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Jesus as Leader: A Sacred Texture Analysis of Philippians 2: 5-11

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Philippians 2: 5 – 11 has been described as a magnificent hymn that extols many of the distinctive doctrines of the Christian faith.¹ Some of the doctrines include the preexistence of Christ, His deity, His equality with God the Father, Christ's incarnation and true humanity, His voluntary death on the cross, His glorious exaltation by God the Father, and His ultimate triumph over evil.² The passage itself tells the story of a heavenly being or the pre-incarnate Christ. It further notes the eternal Word, existing "in the form of God" (v.6), "who emptied himself" (v. 7), and it describes a heavenly being who laid aside his glorious trappings to take up a human existence.³ The primary focus of Philippians 2: 5 - 11 is to teach the Philippians an essential life lesson in a narrative form. The disciple Paul was the narrator of the story and he chose this passage to teach the Philippians about the foundation of the church and the leadership of Jesus. During this time period stories were often used to convey lessons, "The stories we tell declare who we are (or at least who we think we are) and profoundly shape who we are."⁴ In order to thoroughly understand this passage the socio-rhetorical style of sacred texture analysis is utilized as a framework. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how sacred texture analysis can be used to understand the leadership style of Jesus and how this passage compares with servant leadership.

Sacred Texture Analysis

According to Robbins, sacred texture analysis refers to, "a texture that is intertwined with each of the other four texture analysis techniques (inner, inter, social/cultural and ideological)." ⁵ Sacred texture analysis refers to the manner in which a text communicates insight into the relationship between the human and the divine. This technique focuses on a careful analysis of deity, holy persons, spirit beings, divine history, human redemption, human commitment, religious community and ethics.⁶

Deity

The deity of Jesus is demonstrated throughout the passage and is evident "where God, or divine being, who may exist either in the background or in a direct position of action and speech in a text".⁷ For example, in the line, "who, being in very nature God" (v. 6) clearly states that Jesus is in fact God but, then in the same passage contradicts with the statement, "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped" (v. 6). There is certainly a discrepancy in this passage as Jesus is said to be God but, then also less than God. This contradiction is further demonstrated in, "therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name" (v. 9). Certainly no name can be above God therefore through this statement Jesus must be one with God. An additional example of deity is in the passage, "and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (v. 11). By far, this is the most direct verse in the passage as it directly states that Jesus is Lord and not simply equal with God.

Further examples of the deity of Jesus are found in the second stanza where MacLeod postulates that Christ emptied Himself of the "form of God" and in actuality he relinquishes his attributes of deity.⁸ Paul demonstrates this concept of relinquishment in the phrase, "taking the

¹ David J. MacLeod, "The Exaltation of Christ: An Exposition of Philippians 2: 9-11," part 2 of 2 parts of "The Christological Hymn of Philippians 2: 5-11," *Bibliotheca Sacra-Dallas* 158 (2001): 437-450.

² MacLeod, "Exaltation," 437-450.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Brian K. Peterson, "Philippians 2: 5 – 11" *Interpretation* 58, no. 2 (2004): 178-180.

⁵ Vernon Kay Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society, and Ideology*. (London, New York: Routledge: Psychology Press, 1996).

⁶ Robbins, *Tapestry*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ MacLeod, "Exaltation," 437-450.

very nature of a servant” (Philippians 2: 7). Peterson notes that for Paul and his audience in Philippi, “equality with God” is the highest level of status one could have.⁹ Readers of this passage should be mindful of the importance that position had in this society. Social position was of paramount importance, and the society itself was largely built on status.¹⁰ Therefore, for Jesus to choose to express his equality through the actions noted in vv.6-8 demonstrated amazing depth of grace.¹¹ This is truly an interesting act that Jesus became a member of the lower class in order to demonstrate his equality eventually with God. It is interesting that Jesus did not exploit his own position, rights, honor or power in any self serving way.¹² MacLeod explains that Jesus takes on a lower status of a servant with the final goal of making those on earth ultimately rich in grace. This was an amazingly unselfish act on behalf of Jesus and to truly comprehend this act was probably unimaginable to the Philippi of the time. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) added the following about this verse, “He emptied Himself, not by laying down the divine nature, but by taking human nature”.¹³ Augustine noted, “Thus He emptied Himself taking the form of a servant, not losing the form of God. The form of a servant was added; the form of God did not pass away”.¹⁴ This is an extremely important point to remember regarding this verse.

Holy Person

The next subtexture of sacred texture analysis that will be analyzed is that of holy persons or those, “who have a special relationship to God or to divine powers.”¹⁵ Certainly in this passage Paul is clearly stating to the Philippians that Jesus has a special relationship with God. An interesting verse in this passage is, “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (v. 10). Not only will all on earth bow in the name of Jesus but, also in heaven and the netherworld. Paul is clearly stating that the power of Jesus is clearly above that of the darker powers.

In the forth stanza Jesus is exalted by the Father to the place of a holy person. Verse nine is considered to be a decisive turning point for Paul as the primary actor in the narrative shifts to God the Father.¹⁶ MacLeod continues to explain:

When Jesus’ self-humbling reached the absolute depths in His shameful death. God the Father decisively intervened. In vindication and approval of the son’s self-humbling, the Father magnificently exalted Him to the highest place in the universe. The Father clearly rewarded His Son for His perfectly obedient life and death.¹⁷

God exalted Jesus to the position of a holy person because of his obedience to God’s will. Paul is therefore attempting to tell the Philippians that God will also exalt Christians who demonstrate the selfless spirit of Jesus.¹⁸ God ultimately bestows on Jesus, “the name which is above every name” (v. 9).

⁹ Peterson, “Philippians,” 178-180.

¹⁰ David J. MacLeod, “Imitating the Incarnation of Christ: An Exposition of Philippians 2: 5-8 Part 1 of 2 parts of” *The Christological Hymn of Philippians 2: 5-11.* *Bibliotheca Sacra-Dallas* - 158 (2001): 308-330.

¹¹ Peterson, “Philippians,” 178-180.

¹² Peterson, 178-180.

¹³ MacLeod, “Exaltation.” 437-450.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Robbins, *Tapestry*.

¹⁶ MacLeod, “Exaltation,” 437-450.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

In verse 7 the phrase “in the likeness of men” is used by Paul to demonstrate two things. First he wants the reader to know that Jesus is really like men in that He has a real human nature.¹⁹ Second the phrase also suggests that He is more than man. The phrase does not deny the true humanity of Jesus; it simply suggests that He is not exactly the same as other people.²⁰ In this passage there are numerous examples of the holy place that Jesus holds beside God. Jesus is man; but, also more than man.

Spirit Beings

Spirit beings are special divine or evil beings that have the nature of a spirit rather than a human being.²¹ Robbins explains:

The Gospel of Mark, for instance, refers to angels, Holy Spirits, demons or unclean spirits, and the devil. The presence of these beings features competition between forces of good and evil. The sacred texture of a text often emerges in the context of conflict between good and evil spiritual forces. The manner in which this battle is resolved sheds yet more light on the relation of human life to the divine in the text.²²

Verse ten directly deals with the concept of spirit beings as Paul notes in the following passage:

Those who are in heaven are the rational creatures of heaven, namely, the angels. Those on earth refers to all humankind. The region under the earth is the abode of evil spirits and disobedient angels which suggests that those under the earth are the demons.²³

MacLeod continues to explain that in the millennium Jesus will ultimately be acclaimed by every person (and angel and demon) as the Lord of the universe. In fact in the passage Paul speaks of a time when the enemies of Christ will end their rebellion (Phil. 3: 19-20) through their acts of submission to Jesus. Paul further explains that the forces of evil do not yet confess that Jesus is Lord but, one day they will.²⁴

Divine History

Another subtexture of sacred texture examines the relationship between the divine powers direct historical processes and events toward certain results.²⁵ For example, stanza five explains God’s purpose to exalting Christ and bestowing on Him the highest name.²⁶ MacLeod draws attention to the fact that in biblical times a name was not a label for distinguishing one person from another to the extent it is in current times. In biblical times a person’s name described the inner being of the individual or it was, “an index of a person’s character or status.”²⁷

In Philippians 2: 5-11 Paul is using the experience of the death of Jesus on the cross to demonstrate to the Philippians the level of devotion Jesus has to God. In turn this narrative

¹⁹ MacLeod, “Exaltation,” 437 – 450.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Robbins, *Tapestry*.

²² Ibid.

²³ MacLeod, “Exaltation,” 437 – 450.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Robbins, *Tapestry*.

²⁶ MacLeod, 437 – 450.

²⁷ Ibid.

demonstrates the level of devotion the Philippians need to have to God also.²⁸ Only Christians would at this time have an understanding of how Jesus died on the cross and was subsequently exalted to Heaven to sit at the right hand of his Father.²⁹

Human Redemption

Human redemption is yet another form of sacred texture analysis which can be found in Philippians 2: 5 – 11. Human redemption is defined as:

The benefit transmitted from the divine realm to humans as a result of events, rituals, or practices. This benefit could take the form of a transformation of the mortal nature of humans to an immortal nature or the removal of impurity or guilt so that a person is liberated from powers or practices that are debilitating and destructive.³⁰

An example of human redemption can be found in the third stanza that speaks of Christ's humanity. Paul wrote, "being found in the appearance as a man" (Philippians 2: 8). MacLeod explains in addition to Christ's human body and physiology he also experienced emotions and affections.³¹ MacLeod continues, "He thinks humanly. He gathers information. He organizes it. He assimilates it. He memorizes it. He recalls it. He makes inferences from it."³² Jesus is in many ways a man in his daily life.

Another example of human redemption is shown in the second part of stanza five which refers to the level of homage Paul stated that should be given to Jesus.³³ The homage is not directed simply to the Philippians, but it is universal to the foundation of the church, "those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (v. 10).

In stanza six Paul's primary message is that "Jesus Christ is Lord" (v. 11). According to MacLeod, Paul did not think of the exalted Christ as displacing or rivaling God the Father. Rather God the Father is pleased, for His purpose will be fulfilled and his plans realized.

Human Commitment

The sacred texture subtexture of human commitment is another important aspect of Philippians 2: 5 – 11. According to Robbins, this is, "the faithful and supportive following of people who play a special role in revealing the ways of God to humans."³⁴ In this passage Paul is clearly showing his level of discipleship to Jesus even after his death. Paul's willingness to follow Jesus' direction even after his death demonstrates an amazing level of commitment and belief in the words of Jesus. Paul continues to tell the Philippians, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (v. 5). Paul is explaining to the Philippians that they should be obedient to God's word even to the extent that Jesus demonstrated in his death.

According to MacLeod it is Paul's intention to directly speak to all Christians who were tempted to be unloving, divisive, selfish, arrogant, and overly concerned about their own rights.³⁵ Paul accomplished this task by speaking about the person and work of Christ. Paul tries to demonstrate to the Philippians as well as others who read the narrative the level of commitment

²⁸ MacLeod, "Exaltation," 437 – 450.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Robbins, *Tapestry*.

³¹ MacLeod, "Exaltation," 437 – 450.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Robbins, *Tapestry*.

³⁵ MacLeod, "Exaltation," 437 – 450.

that is necessary in order to achieve ultimate salvation. Paul also strives to aid the founding church members in seeing how the story of Christ must, and will, shape the life of the church together as God's people. Paul presents the life of Jesus as the paradigm for the church's life.³⁶ According to Peterson, Paul is not only presenting Jesus as a model for ideal behavior; he is demanding that the Philippians ask, "What Would Jesus Do?" in their daily lives. MacLeod explains Paul's rationale in the following manner:

The congregation (Philippians) was in danger of disintegration because of a competitive spirit creeping in among the members. In verses 1 – 4 Paul urged them to practice humble, self-sacrificing, self-denying, and self-giving service. In verse 5 he reinforced his instruction by pointing to Christ as the Christians' model for behavior. Jesus' humility and self-abnegation, begun in heaven and completed at Golgotha, sets the grand example for Christians.³⁶

Religious Community

Ecclesiology is another facet of sacred texture analysis. According to Robbins ecclesiology is, "concerned with the nature of community into which people are called by God".³⁷ Robbins further notes that this type of analysis is often concerned with the relation of the community to God. In Philippians 2: 5 – 11 a number of key relationships are noted. For example, in the beginning of the passage the relationship the Philippians have with Jesus is found (v. 5). "And being found in appearance as a man" (v. 8) notes the relationship all men have with Jesus; not simply the Philippians. Jesus is shown to have a relationship with heaven, earth and the netherworld (v. 10).

Ethics

Ethics is an important component of sacred texture analysis which references the responsibility humans have to think and act in special ways, in both ordinary and extraordinary circumstances.³⁸ Robbins explains the ethical aspects of sacred texture analysis in the following:

When addressed in the context of religious commitment, the special ways of thinking and acting are motivated by commitment to God. Usually, ethicists work in some way with ethical principles, though some consider ethical guidelines, rules, or principles to be so intrinsic to situations that they cannot be adequately stated. While for some decades during the twentieth century, many interpreters have not considered it possible to develop a New Testament ethics, a number of interpreters now think such an ethics should be possible to formulate.³⁹

Wortham discusses the ethical importance of Philippians 2: 5 - 11 through the following: "The main theme of the passage is the resolution of conflict, and the plot is developed in terms of a rite of passage with underlying subplots of status reversal and status elevation."⁴⁰

Inherently, the Philippians are being given directions that cannot be easy to accept.

³⁶ MacLeod, "Exaltation," 437-450.

³⁷ Robbins, *Tapestry*.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Robert A. Wortham, "Christology as Community Identity in the Philippians Hymn: The Philippians Hymn as Social Drama," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 23, (1996): 269-288.

In their minds, they must have struggled to understand why they were being asked to follow the directions given by Jesus without question. How might following Jesus alter the direction of their society?

Servant Leadership

Patterson’s model of Servant Leadership follows the belief that the servant leaders focus their behavior without concern for the organization’s outcomes because it is the right thing to do for their followers.⁴¹ Patterson’s model is founded in the leader’s agapao love/concern for others. The Servant Leadership model is built upon the following seven values:

Teachable, concern for others, controlled discipline, seeking what is right and good for the organization, showing mercy in beliefs and actions with all people, focusing on the purpose of the organization and on the well being of the followers and creating and sustaining peace in the organization – not a lack of conflict, but, a place where peace grows.⁴²

Table 1: Servant Leadership As Explained in Philippians 2: 5 - 11

Table 1

Correlation of Philippians 2: 5 – 11 & Servant Leadership

Servant Leadership Values	Words in Passage
Teachable	Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (v. 5)
Concern for Others	“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place” (v. 9).
Controlled Discipline	“Became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (v. 8).
Seeking What is Right and Good	“Equality with God” (v. 6).
Showing Mercy in Beliefs and Actions	“Taking the very nature of a servant” (v. 7).
Focus on the Purpose and Well Being	“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place” (v. 9).
Creating and Sustaining Peace	“That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow” (v. 10).

Servant Leadership is built upon the belief that the leader’s agapao love for others (followers) affects the leader’s behaviors of humility and altruism toward the followers.⁴³ The two Servant Leadership tenants of humility and altruism are demonstrated throughout Philippians 2: 5 - 11. For example, Paul demonstrates the humility of Jesus in his “taking the very nature of a servant” (v. 2) and “being made in human likeness” (v. 2). Jesus was able to take on the lowest place in society at that time in order to demonstrate his devotion to his Father and his devotion to his followers. Paul demonstrates the altruism of Jesus through his willingness to “become obedient to

⁴¹Bruce E. Winston, "Servant Leadership at Heritage Bible College: A Single-Case Study," *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 25, no. 7 (2004): 600-617.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

death - Even death on a cross" (v. 8). According to Winston the two tenants of Servant Leadership directly affect the follower's ability to see the leader's vision, to understand the purpose and ultimately to develop trust. Paul demonstrates the importance of trust to the ultimate glory and salvation of the Philippians. According to Patterson's model the leader will empower the follower based upon the level of alignment the follower's vision has with the organization's vision.⁴⁴ Dennis and Bocarnea note that, "without moral purpose, competence has no measure, and trust has no goal".⁴⁵

Greenleaf introduced the concept of servant leadership in his essay *The Servant as Leader*. Greenleaf envisioned a servant leader as one who facilitates achievement of a shared vision via the personal development and empowerment of the followers. A true servant leader is one who shares their power, builds community and practices authenticity in leadership toward a shared vision.

The servant leader is servant first as it begins with the desire to serve others. Then one makes the conscious choice to lead. The unique difference in Servant Leaders is the level of priority that is given to the needs of followers. In Philippians 2: 5 – 11 Jesus is by definition a true servant leader. He places the needs of his followers first even with full knowledge of his own death on the cross. Jesus is first obedient to God with the ultimate goal of showing all of humanity the way to Heaven.

According to MacLeod Jesus has an amazing ability to utilize "mind-stretching paradox" in orders to convey meaning.⁴⁶ Philippians 2: 5 – 11 is an excellent example of the quotation, "the way up is down."⁴⁷ Paul is telling the reader of the humble self-sacrificing, self-denying, self-giving behavior of Christ on earth and that this only displayed what he was always like.⁴⁸

Discussion

According to Wortham the Philippians hymn (2:5-11) can serve as a symbol of unity, providing societal identity and legitimization for members of a new religious movement.⁴⁹ Wortham continues to explain that the hymn could actually describe the beginning transformation of early Christianity from a subculture within Judaism to an independent religious reform movement.

Jesus is not in the cultural position one would expect him to fill. Paul wants the reader to see the true Jesus. Bekker notes that leadership often attracts, "the proud and the upwardly mobile individual."⁵⁰ Still, humility is in reality the road which leads to one being in the image of God.⁵¹ Christ demonstrates that in order to be truly Godlike one does not need to take the riches for themselves. In fact by giving everything away people will actually bring themselves to a higher position. By being obedient to God, even to death, Jesus was able to maintain his position as the right hand of God.

To be a leader often means to place the focus of one's leadership duties on the followers. Sometimes the leader will be asked to relinquish their own position or place of importance with the ultimate goal of bringing one's followers to a position of power. Jesus certainly gave the ultimate sacrifice of a leader for the benefit of his follower's salvation but, even today's leaders can learn a great deal from this passage and how Jesus functioned throughout his lifetime.

⁴⁴ Winston, "Servant Leadership," 600-617.

⁴⁵ Robert S. Dennis and Mihai Bocarnea, "Development of the Servant Leadership Assessment Instrument." *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 26, no. 8 (2005): 600-615.

⁴⁶ MacLeod, "Exaltation," 437-450.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ MacLeod, "Exaltation," 437-450.

⁴⁹Wortham, "Christology," 269-288.

⁵⁰ Winston, "Servant Leadership," 600-617.

⁵¹ Ibid.

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