

2010

# To Whom Was Christ a Slave (Phil 2:7)? Double Agency and the Specters of Sin and Death in Philippians

Nijay Gupta

*George Fox University*, [ngupta@georgefox.edu](mailto:ngupta@georgefox.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Gupta, Nijay, "To Whom Was Christ a Slave (Phil 2:7)? Double Agency and the Specters of Sin and Death in Philippians" (2010).  
*Faculty Publications - George Fox Evangelical Seminary*. Paper 30.  
<http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes/30>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the George Fox Evangelical Seminary at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - George Fox Evangelical Seminary by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.

# To Whom Was Christ a Slave (Phil 2:7)? Double Agency and the Specters of Sin and Death in Philippians

**Nijay K. Gupta**

Ashland Theological Seminary, 82 Samaritan Ave, Ashland, OH 44805, USA  
nijay.gupta@gmail.com

---

## **Abstract**

Paul's so-called "Christ-hymn" in Philippians 2:6-11 is one of the most scrutinized passages in the Pauline corpus as questions abound regarding its origins, purpose, format, and the theological components of its Christology. One factor in the determination of this Christology is the interpretation of *doulos* in 2:7 focusing on the question *to whom was Christ a slave?* While a number of answers have been put forward, it will be argued that the best explanation involves "double agency." That is, when the hymn is closely examined, as well as the theological character of the whole letter, Christ appears to be a subject and agent of the powers Sin and Death, but Paul knows and communicates the reality that he is really God's agent who subverts and enervates these hegemonic powers. This not only illuminates Paul's Christology, but can be identified as a model for other believers discussed in Philippians, including himself.

## **Keywords**

Philippians 2:6-11, Slavery, Paul, Christology, Agency, Death, Käsemann

## **Introduction**

Paul's so-called "Christ-hymn" in Philippians 2:6-11 is one of the most scrutinized passages in the Pauline corpus as questions abound regarding its origins, purpose, format, and the theological components of its inherent Christology.<sup>1</sup> One important matter of the Christology which has not been given enough attention, though, is not just *what* Christ did by "ὁμοιωματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος," but *why* he did it. A key component of

---

<sup>1</sup>) For a useful lengthy study of this pericope, see R.P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians 2:5-11: In Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983; first edition 1967).

this issue, which will be the subject at hand, is the enigmatic phrase “μορφήν δούλου λαβών” in 2:7 where Paul<sup>2</sup> depicts Christ as one who took the form of a slave as he came to the world “in the likeness of mortals.” Paul’s words here seem to be elliptical because he does not directly address the issue of *agency*<sup>3</sup> in terms of Christ’s servitude: *to whom is Christ a slave?* Though several explanations have been advanced, none have persuaded a majority of scholars. Four possible interpretations are worthy of mention.

1. *Ebed Yahweh* theory. Some scholars propose that Christ acts as a “servant of the Lord” especially with a view towards Isaiah’s suffering servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12.<sup>4</sup> A key drawback to this view is that the portrayal of Christ as a δοῦλος is not meant to be honorific, but one of humility and the acceptance of shame (2:8: ταπεινῶ). Nevertheless, this view has some credibility as the slave shows obedience and is finally exalted by God (2:9-11).<sup>5</sup>
2. *Cosmological* theory. Another viewpoint is that, in taking a mortal form, Christ subjects himself to demonic forces.<sup>6</sup> F.W. Beare supports this perspective by turning attention to texts such as Galatians 4:3 which demonstrate Paul’s assumption that all mortals are enslaved to “Elemental Spirits.”<sup>7</sup> A common rebuttal to Beare’s proposal is that the context of Philippians 2:6-11 does not seem to support this cosmological presumption. In recent years the life of this theory has been newly

<sup>2</sup> Though this is also a debated issue, we will presume Paul, even if he had significant preformed resources, was responsible for the final form of the passage; see M.N.A. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (BNTC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 118-19.

<sup>3</sup> By “agency” I am referring to how Christ acted, not only in subjection to someone, but also as an instrument for carrying out some activity.

<sup>4</sup> See D. Georgi, “Der vorpaulinische Hymnus Phil. 2, 6-11,” *Zeit und Geschichte, Dankesgabe an Rudolf Bultmann zum 80* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1964) 263-93. J. Jeremias draws attention to the similar language of pouring out in “Zu Phil. 2, 7: ΕΑΥΤΟΝ ΕΚΕΝΩΣΕΝ,” *NovT* 6 (1963) 182-188.

<sup>5</sup> For a more general perspective of Christ as pious sufferer for the sake of God, see E. Schweizer, *Erniedrigung und Erhöhung bei Jesus und seinen Nachfolgern* (Zurich: Zwingli, 1955) especially 21-33.

<sup>6</sup> See E. Käsemann, “A Critical Analysis of Philippians 2:5-11,” *Journal for Theology and Church* 5 (1968) 45-88.

<sup>7</sup> F.W. Beare, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (HNTC; New York, 1959) 82-3.

leased by an appeal to an “Adamic Christology” permeating this passage, notably argued by James D.G. Dunn.<sup>8</sup> According to Dunn, if the drama of Christ depicted in Philippians was meant to echo the story of Adam, then the slavery is a result of Adam’s “fall,” a slavery “to corruption . . . or to the elemental spirits.”<sup>9</sup>

3. *Anthropological* theory. A third proposal is that Christ’s service, with a view towards the effects and significance of his death, is one that is directed towards all humanity. Thus, J.B. Lightfoot argues, “He who is the Master of all, becomes the slave of all,” which is in line with texts like Mark 10:44-5 where Christ serves the whole world.<sup>10</sup> Once again, though, there seems to be little warrant for this suggestion in the text, as Lightfoot must draw in non-Pauline texts in support.
4. *Political* theory. There are some who propose that hunting for a “master” to this servant metaphor is a lost cause and presses the symbolism too far.<sup>11</sup> The point of the slave-language is that Christ gives up his rights and privileges that he formerly possessed.<sup>12</sup> I would not deny the significance of this position, but that does not preclude the idea that there is also a master involved. In fact, the progression of the poetic narrative divulges that Christ ascends to a lordly status *and* that he is given subjects (2:10). This would lead one to believe that his being a slave also involves a master.

At the end of the day, the flaw of these interpretations is that they find no clear grounding in the text, though each one has a kind of *prima facie* persuasiveness. The most convincing proposal is one that (1) can fit the tenor of 2:6-11 in general and (2) fits within a Pauline theological framework in general. The thesis that will be taken up here is that there is a strong relationship and dialogue between the drama of the Christ-event and the lives

---

<sup>8</sup>) *Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (London: SCM, 1980) 114-25.

<sup>9</sup>) Dunn, *Christology*, 115. It is important to note here, though, that Dunn does not find the idea of the incarnation of Christ or his pre-existence present in this passage, choosing instead to understand him as being *born* into such a situation.

<sup>10</sup>) See *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Macmillan, 1896) 112.

<sup>11</sup>) See G.D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, 1995) 211 n. 84.

<sup>12</sup>) D.J. MacLeod, “Imitating the Incarnation of Christ: An Exposition of Philippians 2:5-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (2001) 320.

of Paul and the Philippians. This leads to the idea that there is some ambiguity intentionally inherent in the portrayal of Christ as a slave. For many who came in contact with the gospel, their evaluation of the significance of Christ hinged on their perception of his authority and allegiances (see Gal 2:17). It will become clear, then, that Paul's purposeful omission of the authority over Christ is a way of navigating through the questions about not only the work and life of Christ, but also the nature of Christian existence and the problems of suffering and death. I propose, then, that Paul imagines and implies *double agency*: Christ, by becoming a mortal, accepted slavery to those cosmological forces that lord over humanity.<sup>13</sup> But, like a true "double agent" of popular espionage, he never forsook his true allegiance to God or his status as Son of God. As an agent of cosmological powers, he is not only subjected by them, but put into their service to help meet some of their ends. Though we will attend to the logic of this later on, Paul affirms that precisely in pushing forward the agenda of these anti-God forces, Christ is ingeniously able to nullify their own power through the ultimate act of eschatological reversal: his own death and resurrection that is capable of being shared by others. This reading of Philippians 2:7 has implications for reading the letter as a whole and especially as it addresses the problem of tribulations in the Christian life and the imprisonment and possible death of Paul as a criminal.

The line of argumentation that is required to defend this thesis involves, first, a new defense of the "*cosmological theory*," grounding it in the text further and linking it together with Paul's overall theology.<sup>14</sup> This will

---

<sup>13</sup>) The suggestion that multiple "masters" are in view is not a particularly new suggestion, but I will develop it in new directions and with literary and theological implications for Philippians and for Paul in general; see S. Fowl, *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul: An Analysis of the Function of the Hymnic Material in the Pauline Corpus* (JSNTS; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) 59; C. Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2000) 61-2.

<sup>14</sup>) It is quite obvious, then, that I agree with Dunn on the matter of Christ's slavery to "corruption" and to the anti-God forces called Sin and Death, but I demur on his proposal that there is no pre-mortal existence implied by Paul. Though there is not space to defend the more traditional view that I hold concerning the assumption of pre-existence here, I at least wish to reiterate N.T. Wright's point that such a perspective would have been necessary for Paul to maintain a view of monotheism as the exaltation of Christ could mean nothing less than that he was raised to the status he eternally had as "fully divine"; see *The Climax of the Covenant* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993) 94. A key

require attention to Romans 5-8 as this would be the most natural place to look for parallels since the phrase “ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος” (Phil 2:7) bears a striking resemblance to “ἐν ὁμοιώματι σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας” (Rom 8:3; cf. Rom 6:5). Secondly, the nature of Christ’s agency as being *ultimately* for furthering God’s agenda will be considered. Finally, we are left to “testing” this *double agency* hypothesis on the shape of the letter as a whole with a view towards its exigencies and central theological messages.

### Christ as Slave to Cosmological Anti-God Powers (i.e., Sin and Death)

When it comes to the *cosmological* theory described above, E. Käsemann is most often referred to as the figurehead proponent of the view that the slavery depicted in Philippians 2:7 involves subservience to demonic forces.<sup>15</sup> However, when critics of this view reflect on Käsemann’s interpretation of the passage, most of them immediately discount his understanding because of his appeal to a gnostic redeemer myth supposedly influencing the images and ideas.<sup>16</sup> However, one must be careful not to exaggerate Käsemann’s appeal to the “*Urmensch*-Savior” myth as he merely found it to be “analogous” to the Pauline passage and, at most, standing within a common tradition (but with no literary dependence one way or another).<sup>17</sup> Secondly, Käsemann’s “demonic” interpretation of the master-slave relationship is nowhere directly tied to his use of the Gnostic myth. Rather, Käsemann derives this reading from a general attitude towards

---

semantic feature that marks a thematic thread in Philippians is the notion of humility/humiliation (2:3, 8; 3:21) where it is a clearly intentional self-lowering (and not just “birth”) that is underlined in the narrative of Christ; for a similar critique of Dunn’s interpretation, see C.F.D. Moule, “Review of *Christology in the Making*” *JTS* 33 (1982) 258-63. I am personally persuaded by Brendan Byrne’s emphasis on pre-existence where he also argues for a view that Christ became mortal taking upon himself the position of humans who are in bondage *qua* humans; see “Christ’s Pre-existence in Pauline Soteriology” *Theological Studies* 58 (1997) 308-30, at 316-17. Byrne implies that it must take someone outside of this chain of bondage to break it.

<sup>15</sup> See “Critical Analysis,” 61-66.

<sup>16</sup> See G. Hawthorne and R.P. Martin, *Philippians* (WBC; Nashville: Nelson, 2004) 118; P. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 219-20.

<sup>17</sup> “Critical Analysis,” 66.

cosmic powers prevalent in the ancient world and, more importantly, apparent within Paul's letters overall. Thus, "The Pauline cosmology, anthropology, and demonology should be sufficient evidence for the fact that such a view has been assimilated in the New Testament."<sup>18</sup> One may say, then, that Paul's silence in terms of attributing lordship to cosmic forces is simply because it was assumed. However, the complete absence of evidence in the text would make one a bit cautious of this interpretation. Therefore, identifying proof within Philippians 2:6-11 of interest in cosmology would strengthen this viewpoint.

When some scholars deny any presence of cosmological language in 2:6-11, this appears to me to be a hasty conclusion. The whole tenor of the passage seems to embody a cosmic drama of descent from heaven<sup>19</sup> and exaltation back into the presence of God. In fact, when Christ is raised up (ὑπερυψώω) in 2:9, his subjects are meant to pay homage to him—those "in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (2:11).<sup>20</sup> Though it is not as distinct as in other letters, Paul's cosmological worldview appears also in his view of eschatological judgment (1:6, 10), his view of "departing" from normal human existence (1:23), the acknowledgement of astral significance (2:15), and the dialectic between earthly and heavenly affiliations (3:20-1).<sup>21</sup> This establishes a ground level of plausibility for seeing the enslavement of Christ as cast within a cosmological scheme.

Part of the problem with Käsemann's articulation of the cosmological theory of enslavement is that he uses the language of "demonology" and demonic powers which does not get at the heart of Paul's concern with the anti-God forces. Rather, I would propose that the *cosmological* theory is best understood when the "overlords," so to speak, are named "Sin" and "Death."<sup>22</sup> If we take a side glance at Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 67. In terms of the general attitude towards ancient cosmology and spiritual conflict, see Osiek, *Philippians*, 61-2.

<sup>19</sup> See W. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Paul's Letter to the Philippians," in *The Future of Early Christianity* (ed. B.A. Pearson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 329-36, particularly 329.

<sup>20</sup> See R.L. Foster, "Reoriented to the Cosmos: Cosmology & Theology in Ephesians through Philemon," in *Cosmology and New Testament Theology* (eds. J. Pennington and S. McDonough; London: T & T Clark, 2008) 107-124, particularly 112-13.

<sup>21</sup> See H. Giesen, "Eschatology in Philippians," in *Paul and His Theology* (ed. S.E. Porter; PAST 3; Leiden: Brill) 217-82.

<sup>22</sup> The choice to capitalize "S" in sin and "D" in death when referring to the cosmic

repeatedly attests to a view that humanity is dominated and ensnared by these evil powers. In Romans 5-8, Paul refers to a cosmic narrative where Sin entered into the world through human sins and weakness and brought with it Death (Rom 5:12). In the present evil age, it holds humanity under its dominance (Rom 6:16-22; 7:14) such that “this world is the frightening, horrifying scene of genuine and profound disaster.”<sup>23</sup> The drama has a hero, though, for Paul. Christ chose to enter this world “dominated by Sin”<sup>24</sup> to challenge Death face to face and destroy the power of Sin (Rom 6:9-10). Indeed, sharing in the death of Christ enables the believer, as C. Roetzel puts it, to “transfer from an old aeon dominated by the ruling powers of sin and death into a new aeon in which he or she participates in the life of Christ and looks forward to the resurrection.”<sup>25</sup> This eschatological shift effects also a “*transfer of lordship*,” as it were, such that believers become freed to serve their true master (Rom 6:22).<sup>26</sup> J.C. Beker observes, though, that Paul understood Christ to have defeated Sin and Death, but that somehow Death is still a last enemy to overcome (1 Cor 15:26). Beker reasons that there is a residual effect left by Sin that lingers on.<sup>27</sup> To say that Christ became a “slave” of these forces, for Paul, may imply more than just subjection from an external viewpoint. Christ could be seen to be “promoting” and furthering the end-purposes of both Sin and Death by encouraging (or at least not avoiding) the shame of suffering (e.g., Gal 6:17). Also, the kind of free association with Gentiles and ostensible disregard for the law that Paul encouraged (in light of the practices of Jesus as well as the implications of his death and resurrection) could cause some

---

powers is a suggestion proposed by J.L. Martyn and will be employed here; see Martyn’s “World without End or Twice-Invaded World?,” *Shaking Heaven and Earth* (eds. C.R. Yoder et al.; Louisville: WJK) 117-132, at 121.

<sup>23</sup> Martyn, “World without End,” 122.

<sup>24</sup> B. Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham’s God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians* (Nashville: Abingdon) 41.

<sup>25</sup> C. Roetzel, *Paul: Man and Myth* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1998) 132.

<sup>26</sup> See R.B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) 38.

<sup>27</sup> J.C. Beker, “The Relationship Between Sin and Death in Romans,” *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul & John* (eds. R. Fortna and B. Gaventa; Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) 55-61, particularly 58.



to perceive of Christ as an agent of Sin (Gal 2:17).<sup>28</sup> Again, from a fleshly perspective, Christ can be seen not only to be under the dominion of Sin, but also an agent who furthers its agenda. However, Paul neither supports the notion that Christ encourages sinfulness (Gal 2:17b: Μὴ γένοιτο), nor finally concludes that he leads others down a path of being wholly consumed by Death. Rather, as a double agent, Christ reclaims the power of Sin and Death and “redeems,” so to speak, their avenues of control, encouraging mortification that is ultimately restorative and life-creating. In Philippians, in particular, the more urgent issue seems to be shame, suffering, and death (and not righteousness, law-obedience, and sin, as in Galatians). Therefore, when I refer to the overlords of “Sin and Death,” I am referring to them as a partnership (see Rom 8:2).<sup>29</sup> Their mutual goal is to corrupt humankind by distancing them from the God who empowers and animates. For many people in the ancient world, certainly including Jews, social shame and many kinds of suffering were considered to be signs of the effects of Sin and Death in the world.

Could this perspective “fit” the issue of enslavement in Philippians 2:7?<sup>30</sup> We have good reason to believe so. Firstly, Paul recognizes that Christ’s obedience as a slave was “to death (μέχρι θανάτου).” Now, this does not mean “to the master who is death” because μέχρι is a preposition of extent meaning “as far as” or “until” (cf. Phil 2:30). However, just as there is a relationship between human sins (as personal choices and transgressions) and the power of Sin, so also many ancient people viewed physical death as a result of cosmic domination. C. Clifton Black refers to this as a “depletion” view of death which conceived of it as an “intrusion” into creation and especially prominent in Semitic thought which associated death

<sup>28</sup>) On this matter, see B. Longenecker, *Triumph*, 109-110.

<sup>29</sup>) James Dunn, for instance, highlights the notion that, for Paul, sin (as a power) “interlocks with the reality of death and gives death its frightening and negative character” (*Theology*, 127).

<sup>30</sup>) Indeed, one should keep in mind that Käsemann himself proposed that the only way to really understand what is behind this slavery of Christ is to inquire “whether and where in the vicinity of the New Testament human existence as such could have been called δουλεία” (“Critical Analysis,” 66). Along these lines, Paul’s undisputed letters propose five forces that enslave/lord over humanity: Sin (Rom 6:6, 12-22), law under the power of Sin (Rom 7:1, 6, 25), the body under the power of Sin (1 Cor 9:27; Rom 16:18), Death (Rom 5:14, 17; 6:9), and the *Stoicheia* (Gal 4:3; cf. 1 Thess 1:9?). The choice to focus on the *Stoicheia* does not appear to be the most important or obvious one.

with sin (Genesis 2-3).<sup>31</sup> Physical death, then, could be seen by Paul as “not only the punishment of sin, it is its *telos*, its end and consummation, its fruit and crown. Thus understood death is, of all things, that which can reveal what sin is.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, from one perspective, when someone dies, it is the outworking of the consequences of Sin’s dominion.<sup>33</sup> This may have seemed to some to be the case with Jesus because he died as a criminal and was crucified (Phil 2:8)—a particularly shameful act of humiliation reserved especially for slaves.<sup>34</sup> To skeptics, Jesus’ death on a cross would prove his ultimate obedience to Sin and Death and that he received his just penalty.<sup>35</sup> Insofar as Paul was supporting the notion of being crucified *with* Christ (as in Gal. 2:20; Phil. 3:10), some could perceive of this as a wonton support of shame and humiliation.

Another clue that Paul has in mind Christ being a slave to Sin and Death is the language of his humbling himself (ταπεινῶω) by taking the form (μορφή) of enslaved humanity. There is good reason to take these two words in reference to Christ’s acceptance of a physical Sin-dominated human body. With respect to ταπεινῶω (2:8), it is hardly coincidental that Paul later refers to the “body of our humiliation (τὸ σῶμα τῆς ταπεινώσεως ἡμῶν)” which will undergo an eschatological modification to *conform* (σύμμορφος) to his “exalted body of glory (τῷ σώματι τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ)”

<sup>31</sup>) C.C. Black, “Pauline Perspective on Death in Romans 5-8,” *JBL* 103.3 (1984) 419, 430.

<sup>32</sup>) S. Lyonnet and L. Sabourin, *Sin, Redemption, and Sacrifice: A Biblical and Patristic Study* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1970) 55; Dunn refers to Paul’s understanding of physical death as the “completion of sin” (*Theology of Paul the Apostle* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998] 125).

<sup>33</sup>) See J.A.T. Robinson, *The Body* (London: SCM, 1952), 36: “physical expiration is the outward confirmation of being in fact already ‘dead’.” This may be the reasoning behind Paul’s comment in Romans that all creation is in “bondage to decay” (8:21). Resurrection is seen as a complete reversal of this down-spiral of decay such that whatever is “subject to Death” (θνητός) ends up being consumed by Life (ζωή) rather than the opposite (2 Cor 5:4).

<sup>34</sup>) See, on the opprobrious nature of crucifixion, M. Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Cross* (trans. J. Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress Press) 62; see also W.L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1974) 106.

<sup>35</sup>) That many had a difficulty understanding how God could have favored a crucified criminal, see the hidden/revealed and wise/foolish dynamic in Paul’s description of Christ and the cross in 1 Corinthians 1:23 and 2:7-8.

(3:21). The linking of σῶμα and μορφή is not unusual, especially in Jewish thought. Consider Philo's discussion of creation where the Artisan (τεχνίτης) took some clay to create the body (σῶμα) and molded human form (μορφή ἀνθρώπινος) from it (*Opif.* 135; cf. *Migr.* 3; *Somn.* 1.210; *Abr.* 118; *Mos.* 1.43: "τὴν τοῦ σώματος μορφήν").<sup>36</sup> As for Paul, though, this should not suggest that Christ merely came "into" a body, as if it were a vessel of some kind. Rather, we may understand Paul's use of σῶμα as, in Käsemann's term, "*Daseinsweise*"—"mode of being."<sup>37</sup> The body-form, thus, "designates the realm in which one stands and by which one is determined, as in a field of force."<sup>38</sup> In this sense, μορφή is better understood as "format" rather than "form."

But why should Paul call Christ's human embodiment an act of humiliation (ταπεινῶν) in 2:8? Or, put another way, why does he refer to the "body of humiliation" (3:21)? Much, I think, can be learned from the expressions that Paul uses for the body elsewhere. In Romans, in particular, we see the expressions "body of sin (τὸ σῶμα τῆς ἁμαρτίας)" (6:6) and "this body of death (τοῦ σώματος τοῦ θανάτου τούτου)" (7:24) which are linked together in 8:10: "But if Christ is in you, though the body is *dead* because of *sin*, the Spirit is life because of righteousness" (NRSV; italics added). These texts suggest that, in the present evil age, Sin (and with him Death) lurks about the body and preys on human weakness always threatening "death-dealing dominance over bodily relations."<sup>39</sup> When we try to understand Philippians 2:7-8 in this light, Christ's humility is seen in his

<sup>36</sup> One might suppose Philo to be unrepresentative of Jewish thought on anthropology, so we may include similar notions in, for instance, 4 Maccabees where parents are described as passing on to their children likeness (ὁμοιότης) of both "mind" (ψυχὴ) and "form" (μορφή) (NRSV 15:4). In the LXX, the folly of idol worshippers is demonstrated by their devotion to the work of a craftsman that shapes metal into "man-form (μορφήν ἀνδρὸς)" (Isaiah 44:13).

<sup>37</sup> Käsemann, "Critical Analysis," 61.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>39</sup> R. Jewett, *Romans* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress) 409; so, also, C.K. Barrett's gloss of 6:6 as "our sin-dominated body" (*Romans* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987] 116); see also R. Gundry, *SOMA in Biblical Theology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1976) 39; M.C. de Boer, *The Defeat of Death: Apocalyptic Eschatology in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988) 183; for a confirmation of the view of Sin dominating the body, see *Wis.* 1:4.

willingness to take on the human form[at] of embodiedness and accept *de jure* the authority of Sin and Death.

A final piece of evidence that the “master” over Christ is Sin and Death is Paul’s use of ὁμοίωμα, as he is born a mortal in the “very likeness” of humanity (2:7). Käsemann is certainly correct that Paul is not trying to “advocate a philosophical concept of God.”<sup>40</sup> Rather, the poetic nature of 2:6-11 permits multiple and synonymous expressions of the same concept. Thus, ὁμοίωμα mirrors μορφή and σχῆμα (2:7). Nevertheless, turning to a similar use of ὁμοίωμα in Romans 8:3, we may come closer to understanding how using a word meaning something like “resemblance” plays an important role in the divine plan of redemption according to Paul. The Apostle explains to the Romans that God sent his Son “in the likeness of sinful flesh (ἐν ὁμοιώματι σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας)” in order to pronounce condemnation on Sin. There is a hint here, then, of a divine trick played on Sin and Death. By sending Christ in human form, a “second Adam,” so to speak, God lured Sin and Death to Christ’s body. The trick, though, comes when Christ succumbs to death (on a cross) and causes Sin to think it has won. What it did not know was that it was part of the plan all along that, as Chrysostom puts it, “At the cross death [receives] his wound, having met his death stroke from a dead body.”<sup>41</sup> The idea of “likeness,” then, is not unlike the word “disguise,” but here it should not carry the idea of *unreal* appearance (as if Christ only *seemed* human). Rather, the use of likeness entails intentionality on God’s part of using Christ’s body-form (or flesh) to draw the attention of Sin and Death.

### Christ as Double Agent

To say that Christ’s servitude in Philippians 2:7-8 is *only* to Sin and Death is, though, to miss the point of the entire passage. Christ becomes incarnate in solidarity with sinful humanity and takes on the yoke of Sin and Death, but he never engenders the expected sinfulness of humanity after Adam nor completely relinquishes his position as Son of God. Thus, he is a double agent—of Sin and Death as human and of God as Son of God.

<sup>40</sup>) Käsemann, “Critical analysis,” 61.

<sup>41</sup>) See *ACCSNT* 9:32.

Karl Barth explains Paul's thoughts here well by describing how the "likeness" of humanity (which is still really mortal) conceals his divine identity.

He puts himself in a position where only he himself knows himself in the way that the Father knows him. In the unknowability into which he enters, it is now certainly the Father's part to reveal him. But the step that brings him into that unrecognizable condition, into the *incognito*, is grounded entirely in himself alone... [H]e exists in such a way that to any direct, immediate way of regarding him—e.g. to the historical and psychological approach—he does not present the picture of his proper, original, divine Being, but solely the picture of a human being.<sup>42</sup>

This perspective certainly accords with Paul's statement that Christ can be perceived from the viewpoint of the flesh ("κατὰ σάρκα") or according to "καινή κτίσις" (2 Cor 5:16-17). Only those with eyes to see, as it were, can recognize that "The *humilitas carnis* (humility of the flesh) covers the *divina majestas* (divine majesty) like a curtain."<sup>43</sup> As evidence of this kind of purposeful double agency elsewhere in Paul's letters, we may appeal to Beverly Gaventa's discussion of παραδίδωμι in Romans. She advances the argument that God's "handing over" humanity to dishonor and impurity in 1:18-32 was a way of saying (through the use of synecdoche) that they were being delivered into the hands of the "anti-God powers," especially Sin.<sup>44</sup> The purpose of this cosmic exchange of ownership was the end purpose of the redemption of humanity. Gaventa also, then, points to the use of παραδίδωμι in Romans 8:32 where Paul explains that God "handed over" his Son for all. She observes that this ostensible betrayal of God in throwing Christ to his enemies "is not victory for the powers but their unmasking and the sure sign of their defeat."<sup>45</sup> Paul came to understand Christian existence as a conformity to this pattern of double agency as well. This involves, in the overlapping of the ages, an acceptance of the yoke of Death which helps to further his agenda. However, Christ has opened up a way to empower others somehow through suffering and "death-like" living. This is quite clear in 2 Corinthians where he can refer

<sup>42</sup> K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (trans. J.W. Leitch; London: SCM, 1962) 63.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>44</sup> B. Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 113-23, especially 119.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

to carrying around the “deadness (νέκρωσις)” of Jesus so that, paradoxically, the life of Jesus may be perceptible in his body (σῶμα) (2 Cor 4:10).

Before moving on to see how this concept of double agency works in the other parts of Philippians, it is profitable to look more closely at Paul’s rhetorical intentions in 2:6-11. In 2:1-5, Paul encourages his converts to be unified and to serve one another in humility and love. But a prominent theme that emerges here (and throughout Philippians) is the notion that proper conduct flows from knowing and thinking rightly—hence Paul’s repeated use of the verb φρονέω (1:7; 2:2, 5; 3:15, 19). He wishes for them to reason and discern in the way that Christ did, who was bold enough to humble himself and suffer while trusting in God’s good purposes (cf. 2:5-6). At least part of this cruciform phronesis involves perceiving the double agency of Christ who appeared like nothing more than a slave in the eyes of those in the world, but who never forsook his status as the lord of glory. Paul encourages his Philippian converts to use this same framework of epistemology to perceive his own apostolic work and their own suffering in the name of Christ (1:29-30).

### Double Agency, Paul, and the Work of the Gospel

The context of Philippians finds Paul in prison under the power and authority of the Roman empire and possibly facing death. The Philippians, likewise, are experiencing difficulties and have apparently sacrificed much for their faith.<sup>46</sup> In a sense, then, they must have been wondering, *who is running the show here?* Scholars have noted before that Philippians 3:20 is the only place in the undisputed letters where Paul refers to Christ as σωτήρ—a commonly recognized honorific title attributed to the Roman emperor.<sup>47</sup> It must have been particularly odd for some Philippian believers that this crucified “savior” is nowhere to be found while his servant, Paul, is locked up and practically doomed to death. Indeed, though, Paul’s whole introductory discussion of his imprisonment and the update on his circumstances have little to do with informing them about his condition,

<sup>46</sup> For a helpful discussion of the kind of suffering that the Philippians faced because of their faith, see P. Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (SNTSMS 110; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>47</sup> See Fee, *Philippians*, 31, 381.

and everything to do with comforting and encouraging them. I would argue also that Paul is clueing them in on his double agency. As a prisoner who faces the reality of martyrdom at the hand of Romans, he acknowledges that he is tempted to succumb to death (1:22-23). But he divulges the true authority and orchestrator behind his imprisonment, for it is God who is working in and through his hostile confinement such that Paul can attest to the *advancement* (προκοπή) of the gospel (1:12, 13).<sup>48</sup>

We may briefly also look at Paul's description of the circumstances of Epaphroditus, the liaison from the Philippians to the Apostle. Paul finds it necessary to explain why he is sending Epaphroditus back and explains to them that he was a faithful servant to Paul. Perhaps the Philippians may have felt that Epaphroditus was a failure and would come home a disgrace. But Paul explains that, for the work of Christ, he "came very near to death (μέχρι θανάτου ἤγγισεν)" (2:30). One can see Paul very carefully paralleling the situation of Epaphroditus and the circumstances of Christ who was obedient "μέχρι θανάτου" (2:8). Again, the theme of double agency is present: what looks like near failure and what may seem backwards is actually part of the forward-moving larger redemptive scheme. Epaphroditus is not another hapless victim of Death and one who brings shame upon others. He is a man to honor (2:29).

It is not until chapter three that Paul directly addresses the enigma of the role of double agency in the divine plot, and even then he does not resolve the tension but simply takes comfort in the joyous finale (3:10-11). Paul recognizes that suffering and death are a necessary part of Christian existence because the death of Christ fused it into the framework of redemption. One must accept the reign of Sin and Death because it is the only way of participating in the power of God through Christ (Rom 6:3-4). James Dunn offers the helpful analogy of vaccination.

In vaccination germs are introduced into a healthy body in order that by destroying these germs the body will build up its strength. So we might say that the germ of sin was introduced into Jesus, the only one "healthy"/whole enough to let that sin run its full course. The "vaccination" seemed to fail because Jesus died. But it did not fail, for he rose again; and his new humanity is "germ-resistant," sin resistant.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup>) For a discussion of agency in 1:12, see S. Fowl, *Philippians* (THNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 37-8.

<sup>49</sup>) James D.G. Dunn, *The Christ & The Spirit: Christology* (Vol. 1; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998) 208.

This kind of reasoning seems to come close to Paul's thoughts in 3:10-11 where he acknowledges that the path to Christ's resurrection power is only through a sharing in his suffering and death. In a sense, then, he is saying that each believer must repeat the drama of Christ (as a participant and not a duplicate) which involves becoming an agent of Sin and Death while at the same time maintaining utter allegiance to God through Christ.<sup>50</sup> Being "sin resistant" through Christ's power means that Sin and Death have no real power to enslave or compel, though one can fall back into the trap of thinking they do (Rom 6:12). Nevertheless, God is able to co-opt all of their powers and resources to the end of redemption and glorification (by using suffering as a means of showing commitment to God and self-giving for the benefit of others). This kind of concept is readily apparent in Paul's political language, for while believers traverse in the territories of the enemy settlements and hold their passports, they must never forget they are true citizens of the heavenly colony whose ruler (κύριος) is lord of all (3:20-1).

## Conclusion

For Paul, it would be a suitable label to call Sin and Death "specters," for the word "specter" has two primary meanings. It can mean some supernatural being and it can also mean something that has an appearance, but no substance (like a ghost). In the same way, Paul can view Sin and Death as cosmic powers who dominate and rule; who plague humanity by attacking the body through encouraging sinful behavior and inflicting pain to the end of death. But Sin and Death are also "specters" because they lost their ultimate power at the cross and now only have the appearance of dominion (Rom 6:14). In Philippians, Paul uses the "Christ hymn" (2:6-11), his own personal circumstances, and the example of Epaphroditus to demonstrate that there is a double agency necessary in the overlapping of the ages. An acquiescence to Death is inevitable, but by going to death in the service of God through Christ, the believer can subvert Sin

---

<sup>50</sup>) Paul's depiction of the drama of Christ demonstrates that one can maintain life in the present age under the dominion of Sin and Death, but not give in to its hegemony by acting out in sinful behavior. Nevertheless, the suffering and hardships associated with following Christ can appear like folly to the world and a mark of ruin, but is really a sign of salvation (Phil 1:28, 29-30).



and Death and re-proclaim their inevitable doom. The last act of the drama, according to Paul, will reveal the true allegiance of the human agent (1:10) who will be rewarded with the glory of a death-defying body (3:21).

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer also explored the paradox of death. We end with this quote regarding the mystery of death as a sign of chaos, but a symbol reclaimed by God through Christ.

When faced with death we cannot say in a fatalistic way, "It is God's will." We must add the opposite: "it is not God's will." Death indicates that the world is not the way it should be and that it requires redemption. Christ alone is the conquest of death. Here the conflict between "God's will" and "not God's will" comes to its sharpest intensification and to its resolution... [F]rom now on, death must serve God. From now on, "God wills it" also encompasses "God does not will it." God wills the conquest of death through the death of Jesus Christ. Only through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ has death come into God's power; it must serve the aims of God. Not a fatalistic surrender, but only living faith in the Jesus Christ who for us died and rose again, can seriously deal with death.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup>) G.B. Kelly and F.B. Nelson (eds.), *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990) 455.