not in Greek.

Most scholars prefer to quickly dismiss application of any kind of meter at all to the passage. As Martin bluntly states, “There are no metrical standards available at this point in the development of Christian worship. Metrical verses came later; and it is only in the third century that we have examples of anapaestic metre and musical notation.”¹⁰¹ Martin, like most scholars, however, is thinking in terms of a strict classical meter. These classical meters had come into existence hundreds of years before the time of Paul. One might imagine they would not have been perfectly preserved in memory. While an argument for a strict classical aeolic meter might be difficult to support, this does not exclude the possibility of some semblance of a meter still being preserved within the Philippians passage. As mentioned above, the meter was written even into prose, making it difficult to draw a firm line between ‘metrical’ and ‘non-metrical.’ In addition, Hephaestion’s writings on lyric poetry were often used as a standard reference for ancient scholars. Modern analysis has now

With the Philippians passage, there are no other texts that give its context like the Gospels do for Jesus and his teachings.

¹⁰⁰ Eckman, “A Quantitative Metrical Analysis,” 265 – 266.

¹⁰¹ Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*, 12.

determined him to have been often mistaken in his classifications. Levin's use of both Hephaestion and modern scholarship makes his argument difficult to support. While modern authors seem to have little problem pointing out human error in contemporary literature, they seem hesitant to acknowledge that possibility in ancient literature in this particular case. The primary problem with Levin's metrical analysis, as well as Eckman's, is that it assumes that the standard rules for lyric poetry were still widely acknowledged as the standards hundreds of years later. However, one finds in analyzing later poets, such as Isyllus, that even before Paul's time metrical analysis had become more fluid. Thus, by the time of Paul, at least some poets might have used a looser, rougher form of meter. Philippians 2:6-11 does not have a strong meter in the same strain as Pindar. However, it does exhibit some rhythmic elements, especially at line eight with the repetition of "death, death on a cross," that point to potential Greek metrical influences, seen below:

Θάνατοῦ, θάνατοῦ δὲ σταυροῦ ◡◡-◡◡- - - -

By no means is this rhythm a clearly identifiable meter or even colon. Instead, it demonstrates a rhythmic influence on the text which may have evolved from the metrical tradition. Although the passage might not have been written with a formal meter, it is an identifiably Greek-inspired metrical composition. Since Philippians 2:6-11 is a popularly quoted passage, the determination of a Greek, rather than Hebrew, influence makes an enormous difference in terms of the theological questions it raises.

Theological Implications

Interwoven with the identification of Philippians 2:6-11 are the theological implications of a Greek, as well as Semitic, influence. The role of Jesus as it relates to the early church changes, depending on by which culture he is interpreted. From a monotheistic tradition, he is vested with more independent power and influence, *the* son of the only God, *the* resurrected one. However, from a polytheistic standpoint, especially a Greco-Roman one in which gods often have sons who are at times granted immortality, this characteristic is less unique. Here, Levin makes a strong point. Although Jesus may or may not be explicitly competing with the Dioscuri, he does become another semi-divine son among many. The end of the hymn, then, increases in importance as Jesus is rewarded with lordship over the heavens, earth, and underworld. Martin recounts that early Christians “evidently had it as their custom to hail their Lord Christ as a cultic God, to set Him at the centre of their worship as they brought homage to Him.”¹⁰² As worship of Jesus Christ as a god was an acknowledged practice, a hymn praising him as such would not be impossible.

Additionally, as emperor worship had become commonplace in the Roman Empire, reinforcing ruler worship in the Hellenized areas, the early Christian church had the challenge of presenting a better, stronger figure to worship. The emperor dies and becomes divine, but does not thus rule over everything from the heavens on down. The importance of Jesus as a divine, still powerful figure becomes much more tangible, especially in a Gentile context. From a monotheistic point of view, his role as Son or messiah is expected, not

¹⁰² Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*, 8.

controversial, and so loses its emphasis. Furthermore, through the acknowledgement of a Greek influence, Christ becomes a more physical figure who, similar to the emperor, takes a historical leadership role before being risen to divinity.¹⁰³ Ronald Cox's book, *By the Same Word: Creation and Salvation in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity* makes this point in a larger context arguing for the development of Judeo-Christian religion and Greek and Hellenistic culture together, both influencing and conflicting with each other. The implication is that in contrast to the Roman Empire, Christ provides a new one in which he is emperor, at every level of creation.¹⁰⁴ As a legitimization of the new church, this hymn takes on new meaning and importance since it emphasizes the monotheistic importance of the deified Christ in a polytheistic culture. Perhaps for this reason Paul quoted it in its entirety.

Conclusion

Scholarship surrounding Philippians 2:6-11 is extensive and often contradictory. Interestingly, emphasis more often is on the passage as fitting into one category over another, despite the lack of strong evidence. A combination of influences is more likely. Acknowledgement of ambiguity and exchange between genres does not indicate weakness in argument and scholarship, but rather points to a growing awareness of the fluidity and interactions that take place within and among cultures. A Semitic hymn is difficult to argue,

¹⁰³ Ronald Cox, *By the Same Word: Creation and Salvation in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter: 2007), 355.

¹⁰⁴ J.A. Marchal, *The Politics of Heaven: Women, Gender, and Empire in the Study of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 39.

but that does not necessarily negate the argument that the passage is in fact a hymn. If the passage does not completely meet the standards of an *encomium*, it might still come from a Hellenistic background. A Pindaric meter might be difficult to prove; yet, the passage might still have traces of a rough meter derived from Classical Greek meter. By re-examining the Hellenistic context of the hymn, one finds that a combination of cultures and influences proves more illuminating. Just as it is helpful to acknowledge the rich combination of influences on Philippians 2:6-11, it is also illuminating to acknowledge the impact these influences had on the early church. The church we know today originated in a melting pot of cultures which practiced both monotheistic and polytheistic religions. Greco-Roman influences are present and influential in New Testament texts, intertwined with the Semitic background. By knowing this exchange between cultures, one can see more clearly the various influences and pressures that shaped the early church, and how the church has evolved into its present form in the modern day.

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