

Ernst Lohmeyer's *Kyrios Jesus* Revisited

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September 19, 1996 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the judicial murder of one of the great NT scholars of our time, Ernst Lohmeyer. In an early memorial tribute Oscar Cullmann observed that all future study of Phil. 2:6-11 must take as its starting point the insights of Lohmeyer's *Kyrios Jesus* (1928). Lohmeyer's identification of Phil. 2:6-11 as a pre-Pauline psalm is well known. However, the form-critical analysis which led to this conclusion was by no means the sole contribution of his monograph. Lohmeyer proceeded to suggest theories concerning its place in the eucharistic worship of the primitive Jerusalem church, its role in the development of primitive christology, and its relationship to other literature of the New Testament. All this was done within the context of a metaphysic which Lohmeyer saw not only as the key to understanding the humiliation and exaltation of the servant figure in the psalm, but as the motivating force of Christian living.

Lohmeyer divided the passage into two strophes each consisting of three three-line stanzas (*Kyrios Jesus*, 5-6; Lohmeyer, KEK 9 [1930], 90):

- (1) ⁶ [The one] existing in the form of God [ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ]
considered it not plunder [οὐχ ἄρπαγμὸν]
to be like God [τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ],
- (2) ⁷ but sacrificed himself [ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν],
having taken the form of a slave,
having become an image of humanity;
- (3) and [though] being found “as Son of Man [ὡς ἄνθρωπος]”
⁸ he humbled himself,
having become obedient unto death
[death on a cross].
- (4) ⁹ And therefore God exalted him highly
and bestowed on him
the name above every name,
- (5) ¹⁰ that in the name of Jesus
every knee should bow
in heaven, earth, and the underworld,
- (6) ¹¹ and every tongue acclaim:
“Jesus Christ is Lord [κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός]”
to the glory of God, the Father.

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This format differs from Nestle-Aland²⁷ and NRSV which follow traditional verse numbering, whereas Lohmeyer based his division of stanzas on the sequence of ideas that he detected. The unique form and vocabulary of the passage suggested that it was a pre-Pauline composition, celebrating the humiliation of Christ as Son of man and servant, and his exaltation as Lord of the universe. Paul's sole contribution was the interjection of the typically Pauline "death on a cross."

The composition was Hellenistic in form, but Jewish in content. Thus, Lohmeyer rejected Bousset's view of the Hellenistic origin of title *Kyrios*. He traced the origin of the servant figure's primordial temptation to Zoroastrian dualism which had become absorbed by Judaism, and which he interpreted in terms of his own idealist philosophy.

Numerous scholars have accepted Lohmeyer's basic thesis about the psalm's form, but have sought to turn it into two-line couplets in order to permit it to be sung or chanted antiphonally. Recent study has raised questions about the *Gattung* of hymn. Two considerations appear to vindicate Lohmeyer's view about its form. One is J.A. Fitzmyer's translation of the passage into Aramaic in a form similar to Lohmeyer's (*CBQ* 50 [1988]:470-83). The passage may have existed first in Aramaic before the Greek version that we have with the Semitisms that Lohmeyer noted. (Lohmeyer thought that it was composed in Greek by a poet whose mother-tongue was Semitic.) The other consideration is Lohmeyer's little-noticed observation that the passage is structured in the logical form of a *sortes* which would require the form that Lohmeyer posited. It might suggest a mnemonic device, and that the composition is an early doxological creed. This might be the point of 4:8: "if there be any virtue [ἀρετῆ], if there is any [ἐπαῖνος], think about these things."

Several scholars have noted that "form of God" may be the equivalent of "image of God." Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, J.D.G. Dunn, and others have suggested (in my judgment rightly) that the work is not about preexistence and postexistence, but about the contrast between Christ and Adam. (On a canonical reading of Gen. 1:27; 3:5, Adam the original image, vainly sought to be like God.) Other scholars note that "form of God" may be a way of saying "glory of God."

I wish to go further and propose that the temptation "to be like God" is another form of the tradition preserved in the temptation narratives of Matt. and Luke. It also echoes charges that Jesus was putting himself in God's place (Mark 2:8; John 5:18), and that he was a seducer empowered by an alien deity (Matt. 10:24; 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15; cf. Lev. 20:27; CD 12:2-3). It is to be heard against the background of the fact that Jesus died the death of one who was under a divine curse (Mark 14:64 par. Matt. 26:65; 1 Cor. 12:3; Gal. 3:13; cf. Deut. 21:22-23; 11 Q Temple 64:6-10). The passage is essentially a confession of faith which repudiates such charges, and offers a counter-interpretation which celebrates the death of Jesus as an act of utter obedience which is the ground of his exaltation and lordship. See further, Colin Brown, "Ernst Lohmeyer's *Kyrios Jesus*." In Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd, eds., *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, 6-42.