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A Note on morphē

The simple nominal form μορφή occurs but three times in the N.T., two of these instances being found in the Kenosis passage in Philippians, and the other is in Mk. 16:12 which is a textually uncertain passage. The cognate noun μόρφωσις appears twice (Rom. 2:20; II Tim. 3:5), and the compounded noun σύμμορφος also is used twice (Rom. 8:29; Phil. 3:21). μορφή is found once in its verbal form μορφόομαι (Gal. 4:19), and two times in its compounded forms μεταμορφόομαι and συμμορφίζομαι. The former appears four times, two in relation to the Transfiguration (Mt. 17:2; Mk. 9:3) and two in the Pauline letters (Rom. 12:2; II Cor. 3:18), and the latter but once (Phil. 3:10).

1.

At least two significant inferences may be drawn from this evidence. First, the sense of the compounded forms will in large measure be determined by the meaning of μορφή itself. Second, it is clear that this word is quite distinctively, although not exclusively, *Pauline*, for of the 13 instances in the N.T., ten are in the Pauline corpus and therefore in some measure reflect his thought.

Because of the limited usage of μορφή in the N.T. it is difficult to identify the precise *sense* of the word, and it is predictable that the exegesis of μορφή should engender controversy and debate, especially in view of its highly critical contextual and consequently theological implications. This debate is heard as early as the Christological councils of the post-apostolic church, and it continues up to the present. The most sensitive issue at stake is this: what is meant when it is affirmed that Jesus Christ is ἐν μορφῇ Θεοῦ, "in the 'form' of God"?

A forthright answer to this question is given by J. B. Lightfoot in his learned commentary on Philippians[1], an exegetical work so competent that it still regarded as a standard of exegesis nearly a century later. Although Lightfoot does not equate μορφή with οὐσία or φύσις, none the less "the possession of the μορφή involves parti-

[1] J. B. Lightfoot, St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians (1868), p. 108f. and pp. 125–131.

cipation in the οὐσία also...»[2], and he goes on to indicate that εἰκών (II Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15) and χαρακτήρ (Heb. 1:3) are similar but not so decisive N.T. expressions for the deity of Jesus Christ.

In his excursus on μορφή Lightfoot contrasts it with σχῆμα which he identifies as relating to external features whereas μορφή refers to nature, quality and essence[3]. The σχῆμα of a thing may vary; i.e., its accidental characteristics may change, but the μορφή of a given thing is immutable. If the μορφή should be altered, then the essential features of an object change and it is basically no longer what it was. At times these two words appear to approximate each other in semantic value, but this seeming closeness vanishes when they are used in the same context. Rom. 12:1, 2 is a study in contrasts, not comparisons. Phil. 3:21 sets forth an acute distinction between these two words and not a parallelism.

In recent times this exegesis of μορφή, especially as it relates to the Kenosis passage, has been brought under criticism and revision. J. Héring proposes that the μορφῇ of Phil. 2:6 looks back to the Hebrew דמות which means 'image', and he suggests that Gen. 1:26 provides the antecedent thought behind the Kenosis passage[4]. Prof. O. Cullmann accepts this hypothesis and proceeds to assert that μορφή is a link between the creation account of Adam and the incarnation of the Son of man. Thus he writes that "μορφή in Phil. 2:6 is immediately related to the concept εἰκών, since the Semitic root word דמות or its synonym צלם can correspond to either of the two Greek words"[5]. Other modern scholars have also adopted this view either in whole or in part, thereby demonstrating its attractiveness[6].

This exegetical development stands or falls with the identification of דמות with μορφή; i.e., can it be shown that Biblical Greek writers and translators used μορφή to represent דמות? Cullmann's acceptance of this identification rests in part upon the Peshitta, but since it is post-Christian its value for this discussion is marginal.

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[2] Ibid., p. 108. [3] Ibid., pp. 125–131.

[4] J. Héring, Le royaume de Dieu et sa venue (1937), p. 146f.

[5] O. Cullmann, The Christology of the New Testament (1959), p. 176ff.

[6] Cf. W. Eltester, Eikon im Neuen Testament: Zeitschr. f. d. neutest. Wiss., Beih. 23 (1958); J. Behm, Morphe: Theol. Wörterb., iv, p 759; A. M. Hunter, Paul and His Predecessors (2nd ed., 1961), p. 43; R. P. Martin, An Early Christian Confession (1960), pp. 17f. and 46–48.

An examination of the two Hebrew words in Gen. 1:26 — דמות and צלם – will show that μορφή never translates דמות in the LXX, and translates צלם but once in Dan. 3:19. Cullmann cites the Syriac *d*[e]*mutha* as equivalent to μορφή, but it is quite probable that the Syriac has responded to Greek influence, but not the Greek to Syriac[7]. For example, *d*[e]*mutha* represents μορφή which is opposed to ὕλη, matter, substance, and μορφή refers to essence, nature or quality. εἰκών represents five Hebrew words in the LXX, צלם being the commonest; εἰκών represents דמות only once in the LXX (cf. Gen. 5:1). On the other hand, μορφή translates five Hebrew words, צלם being only one of those five. The two main Hebrew words in question appear in parallel construction in Gen. 1:26, 27 where the creation of man is described. Adam was created in the image and likeness (דמות and צלם) of God. E. Jacob states that צלם means a "fashioned image", a concrete representation, and cites P. Humbert to the effect that «...the noun tselem refers to no spiritual likeness in this case any more than in any others»[8].

It therefore appears questionable whether μορφή and צלם are semantic equivalents, for only צלם is rendered by both μορφή and εἰκών, and only the equation צלם = εἰκών is decisive. This is insufficient evidence from LXX Greek to support the hypothesis that μορφή bears the same semantic value as דמות. Moreover, Theodotion, who generally accepts prior LXX wording, changed μορφή to ὄψις in Dan. 3:19, the sole instance where μορφή had translated דמות.

As to the lexical quality of these words, דמות means likeness or similitude, and this is quite consistently employed in reference to external or physical appearance. צלם lies close in meaning to דמות for it speaks of image, likeness or semblance, again pointing to representative qualities. εἰκών is the approximate Greek equivalent of these two Hebrew words, and suggests a physical or tangible representation of an object. Only in Timaeus Locrus the philosopher does εἰκών appear to be used in a metaphysical sense. In the N.T., Col. 3:10 seems to come the closest to equating μορφή with εἰκών, but even here μορφή would not be a proper synonym. μορφή sometimes approximates εἰκών, but they cannot be interchanged.

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[7] C. Brockelmann, Lexicon Syriacum (1928), pp. 156–157.

[8] E. Jacob, Theology of the Old Testament (1958), pp. 166–167.

2.

Whereas εἰκών contemplates the external or representational features of an object, μορφή tends, both in classical and Hellenistic Greek, to point to the metaphysical property of an object so that it refers to *nature* or essence. It is unfortunate that the English word "form" has been used to translate μορφή, for this is inexact and misleading. Plato represents Socrates as saying that the μορφή of a thing persists even if the εἶδος (form, shape) changes[9], and this general sense endures even into late Hellenistic Greek. So μορφή refers to specific character or nature; this may or may not be related to external appearance or likeness.

Cullmann holds that the ἐν μορφῇ Θεοῦ of Phil. 2:6 refers to the image of God which Jesus possessed from the beginning, and he dismisses the possibility that μορφή has to do with Jesus' nature[10]. Col. 1:15; 3:10; II Cor. 3:18 and II Cor. 4:4 are adduced in support of the thesis that εἰκών is equivalent to μορφή. However, the passages cited are of doubtful value to this thesis, for εἰκών contemplates a close but nevertheless distinct concept from μορφή. Paul confesses in II Cor. 4:4 that Christ is the likeness (εἰκών), or image, of God, but the emphasis in this and parallel statements is on the glory of God which is also in Christ. The intention of these passages is admittedly not the natures of Christ, but rather his visible manifestation of the invisible God. Col. 1:15 uses εἰκών precisely to establish this point, and it does not aim its central thrust at the idea of be nature of Christ.

To equate μορφή and εἰκών entails a further difficulty, for it equates the image of God with the form of God. This exegesis leaves indeterminate the meaning of μορφή δούλου, for to be consistent this phrase should be translated "image of a servant", a less powerful expression than "form of a servant", i.e., participation in essential human nature. To sustain the comparison and contrast between Adam and Christ Cullmann treats the vexatious ἁρπαγμόν as "robbery" instead of the passive sense of "a thing to be prized". Paul's thought may well be to contrast Christ and Satan rather than Christ and Adam. When μορφὴ δούλου and μορφὴ Θεοῦ are set up in obvious contrast, the impact of the entire passage is attenuated by

[9] Phaedo, p. 103E, 104A.

[10] Cullmann (n. 5), p. 176.

taking μορφή as εἰκών in the latter case, but simply as "form" in the former. Instead of speaking of the Son of man who possesses the Imago Dei, Paul is perhaps rather treating Christ's equality with the Father, his subsequent humiliation and final exaltation. There are indeed overtones of Son of man theology in the Kenosis passage, a truth which eluded Lightfoot; Son of man theology appears, for example, in vs. 8 where Christ's obedience is implicitly contrasted with Adam's disobedience. But it is subordinate to the stronger motifs of deity and עבד יהרה.

Further semantic evidence that μορφή does not mean εἰκών is seen in the nouns and verbs compounded with μορφή. To substitute εἰκών for μορφή in such a passage as Rom. 12:1, 2 would blur the clearly intended contrast between the external, accidental marks of human personality and behavior and the inward nature of the Christian life.

Cullmann says that "We do not have here to do with speculation about 'natures', but with *Heilsgeschichte*... All the statements of Phil. 2:6ff. are to be understood from the standpoint of the Old Testament history of Adam»[11]. This is to say that the N.T. has no metaphysical interest in Christ, but the lexical data do not appear to support this conclusion, for the plainest sense of μορφή indicates something of a metaphysical characteristic. Moreover, it is debatable whether the intention of the Kenosis passage should be understood in terms of a single, although important, O.T. passage. Rather, the Christ-hymn is a compound of several O.T. motifs which include the ideas of Adam, Son of man and Servant of the Lord.

Why is the attempt made to equate, at least in Phil. 2:6ff., these two dissimilar words? The answer may lie partially in the contemporary disaffection for any *metaphysical interest* in the N.T. doctrine of Christ or in Biblical Theology as a whole. Cullmann's treatment of Heilsgeschichte seems to rule out the possibility of any philosophical or metaphysical language or categories in the N.T., for the Bible is thought to discuss God, Christ, man, *et al.* in concrete language. Biblical thought patterns are dynamic, vital and functional, and not formalistic, intellectualistic and abstract. Repeatedly Cullmann rejects the idea that the N.T. exhibits any concern for the 'natures' of Christ and assigns all such questions to the

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[11] Ibid., p. 181.

post-apostolic church which at a later time (i.e., Chalcedon) developed an interest in metaphysical niceties and distinctions about the person of Christ[12]. His general thesis is not challenged here, for it is above dispute that the Semitic mind, as expressed both in the O.T. and N.T., has far more affinity for the concrete than the abstract, a point vigorously defended by T. Boman[13]. However, it is also true that N.T. events and writing took place at a time and in a circumstance which had been heavily influenced by Greek culture and thought. It is an overstatement of the principle, therefore, to contend that the N.T. has no interest in the "nature" of Christ. To hold such a position prejudices the words of the N.T. and tends to rob them of their native and spontaneous semantic content in the interest of a theological point of view, and modern Biblical theologians have been taken to task for this tendency[14]. The implicit judgment against Lightfoot's exegesis is sustained, for his understanding of the key words in the Kenosis passage is more informed by Hellenistic thought than Hebraic. Paul was not fundamentally concerned to establish an abstraction about the "nature" of Christ, as though he were more indebted to Plato than to Moses. Paul was a Jew. But it must also be borne in mind that he was an educated Jew who was aware of the nuances of Greek thought bound up in these words in the Philippian hymn, and he chose them because they said something unique to that demand. Lightfoot was not wholly wrong. The contemporary distinction between a "functional" Christology as over against an "essential" Christology is more the product of academic theology than an original concern of Paul to whom the entire consideration remained undifferentiated[15].

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[12] J. S. Arrieta levels a Roman Catholic criticism of Cullmann at this point; cf. La Iglesia Del Intervalo: Aspecto Escatologico Del Tiempo de la Iglesia en Oscar Cullmann (1959). This criticism, voiced in company with many Roman Catholics, has moved Cullmann to defend himself against the charge that he rejects Chalcedon. Cf. O. Cullmann, La Response du Professor Cullmann: Choisir 9–10 (1960). This has been translated by R. P. Meye in Scott. Journ. of Theol. 15, 1 (March, 1962), pp. 36–43.

[13] T. Boman, Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek (1960).

[14] Cf. J. Barr, Semantics of Biblical Language (1961), and Biblical Words for Time (1962), esp. pp. 129f.

[15] Cf. D. E. H. Whiteley, The Theology of St. Paul (1964), p. 123, and R. H. Fuller, The Foundations of New Testament Christology (1965), pp. 247–250.

N. Snaith has well observed that "...words do not stand for pinpoints of expression, but for large circles, and the nearer we get to the circumference the more particular significance gets blurred"[16]. This is simply to say that μορφή and εἰκών at times may overlap in their semantic value, so that the one seems to reduplicate the thought of the other in a given context. But it is inadequate to infer that they therefore mean the same thing.

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[16] N. Snaith, Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament (1959), p. 144.