

August 18, 2013

Sunday After the Dormition of our Lady

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Adam and the Suffering Servant

Philippians 2:6-10 appears to contain part or all of a Christian hymn; this may be our earliest extant example of Christian hymnody:

Being in the form of God, / he thought it not robbery to be equal
to God, / but he emptied himself, / taking on the form of a slave,
/ becoming like unto men, / found as a man in aspect. / He
humbled himself, / becoming obedient unto death, / the very
death of the Cross. / On account of this, God raised him up / and
granted him a name / above every name whatever, / so that in
the name of Jesus / every knee should bend, / whether above,
upon, or beneath the earth, / and every tongue should confess, /
unto God the Father's glory, / that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Notwithstanding the widespread agreement that these lines are hymnic, there is no such agreement with respect to their structure and meter. Leaving aside a more ample consideration of this point, let me mention a long-held suspicion that this passage is a Greek translation of a hymn originally sung in Aramaic. If such is the case, these may be among the earliest words in the whole New Testament.

Two points may be made about this passage, I believe.

First, its rich doctrinal character is surprising in a context where we would not expect it. The context is not doctrinal. It is, rather, a moral exhortation, in which Paul describes how Christians are to be humble and obedient in their regard and behavior toward one another (2:1-4,12-16).

Settled in the middle of that context, the Christological passage quoted above has the feel of an insertion. It takes the reader in a specifically doctrinal direction. It appears that Paul, wanting to hold up the example of the obedience of Christ, reminds them of a text that he expects his readers to recognize.

In short, Paul wanted his readers to adopt the self-emptying of God's Son. Paul's moral intent here is very much like that of the Apostle Peter, who reminded his readers, "Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow his steps." And, just as Peter

illustrated his point by citing a biblical source (Isaiah 53:9), so Paul cites a well-known hymn to make the same point.

Indeed, the hymn cited by Paul sounded a note identical to that the Old Testament text cited by Peter: Christ as slave, identical to the Suffering Servant (*'eved, dousos*) in the Book of Isaiah. When God's Son took on "the form of a slave," he had in mind this very specific slave foreseen by the prophet.

This Isaian theme—the Servant suffering for the sins of men—gave shape to early Christian preaching, as we see in Philip's discourse to the Ethiopian (Acts 8:32-35) and Paul's evangelizing of the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 15:3). Here in Philippians we observe its appearance in early Christian hymnography.

Second, at least part of the content of this hymnic insertion clearly relies on a contrast between Christ and Adam. Adam, we recall, was disobedient in trying to become like God. This is implied in what the serpent told Eve with respect to the forbidden fruit: "For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God" (Genesis 3:5). That is to say, disobedient Adam "regarded equality with God a thing to be grasped" (*harpagmon egesato to einai isa Theo*).

God's Son, in contrast, being "in the form of God" (*en morphe Theou*), was already "equal to God" (*isa Theo*). He had no need to rob or grasp it. Yet He emptied Himself and assumed "the form of a servant" (*morphen doulou*), becoming obedient to death on the Cross. This is the model of obedience that Paul holds out to Christians, telling them, "Have this mind (*touto phroneite*) among yourselves." Believers are to abandon the example of Adam and pursue the standard of Christ.

In sum, Paul himself apparently inherited this contrast between Adam and Christ from the hymnography of early Christian worship. For this reason it should be regarded as coming from the most primitive theological insights of Christians. In 1 Corinthians and Romans Paul himself represents new developments on the theme, applied to the two disputed questions he had in mind to address, the Resurrection and Justification. Earlier than Paul, however, was this primitive hymn.