

## **„Μορφή Θεού” (Php 2, 6) and „μορφή δούλου” (Php 2, 7) – an Orthodox Exegesis**

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### **Abstract:**

*The present article aims two major goals. Firstly, this paper will mainly cover the issue of the term μορφή (Php 2, 6-7), a term with decisive importance in the understanding of the fragment Php 2, 5-11, known under the name of the Christological Hymn (or Carmen Christi). Secondly, this academic endeavor tries to propose an exegetic methodology specific to the orthodox space that doesn't yet suggest, within modern exegesis, any well-defined approach method. Our endeavor starts from the lack of such presentation in specialized articles from our country, but also from the need to present the Orthodox point of view along with the Western one. This term will be analyzed in the two phrases used in the hymn, ‘μορφή Θεού’ (Php 2, 6) and ‘μορφή δούλου’ (Php 2, 7). We thus suggest the use of a methodology that combines the historical-critical method with the resort to the Holy Fathers’ theology.*

**Keywords:** *μορφή, morphe, Carmen Christi, Php 2, 5-11, Php 2, 6, Php 2, 7, Orthodox exegesis*

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### **Introduction**

The text with the greatest authority is, without any doubt, the Holy Bible and this authority is also confirmed by the experience of the people who have lived the wholeness of the communion with God, charismatic spiritual people, carrying the Holy Spirit within them. The divine realities and the realities of the divine iconomy (recapitulated in the Holy Scriptures) are realities accessible to those before us (the spiritual people), but also to us because, as N. Matsoukas says: “The divine realities are not something abstract – nor is God Himself, in His eternal inter-trinitarian relationships –, but [they are] embodied states as a way of living” (Matsoukas 2011: 37). And these people had the *direct* experience of these states which, in essence, means knowledge.

The chance of direct experience of the divine realities thus becomes an important reference point, outside the text, a reference point to which we can relate to in order to a better understanding of the text. This experience of divine realities of the Holy Spirit Bearing Fathers is widely presented in the philocalic writings. This literature, called/which we named niptic or philocalic, is much more loyal to the biblical text than academic theology is. The present approach whence draws its basis to highlight the close connection between the scriptural text and spiritual life, the latter being based on the first.

An essential change in tackling the biblical text, aimed by this paper, would naturally be escaping the captivity of the text (specific to the western area), passing from here – but without taking distance from it – to the reality presented by this text, reality that we have immediate access to. We also keep in mind the fact that this academic endeavor can help put together – as has been stated before – a methodology specific to the Orthodox space that does not yet suggest, within modern exegesis, any well-defined approach method.

We thus suggest the use of a methodology that combines the historical-critical method with the resort to the Holy Fathers' theology. In order to accomplish this, we will start from the grammatical analysis of the text that is the object of our endeavor, highlighting the opinions of modern exegetes, dealt with in a critical manner, of course. Next, after indicating the pluses and shortcomings of modern exegesis, we will resort to – especially where modern exegesis could not go any further – the knowledge which the Holy Fathers expressed in the philocalic writings.

This paper will mainly cover the issue of the term *μορφή* (Php 2, 6-7), a term with crucial importance in the understanding of the fragment Php 2, 5-11, known under the name of *The Christological Hymn*. Our endeavor starts from the lack of such presentation in the specialized articles from our country, but also from the need to present the Orthodox point of view along with the Western one. This term will be analyzed in the two phrases used in the hymn, “μορφή Θεού” (Php 2, 6) and “μορφή δούλου” (Php 2, 7).

We will first try to show which is the current level of modern biblical research concerning this term, using a critical approach. Then, isolating as briefly as possible the conclusions drawn so far, and without

paying too much attention to details, we will attempt, in the last part of the paper, to present the theology of the Holy Fathers concerning firstly this word and, after that, closely connected to the latter, concerning the rest of the fragment. The hypothesis, which serves as a base (for this paper) and which we want to prove by the end of the paper, is that the understanding of a holy text mostly depends mostly on the articulating of the Holy Father’s spiritual experience to the usual exegetical methods, with the purpose of applying it to our own spiritual life.

### **The analysis of similar terms used in the hymn and the relationships between them**

Here we will analyse the nouns that define approximately the same reality as *μορφή*, namely *σχήματι* and *ὁμοιώματι*.

a) *Σχήματι*

**σχῆμα, ατος, τό** (is formed from the same root word as *ἔχω*, Aorist Infinitive *σχεῖν*; with different meanings: “attitude; manner, way; conduct”)

1. the state or form generally recognized, in which somebody appears; exterior appearance; the form or allure of a person: *σχήματι εὐρεθεῖς ὡς ἄνθρωπος Php 2, 7*.

2. the functional aspect of a thing, of a way of life (Arndt, Danker, Bauer 2000: 981).

*Εὐρεθεῖς* shows that the truth of this fact can be seen by anybody (Käsemann 1960: 75). *Σχῆμα* doesn’t only show the coming of Jesus, or His physical embodiment, or the undisguised natural delimitation of His earthly life, or the features of His moral character. It shows “the way of manifestation”. The reference is made to the entire form and His full human nature. In this sense, the exterior form He assumes corresponds to His interior way of being.

In 1 Co 7, 31, Paul asks us to own material things in such a manner, as if we did not have them. He underlies this request on the principle “*παράγει γὰρ τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου*”, which can be better translated: “for this distinct (specific) manifestation (form) of this world is (already) passing away” (Kittel, Bromiley, Friedrich 1964: 957).

**Meaning:**

In the New Testament the word can only be found in Php 2, 7 and 1 Co 7, 31, with the following meanings:

- structure, exterior construction (the way in which something is structured and the way in which its components are arranged) – 1 Co 7, 31,
- form, image, appearance (visible appearance of somebody or something, especially taking into account the structure or spatial composition; addressing the visual sense) – Php 2, 7.

The idea of “exterior appearance” or “form” is what generally differentiates this word *σχῆμα* from *μορφή*, “which is essential and permanent”, and it so clearly results from Php 2, 7 (Moulton, Milligan 1930: 619).

“Σχήματι εὑρεθείς ὡς ἄνθρωπος” doesn’t only express the reality of Christ’s humanity. Particular emphasis is placed on the fact that throughout His life, even in His death on the cross, Jesus was in the humanity demonstrated (confirmed) by His earthly appearance [There was also an opinion expressed that *γενόμενος* refers more to the Incarnation, while *εὑρεθείς* refers more to humanity].

Contradicting Lightfoot, Moises Silva proves that the initial purpose of the use of *σχῆμα* wasn’t to be put in contrast with *μορφή*. Rather, he says, the entire sentence recapitulate the meanings of the two previous sentences, making a short statement about the Incarnation (showing Himself as no more than a man) (Silva 2005: 106).

In conclusion, *σχῆμα* shows “the image” or “the form”, not in the usual terms that describe these concepts, of external features through which somebody can be recognized, but through the features and qualities that are essential to that person. Therefore, it means “...that which truly characterizes a given reality” (Fee 2007: 378).

b) *Ὁμοίωματι*

**Meaning:** similarity

**Origin**

- **ὅμοιος** (which makes it look like *ἴσα*) – the root of the word
- **ὁμοίωμα** is “something made alike”, “a copy”. The word is rare in classical Greek Literature, and always has the concrete meaning of “copy”, rather than the abstract meaning of “likeness” or “similarity”.

Thus, it becomes similar to *εἰκών*, these two words (*εἰκών* and *ὁμοίωμα*) being often used as equivalents. For example, Plato’s *ὁμοιώματα* and *εἰκόνες* are the earthly copies of the heavenly models. There is another distinction between these words, which could be expressed as follows: *εἰκών* represents the object while *ὁμοίωμα* underlines the resemblance, without the need of an inner correspondence between the model and the copy. In other words, the difference between *εἰκών*, which implies the presence of an archetype, and “likeness” or “form” from *ὁμοίωμα* can only be accidental, just as in the case of things that resemble mostly because of their exterior appearance.

In the New Testament we find the following occurrences with theological value, but only the last two of them, being more similar to each other, can help us decipher the meaning: Rm 1, 23; Rm 5, 14; Rm 6, 5; Rm 8, 3; Php 2, 7. We do not find any direct correspondence between the meanings of this term in the two passages in which Saint Paul uses this word to speak about Christ’s earthly life.

The phrases “ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων” (Php 2, 7) and “ἐν ὁμοιώματι σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας” (Rm 8, 3) could mean that God had, in His earthly work, a complete human appearance (form) and that His body was able to sin just like any other human body, or that He had a human form, being seen and perceived as such, without losing His identity as a Godly being even on Earth. However, we must admit that the final statement (that He doesn’t lose His identity as a Godly being) doesn’t result directly and clearly from the text, but especially from the *sense* that originates from faith, which disarms those who argue that in the exegesis of a text faith has absolutely no relevance, which we cannot agree with. In the light of all that has generally been said by Saint Paul about Christ, it is possible that he used this word in order to highlight two facts, at the same time: the fact that Jesus also, in His earthly work, was like sinners, and the fact He wasn’t entirely like them (Arndt *et alii* 2000: 707).

The course from *μορφή* through *ὁμοίωμα* and finally to *σχῆματι*, shows an evolution towards exteriority (an externalization), secondariness and appearance – toward a human exteriority that manifests the essential nature of what it means to be a servant, towards a world where what it is seen on the surface isn’t true. It is a descent from the logic (reason) of identity in the world of shifting appearances (Ward 2005: 276-278). This

conclusion is very important, the more valuable as it results only from grammatical analysis – a plus of the strictly textual exegesis.

The Dative *ἐν ὁμοιώματι* has two functions. The fact that in Greek the Dative is „the case of the person and of the personification” (Dumitru-Oancea 2015: 234), but also a case of “the reference point, identifying the person seen as a reference point” (Dumitru-Oancea 2015: 238), makes *ἐν ὁμοιώματι* to express at the same time a certain reality to which that person compares to (makes reference, in our case, to the human condition), but also a kind of participation of that person to the named reality (making reference to the entrance into the human condition).

A final note about the sometimes troubling word “likeness”, from Gordon Fee, is needed:

As with that passage, Paul’s choice of *ὁμοίωμα* seems deliberate and is used because of his belief (in common with the rest of the early church) that in becoming human, Christ did not thereby cease to be divine. This word allows for the ambiguity, emphasizing that he is similar to our humanity in some respects and dissimilar in others. The similarity lies with His full humanity; in His incarnation He was “like” us in the sense of “the same as”. The dissimilarity in this case has to do with His never ceasing to be “equal with God”. Thus He came in the “likeness” of human beings because, on the one hand, He has fully identified with us and because, on the other hand, in becoming human, He was not human only. He was God living out a truly human life, all of which is safeguarded by this expression (Fee 2007: 388).

True, but we return to what was stated above about the role of faith. If we can say that Christ is *exactly like* God (as shown in the text), one can see that this doesn’t imply what “*exactly like*” means. Who knows God’s ways?

c) *The relationship between the phrases “μορφήν δούλου” (the form of a servant), “ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων” (into the likeliness of men) and “σχήματι ὡς ἄνθρωπος” (appearance as a man)*

The first of these phrases – *μορφήν δούλου* – is the most meaningful one. It is obviously connected to the humility of Christ, underlining the fact that that He came as a servant, to serve humankind, emphasizing the form that man has, encompassing all human attributes; He kept His divine nature, but manifested it in that of a servant, in order to make His full humanity obvious.

The first two phrases, “μορφήν δούλου” (the form of a servant) and “ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων” (into the likeness of men), put in contrast what Christ was with what He had become. The second phrase refers to His Incarnation, emphasizing the similarity with other human beings in connection to the way He emptied Himself, showing what Christ actually was, but keeping His divine nature, which means that He could not completely identify Himself with human beings. All of these situate the phrase halfway between the other two. The third phrase, *σχῆματι ὡς ἄνθρωπος* (appearance as a human), repeats the content of the first two, being a repetition of them, in order to highlight/emphasize especially the second one. It shows what the content of Christ’s humility is and the way Christ humbles Himself, thus showing the way in which He revealed Himself to people, in His external appearance.

Starting from *σχῆμα* (appearance) from the third phrase, one can deduce *ὁμοιώματι* (likeness/similarity) from the second one, and both serve to explain the meaning of *μορφή* from the first phrase.

### **The meaning of μορφή. Different translations**

We must notice from the beginning that Saint Paul’s use of this term/notion/word cannot be in any way considered random, given that it is used by him *only* in this fragment. The key to understanding this term lies, as Gordon Fee notices, in the Apostle’s main purpose (announced from the beginning of the hymn), which is to show what he refers to when he says “the mind which was also in Christ Jesus” (v. 5), first as God, then as human (Fee 2007: 378). Therefore, the assumption we start from in the interpretation of this term is that “Μορφή was precisely the right word for this dual usage, to characterize both the reality (his being God) and the metaphor (his taking on the role of a slave)” (Fee 2007: 378) through which the Apostle describes best Christ’s course.

#### *The use of μορφή in relation to ὑπάρχων*

We thought it appropriate that the analysis of this term/notion/word should be present in this small exegetic part of the paper because, from a grammatical point of view, it is very important not only for the direct understanding of the term in question, but also because it connects the other logical units of our whole excerpt and also because of the lack of different approaches of the exegetes regarding this particular connection.

*Υπάρχων* is an adverbial Participle, that can be interpreted as being concessive ([al]though) or causative (because) (Hawthorne in Martin and Dodd 1998: 97). It is interesting to note that not the verb “to be” – εἶμι – lies at the core of the formation of this construction, although it is the most often used in the New Testament (approximately 2900 occurrences), but the verb *ὑπάρχω*, which is less frequently used (only 30 occurrences!). The unanimous opinion of exegetes sets the cause of its use in the emphasis it puts on the Continuous aspect and on the fact that it indicates not only the simple fact of “being”, but of “truly existing” (Acts 16, 3, 20, 37; 17, 24; 1 Co 11, 7, 18; Ga 1, 14; 2, 14). To be noted is also the use of this verb with its plural participle forms *ὑπάρχοντα* (Lk 12, 33; 1 Co 13, 3) and *ὑπάρχουσιν* (Lk 12, 44), which refers more to the act of possessing/owning/having, to “having” than “being”, which enhances even more the power of this verb. Therefore, the conclusion most exegetes draw is that Saint Paul has chosen to use this Participle to emphasize the fact that Christ has been in the image of God *forever*.

We already said at the beginning of the analysis that the Present Participle *ὑπάρχων* is in temporal contrast with the Aorist Participle *λαβών* and with the Aorist Participle (deponent form=Passive form, but Active meaning of certain old Latin verbs) *γενόμενος* (ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος – making Himself into the likeness of men) which only has meaning if “in the image of God” assumes His previous existence as God. We therefore see that the exegetes reached the conclusion that the use of *ὑπάρχων* shows without a doubt the pre-existence of Christ, and not only that, but also the fact that Christ has been in the *form* of God since *forever*. But they are reluctant to clearly stating what exactly this *form* means.

### **(Ἐν) μορφῇ θεοῦ (2, 6) – in the form of God. Directions in interpreting**

The essential question concerning this expression is: What did Saint Paul mean by the fact that Christ has always existed „*in the form of God*”?

The answer is very important for understanding the whole fragment/extract (Php 2, 5-11), but it is made difficult hindered by several factors. First of all, its exact translation, as showed at/in the beginning, cannot be applied to God, just as its use in Septuagint is not useful at all.



Then, the term *μορφή* appears only three times in the New Testament, once in the long version of the Ev. after Mark (16, 12) and twice in our fragment, which brings us to the main obstacle in the way of our full understanding of the term, namely the inability to shape a model in the Pauline corpus which can help us determine what Saint Paul wanted to express through the (intentional) use of this term.

Without going into detail on different interpretations (For detailed references concerning this matter, see: Martin 1967: 99-133; Hawthorne and Martin in Metzger and Hubbard and Barker 2004: 71-75; Wanamaker in *NTS* 1987: 179-193; Wong 1986: 267-282), which would divert this paper from its original purpose, we will state that the essential question, which might open the text to fair interpretations/ approaches of this phrase, could reduce to that which was clearly posed by O’Brien:

Is the term to be understood as pointing: 1) to the external appearance, condition, position, or form of existence of something? Or does it denote 2) something more profound, so that it is equal to or closely related to the ‘nature’ or ‘essence’ of something? Could, for example, *μορφή* be regarded as an equivalent of εικόν (‘image’) and/or δόξα (‘glory’)? (O’Brien 1991: 206).

It appears however that most modern exegetes agree with Lightfoot’s opinion (Lightfoot 1913: 127-133) who follows Aristotle’s line, connecting the external visible manifestations to the interior qualities of a subject, opinion adopted later by Hawthorne (Hawthorne in Martin and Dodd 1998: 98), according to which, if “always signifies a form which truly and fully expresses the being which underlies it” (Moulton and Milligan 1930: 417), then, applying this to God, it means that we must refer to the depth of His being. This, he concludes, leads us to the interpretation of *μορφή Θεοῦ* as being the essential nature and character of God (Hawthorne and Martin in Metzger and Hubbard and Barker 2004: 110).

This opinion of Hawthorne’s, as he confesses himself, is quite refuted (Fee 1995: 204; O’Brien 1991: 201 [which says that the reference to visible, external manifestations should not be eliminated, but must be related to the inner ones, which determine the first]; Silva 2005: 116), especially because it is “unlikely that Paul intended to use *μορφή* in such a deeply philosophical sense when he wrote of the ‘form’ of God” (Hawthorne in Martin and Dodd 1998: 98).

The most attractive (after R.P. Martin's one (Martin 1987: 105)) is the translation of E. Schweizer (Schweizer 1955), cited by Hawthorne, according to whom *μορφή* indicates the status, the rank or the condition which results from sitting next to God, being considered as such because it harmonizes best the two phrases, *μορφή Θεοῦ* and *μορφή δούλου*. He translates in this way: "He who was from the beginning ... near God ... chose to ... take upon the human condition 'in the form of a servant'" (Martin 1987: 96). However, here Schweizer is not explicit at all in what the significance of these important words (like rank or status) is concerned.

At this point, we notice even more the legitimacy of the dilemma expressed before O'Brien, so that we are going to analyze the two main directions mentioned earlier.

#### *1. The interpretation of 'μορφή' through 'δόξα'*

The fact that the immediate meaning of *μορφή* refers to the idea of exterior appearance, relevance, manifestation, led the exegetes (especially the old ones) towards the development of an interpretation of the form in which Christ exists, in terms of God's glory (Ex 16, 10; 24, 16; 33, 17-19; 40, 34-35; Lv 9, 6, 23; 1 Kg 8, 11; Is 6, 3; 10, 16; 60, 1-2; Iz 1, 28; 43, 3; 44:4; 2 Mac 2, 8; 3 Mac 4, 18), meaning the brightness of the glory through which God is described, or through which His presence is indicated (Meyer 1875: 80, which defines *μορφή* as "divine glory", that "form of existence which corresponds to the being". Something similar is also found in Weiss 1959: 2478, which makes the direct connection between the *form* of Christ before the Incarnation and the glory of God).

S.E. Fowl (Fowl 1990: 50-54) supports this interpretation, relying on both Septuagint references that refer to God's visible manifestations in the terms of His "glory" and on the fact that Saint Paul does the same thing on different occasions (Cf. Rm 1, 23; 1 Co 11, 7; 2 Co 3, 18; 4, 6. See also Lk 2, 9; Rev 15, 8; 21-23). He goes even further stating that "By locating Christ in this glory, it conveys the majesty and splendor of His pre-incarnate state" (Fowl 1990: 54), which corresponds to the glory mentioned in Jn 17, 5. Fowl, as Hawthorne notices (Hawthorne in Martin and Dodd 1998: 108), brings through this interpretation those clarifications about the "rank" and "status" that Schweizer lacked.

Nonetheless, Hawthorne observes, Fowl is quite cautious in expressing himself, emphasizing the fact that the interpretation of *μορφή* through *δόξα* is not intended as a dogmatic statement about Christ’s nature, but it only falls in the wider context of the fragment, being used here to reflect Christ’s exalted position (Hawthorne in Martin and Dodd 1998: 99).

We must notice here the fact that, no matter how attractive this interpretation might be through its articulation to the main meaning of *μορφή*, from a strictly grammatical point of view, we are dealing with a focus changing from the main meaning, which comes from the immediate context in which *μορφή* is placed. We cannot understand what Saint Paul is trying to say about Christ’s Person through the use of this term, if we distance ourselves from the immediate context (vv. 6-7), that is from His status before the Embodiment, and we refer to the next context (vv. 8-9), that is His state after the Crucifixion, without leaving room to speculations by doing this. For example, we can see this emerging from the way C.A. Wanamaker interprets this term.

Wanamaker, who develops the theology of the Php 2, 5-11 in terms of a “Son of God” Christology (Wanamaker 1987: 179-193), suggests the same identification of *μορφή* with “divine glory”, showing that Saint Paul makes the connection between Christ’s divine glory and His outward appearance in Php 3, 21 (Wanamaker 1987: 186-187).

As expected, his vision has been seriously criticized, by Hawthorne (Hawthorne and Martin in Metzger and Hubbard and Barker 2004: 82; See also Martin and Dodd 1998: 100) also who shows that, from a linguistic point of view, we cannot bring any solid arguments to equate the terms *μορφή* and *δόξα*, or to give *δόξα* key value through which we can interpret the phrase in the “image of God” (*ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ*). From an exegetical point of view, he shows that it is impossible to apply to *μορφή* the meaning of *δόξα*, as long as the same meaning cannot be applied with the same force also to the parallel phrase *μορφή δούλου*.

We can notice in these two visions two major problems. The first one is that, in Wanamaker’s vision, he doesn’t tackle the issue of Christ’s divinity except tangentially, when he refers to His glory, which from an Orthodox point of view is a major shortcoming because, if the true value is not given to the immediate context (vv. 6-7) by it being centered on Christ’s divinity, then the force of the Christology of this extract becomes

too small, which (in addition) leads also to the impossibility to extract from here the premises of man's deification.

The second problem is that which results from blocking the exegesis in the linguistic area. We cannot perform the exegesis of a text (the more so as this is a holy one) only based on grammatical and semantic rules. We therefore need to observe that the modern western exegetic method, although very thorough and almost exhaustive, ends in itself, being unable to ease people's access to the deep meaning of the Holy Scripture.

### *2. The interpretation of 'μορφή' through 'εἰκών'*

There are also exegetes who are trying to reach the meaning of *ἐν μορφῇ Θεοῦ* (Flp 2, 6) through the phrase *κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν* (Fc 1, 26) and who equate the phrases "being in the image of God" (*μορφή Θεοῦ*) from the Filipians with "being in the form/image of (*εἰκών*)" since the Creation. These are mainly those who situate the whole hymn in the parallel Adam – Christ (the New Adam), among which the most important representative being James Dunn.

He strictly encompasses the whole fragment in the parallel Adam – Christ (the New Adam), comprehending it as applied to Adam not to Christ, and that even the language used is appropriate not for Christ but for Adam (Dunn 1996: 120), thus eliminating from the beginning the theory of Christ's pre-existence, and arguing that the "Adam christology" was very popular at the time Saint Paul wrote the epistle (Dunn 1996: 115). As a result, J. Dunn translates in the following manner:

*The Christ of Phil. 2.6-11 therefore is the man who undid Adam's wrong: confronted with the same choice, he rejected Adam's sin, but nevertheless freely followed Adam's course as fallen man to the bitter end of death; wherefore God bestowed on him the status not simply that Adam lost, but the status which Adam was intended to come to, God's final prototype, the last Adam (Dunn 1996: 119).*

Therefore, Dunn speaks of Christ as human/man, and this leads to a Neo-Arian theology, which we will not analyze here, given the limitation of this paper, but which we must signal.

What is surprising though concerning what we mentioned above, is the fact that the only criticisms brought against Dunn were the ones referring to exegesis and none, or too little, concerning his theology. This

way, T. O’Brien mentions/reviews these critiques/criticisms, stating that Dunn has been accused mainly of minimizing the importance of v. 6 from the point of view of Christ’s pre-existence, which not only lowered the rightful importance of the phrase “ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ”, but also “wronged” the “resuming” phrase from v. 7, “καὶ σχήματι εὑρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος” (and in appearance being as a man), which cannot be understood if it applies to somebody who has never been anything else but human/a man. In addition, O’Brien emphasizes the fact that one cannot understand the obvious contrast between “ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ” and „μορφήν δούλου λαβών”, if it applies to two stages in the life of man (O’Brien 1991: 267). He concludes using R.H. Fuller’s incisive phrase, which states that this attempt to fully eliminate the pre-existence from the fragment in question “must be declared a failure” (Fuller 1965: 235).

Here we must remember the fact that against the interpretation of *μορφή* in the sense of *εἰκόν*, a very important philological study has been written (Steenburg 1988: 77-86) in order to clear this issue, a study which clearly shows that these terms/notions/words are far from being equivalent.

C.F.D. Moule also brings a specification able to clarify this issue, emphasizing the fact that Christianity has always seen in Christ a Savior, and not less, a Creator, and not just an instructor or a mere model of imitation (Moule 1978: 59), which focuses back on the reality of salvation, compelling, in their words, the linguistic disputes to make room to the soteriological approach.

Finally, although Hawthorne admits the fact that the difficulty in (the) understanding of the text is mainly in its stagnation between the limits of linguistic research, he fails in his attempt to harmonize the opinions enumerated above, being unable to emerge completely from the influence of the meanings offered by dictionaries. Thus, he uses the words of O’Brien as conclusion (Martin and Dodd 1998: 101), who states that

the phrase ‘ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ’ is best interpreted against the background of the glory of God, that shining light in which according to the OT and intertestamental literature, God was pictured. The expression does not refer simply to external appearance but pictures the preexistent Christ as clothed in the garments of divine majesty and splendour. He was in the form of God, sharing God’s glory. ‘ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ’ thus corresponds with John 17, 5 (τῇ δόξῃ ἣν εἶχον πρὸ τοῦ τὸν κόσμον εἶναι παρὰ σοί – the glory I had with You, before the world began) and

reminds one of Heb 1, 3 (*ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ* – the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being) (O’Brien 1991: 210-211).

What eliminates these two interpretations of our fragment is the second occurrence of *μορφῆ* – the one in v. 7, which makes it impossible to join the first occurrence to *εἰκόν* (*εἰκόν* is too little for God, and it cannot harmonize the meaning of the phrase *ἐν μορφῆ θεοῦ* with that of the phrase *ἴσα θεῷ*), and that of the second one with *δόξα* (*δόξα* is too much for a servant). We can notice here too the incapacity of modern exegesis, discussed above, to go beyond the limitations imposed by the letter and to come closer to the spiritual meaning.

### **Μορφὴν δούλου (λαβών) (2, 7) – taking upon Himself the form of a servant. Ways of interpretation**

In what the interpretation of this phrase by modern exegesis is concerned, what is to be noted is only the connection between Php 2, 7 and Is 53. This connection, although is adopted on a quite large scale, meets a worthy opposition. Without getting into the details of this exegetic dispute, we will mention here O’Brien’s opinion (which we also subscribe to), which brings an enlightening and conclusive argument. We notice the fact that, although he doesn’t fully support this theory, he leaves room to a certain ambiguity, which leads to concluding that this connection maintains its value. The primary objection to the identification of the Servant in Is 53 with the *δούλος* of Php 2 7, says O’Brien, is that

the LXX renders the Hebrew *‘ebed*, with *παῖς*, a title of dignity and honour, whereas *δοῦλος* by contrast underscores the elements of shame and humiliation. However, in partial reply it has been pointed out that both Greek terms (*δοῦλος* and *παῖς*) are used interchangeably in the LXX to render the *‘ebed* of Is 40–55, with a preference for *παῖς* (42, 1; 49, 6; 50, 10; 52, 13; *δοῦλος*: 49, 3, 5; cf. 42, 19; 48, 20). K. Euler (Euler 1934: 54ff) showed after an exhaustive examination that the two titles were employed interchangeably in the OT, while the use of the verb *δουλεύω* at Is 53, 11 has suggested that there was no great distinction in the writer’s mind between the two terms (O’Brien 1991: 270).

Leaving aside the wider question as to whether other statements of the Philippian hymn are to be understood against an Isaianic Servant background (see the individual points of exegesis), we consider the above-mentioned challenges not to have been sufficiently met. Consequently, the evidence presented by Jeremias and

others has not been sufficient to establish with certainty the identity of Is 52, 12 and Php 2, 7 (O’Brien 1991: 271).

### **The Holy Fathers about the “form (μορφή) of God”**

The Holy Fathers have a holistic perspective of this text and, before enumerating some of their most important interpretations, we will note that they do not assign broad space to prove these truths, nor do they try to clarify in many words these fragments from the Scriptures, since they have that confidence coming from the Holy Spirit, without which they would not have dared to speak. In other words, the Holy Fathers do not aim to *reach* these truths, but rather they focus and develop their whole theology *starting from* these truths.

The Holy Fathers all agree when they refer to *μορφή* and, without being limited to the immediate meaning of the term (the one from the dictionary), they consider without a doubt that *μορφή* refers to the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son (*omousios*). Saint Basil the Great does not hesitate to say that the main meaning of *μορφή*, that of *form*, appearance, does not pose any interpretation problems, but it does the opposite, apparently based on its use in the two parallel phrases, *μορφῆ θεοῦ* and *μορφὴν δούλου*. He said that *μορφῆ θεοῦ* (being in God’s form) is referring to “the characteristic of the divine being” (*Against Enomius* (Sf. Vasile cel Mare translated by Carp 2007: 68)).

Saint John Chrysostom explains this in the simplest terms: “Now in our own case, since we men are of a compound nature, form pertains to the body, but in the case of a simple and altogether uncompounded nature it is of the substance” (St. John Chrysostom translated by Cotton and Broadus, vol. 13, 1889: 209). He also underlines the fact that Saint Paul’s intentional use of *ὑπόρχων* shows beyond any doubt the fact that the Son has the same essence (nature) as the Father, thus referring to Ex 3, 14:

Why says he not, “being made in the form of God,” but “being in the form of God”? This is the same as the saying, ‘I am that I am’ (Ex 3, 14.) ‘Form’ implies unchangeableness, so far as it is form. It is not possible that things of one substance should have the form of another, as no man has the form of an angel, neither has a beast the form of a man (St. John Chrysostom translated by Cotton and Broadus, vol. 13, 1889: 209).

St. Teofilact of Ohrid comes to reinforce what St. John said, guiding us to the same source at (Ex 3, 14):

Paul says here: «in the form of God», that is, «in the nature of God». And he did not say that «He was made» or that «He was created» – like Arius blasphemed – but that «He existed» and «He was», which is similar to what God said to Moses: «I am ó ǒv (that means *The one that I was, I am and I will forever be*)» (Sf. Teofilact al Bulgariei, translated by Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul 2006: 248).

What is to be noted is the lack of ambiguity around the term *μορφή* and its use together with *ὑπόρχων*, ambiguity that we signaled in the modern exegetes concerning the same topic. In order to dissipate any shadow of a doubt and to counteract Arian heresy, Saint Athanasius the Great says that “The form of Divinity is not a part belonging to Him, but the essence of the Son is the plenitude of the divinity of the Father; and the Son is entirely God” (Sf. Atanasie translated by Stăniloae 2010: 488) and he also adds these words that underline the identity of will and work between the Father and the Son, which results precisely from the fragment in question:

So while the Son is the form of the Father, one must reflect on the fact that Divinity and what belongs to the Father is the essence of the Son. This is what we have to understand when it is said: «Who, being in the form of God» (Php 2, 6); and «The Father is in Me» (Jn 14, 10) (Sf. Atanasie translated by Stăniloae 2010: 488).

These words are, in our opinion, able to clarify this issue and, at the same time, to show the inconsistency of the kenotic protestant theories, which were based precisely on this misunderstanding of the given fragment.

Another misunderstanding shown above is the one caused by the reading of the fragment Php 2, 5-11 in the terms of the parallel between Adam and Christ – the New Adam. Although the Holy Fathers do not deny that this kind of resemblance between Adam and Christ (the New Adam) was on Apostle Paul’s mind, they did not allow themselves to be tricked by this. We say that they did not allow themselves to be *tricked* because they were not tricked by the letter, just as shown above that happened to J. Dunn, and they maintained the fragment in the lines of the Christology of Saint Paul, this way keeping away from exaggerations. Saint Nicholas Cabasila easily clarifies this problem, saying:



For not the old Adam was a model for the new Adam, but the old was taken in the image of the new. ... The old Adam is nothing more than an imitation of the new Adam, built in His image and likeness, but has not remained in His image and likeness. ... This is how the Law was given to the old Adam, but only the second Adam fulfilled it (Sf. Nicolae Cabasila translated Braniște and Bodogae 1989: 260).

The Holy Fathers went even further, trying to identify not as much the meaning of these things as their purpose, but in order to show their spiritual benefit. Making the connection between *μορφῇ θεοῦ* and *μορφῆν δούλου*, Saint Athanasius the Great identifies in this extract the very purpose of Christ’s Incarnation:

Thus it was written: «In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God» (Jn 1, 1), and it was not added why. But when it was written, “And the Word became flesh» the cause (the purpose) for which it was done was also stated, saying: «And lived among us» (Jn 1, 14). And the Apostle, saying «Who, being in the form of God» (Php 2, 6), did not give the cause (the purpose) until after the expression: «took upon Him the form of a servant». Then he adds: “He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross”, because for this reason He became flesh and took upon Him the form of a servant (Sf. Atanasie translated by Stăniloae 2010: 428).

We arrive now at the true purpose for which God made all these, and Saint Athanasius, referring to the identity of will and work between the Father and the Son discussed above, says:

And again, since the Son's deity and His image (form) are none other than the Father's, he said, «I am in the Father» (Jn 14, 10). Thus, in Christ the One who reconciled the world unto Himself was God (2 Co 5, 19), for the Son is proper to the Father's being. That is why the world could be reconciled with God in Him. Thus, the works of the Son were the works of the Father, for the Son is the image of the divinity of the Father, Who worked all the deeds. Therefore, he who sees the Son sees the Father, for in the fatherly divinity the Son is and is to be seen (Sf. Atanasie translated by Stăniloae 2010: 488).

And Avva Isaiah says:

For God desires man to be like Him in everything and therefore He has come to us, and He has suffered, to change our rotten nature, and to cut off our wills and the liar (false) knowledge, which have taken possession of our soul (Avva Isaia Pustnicul translated by Stăniloae 1991: 88).

Through this, he shows God’s initial purpose from the beginning – which is the deification of humankind – and the way through which it is

done, which leads to the necessity of the fact that Christ transforms our natures in no other way than through His divine nature. This is also emphasized by Clement from Alexandria, when he says that Christ is “immaculate God in the form of man” (Clement Alexandrinul translated by Fecioru 1982: 168).

Nevertheless, things begin to take shape as the Holy Fathers develop their theology of the Incarnation and the taking of the form of a servant. First, we will notice that the Holy Fathers do not insist on connecting this fragment to Is 53, but sometimes they bring them closer together, other times they distance them, thus showing that the fragment from Is 53 cannot be put on the same hermeneutic level, despite the fact that the connections between them cannot be denied.

Therefore, when they establish what exactly this “form of a servant” means, the Holy Fathers agreed that this refers to our human nature; moreover, Clement from Alexandria says that when Saint Apostle Paul uses “servant” here, he means the body before the Incarnation, this way showing a point also in which our fragment differs from the one in Is 53:

Because the body is a servant, as Paul confesses, how can the servant be adorned as a seducer? Because the body has the form of a servant, the Apostle says of the Lord: «emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant» (Php 2, 7), naming a servant the outward man, before the Lord becomes a servant and bears a body (Clement Alexandrinul translated by Fecioru 1982: 307).

The same thing is said by Origen, putting next to each other the form of God (*μορφῆ θεοῦ*) with the form of man (*μορφὴν δούλου*):

He who had existed before, namely, being in the form of God, came (into the world) to take upon Himself the form of a servant. And it is written that, because He was born in the flesh, He remained with His body, that is He was born of the one who said: «Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to Thy word» (Lk 1, 38). This is the form of the servant, who is flesh also, and who obeys His word (Origen translated by Bodogae, Neaga and Lațcu 1982: 14-15).

Christ made Himself an Intercessor between us and God through the fact that He made Himself a connecting bridge between humankind and Him, in order to make possible, on one hand the union of our will with the will of God (through obedience), and on the other hand our deification: “The Intercessor fulfills the will of the Father. The Word is Mediator, it is common to both God and man; he is the Son of God and the Savior of men; he is Deacon of God and our Paedagogus” (Clement Alexandrinul

translated by Fecioru 1982: 307). The way in which He did this it is shown next by the same Father:

But the merciful God freed the body of wickedness, and freeing it from the bitter captivity of death and bitterness, clothed it with incorruption, putting around this body the sacred garment of eternity, the immortality (Clement Alexandrinus translated by Fecioru 1982: 307).

We understand the fact that the slavery must be understood in one way before the moment of the Incarnation, and in another way after it; actually, here lies the explanation of the connection between Php 2, 5-11 and Is 53. What is harder to understand is how these two “forms” can unite, how and why God’s almightiness takes the form of humiliation without ceasing to reign. The Scripture is not enough to enlighten us in this regard. Love requires to be shared first, before it allows itself to be known. The spiritual experience is communion with Christ, is partaking with His humbleness, and the humbleness is – as all the Holy Fathers testify – a fundamental gnoseological principle. Father Staniloae sums up this truth as follows:

Those who have shared the gift of knowing Jesus Christ by faith have also seen His active deity. The love of Jesus, like any other love, was not experienced and understood from the outside, but only by entering into communion with Him, through the leap of faith. Love is by itself humility or *also* humility, being a reduction of exclusive selfishness, admitting the existence of others on an equal level with their own subject and seeking their love. But who responds to the love of someone no longer sees the appearance of humility, the humiliation. But when not answered, the behavior of the man who walks with love after the communion of others appears very humiliating (Stăniloae 2013: 185).

These are the saints, and they shared with us their direct experience of knowing God:

And because, according to His nature, the Savior still has to rule – being the Son of the Almighty, but surely in one way, the only one who could be worthy of Him – the Lord knew how to act. He did it in the most unexpected way, using the most amazing way we have ever imagined: namely, to become truly Master, he takes upon Himself the form of a servant and serves these slaves to the cross and to death, thus to win their souls, and He gets to save their will as He pleases. That is why Saint Paul, knowing that the secret of all dominion lies in this, says: ‘He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross, therefore also God highly exalted Him’ (Php 2, 7-9). And Isaiah the wonderful prophet also says: ‘Therefore, I will allot Him a portion

with the great, And He will divide the booty with the strong; Because He poured out Himself to death and was numbered with the transgressors' (Is 53, 12). For through the first Creation Christ became Lord of the inanimate nature, as long as by the second He became Master even over our will. Or, taking the man after Himself, after He has enslaved and subjected his thought and will – what forms the whole being of man – here is what it really means to master the man (Sf. Nicolae Cabasila translated Braniște and Bodogae 1989: 220).

For a better understanding of this latter word, we quote Father Stăniloae:

In every love there is a self-restraint, a kenosis, for it is a renunciation of direct power, which reduces to an object what it is before it. The alternative for God is: either to manifest His omnipotence towards the state of the object of everything outside Him, or channeling of His power through love which is a restriction of an exclusivist assertion, a restraint of power, an admission of other free beings, a descent to their level in order to make the communion possible.

And again,

If God wanted to save the humankind, to raise the man towards the state of being in communion with Himself and for this purpose He became man, He could manifest Himself in His relations with humanity only by restricting His direct power, manifesting Himself through love. And by doing so, God has shown His true superiority (Stăniloae 2013: 184-185).

## **Conclusion**

This conclusion will be a necessary revision, both for clarifying this endeavor and for the consolidation of the method.

This work is intended to be a start in shaping a new study method of the Bible, which stems from the exegetic analysis of a biblical text – using modern scientific tools –, analysis addressed as a criticism which would generate certain conclusions that will be the object of a new analysis, in order to approach the text from a spiritual point of view. For this, we use the writings of the Holy Fathers, which will complete and enlighten the meanings of the biblical text that we initially set our minds to analyze. All these have as a starting point the fundamental premise of biblical study, namely the Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit and, therefore, its full understanding is solely for those inspired by Him. Starting from this premise, we formulated a fundamental hermeneutic principle, that the

experience of seeing God is an essential gnoseological principle and therefore it is indispensable for biblical studies.

The purpose of this paper was to analyze one of the most debated term – μορφή – from the not less debatable fragment Php 2, 5-11, known as the *christological hymn*, the *kenotic text*, or *Carmen Christi*.

One of the reasons this term is so disputed is that it only appears twice in the Pauline corpus, both times in this fragment. That is why we considered absolutely necessary to analyze these occurrences together, that is in the two phrases „μορφή Θεού” (Php 2, 6) and „μορφή δούλου” (Php 2, 7).

The term *μορφή* means “form”, “external appearance”, attributes which cannot be attributed to God. This is another important reason why this term is so debated. In order to understand these things, and especially to understand the reason why Saint Apostle Paul chose to use it precisely in this fragment, we thought appropriate to begin by analyzing the given text from a grammatical and linguistic point of view, trying to find an answer to the question: “What does the text tell us?” We showed throughout this paper that this grammatical analysis cannot and must not be minimized or overlooked, a testimony being the conclusions that emerged from this analysis. For concision we will shortly enumerate some of the conclusions:

- The first occurrence – *μορφή Θεού* – shows us the Christ before the Incarnation, therefore it underlines, together with the phrase *ἴσα θεῷ*, Christ’s pre-existence.

- The second occurrence – *μορφή δούλου* – shows us the Incarnated Christ.

Through the analysis of the “similar” terms (which express approximately the same reality), like *σχήματι* and *ὁμοιώματι*, we understood **only** the meaning of the second occurrence – the form of a slave (servant).

An important conclusion drawn from the linguistic analysis is that the use of the above mentioned similar terms, especially in this order, shows a development of the meaning of the “form of a slave” through an externalization, which would be better expressed by an antinomy, therefore the meaning of the phrase “*μορφή δούλου*” becomes deeper through externalization.

However, we had to notice the fact that these conclusions are far from satisfactory, for the following main reasons (throughout the paper others were shown as well):

- The grammatical analysis didn't solve the first and most important of difficulties, that of the phrase "*μορφή Θεού*", failing to explain why Saint Apostle Paul used this particular term (form) in order to present God to us;

- It didn't show in a satisfactory manner the connection between the two phrases, which we consider essential.

Taking into consideration these shortcomings, we used, as intended from the beginning, the writings of the Holy Fathers, which enlightened us on these issues. We will briefly enumerate some of these:

The first occurrence – *μορφή Θεού* – speaks of God's being, and not about His physical form.

The second occurrence – *μορφή δούλου* – portrays (and here we notice a new element) not the Incarnated Christ, but the state of (the) man before the Incarnation (Clement from Alexandria and Origen; the same thing being said by Saint Nicholas Cabasila).

The connection between the two phrases is essential to our spiritual life, through the fact that it is based on the reality (and not only on the potentiality) of man's deification, showing also the way, which is none other than the one shaped between the two phrases, starting from the first and reaching the second, only to return to the first.

We thus saw, in the present analysis, that what we hypothesized at the beginning came true and that the simple analysis of a biblical text is not enough to enlighten us, neither on the meaning of the text nor on our spiritual life into Christ. We believe that this is not the purpose of the Holy Scripture but, on the contrary, the purpose is to find and (get to) know Christ, to unite with Him, as Saint John the Evangelist says: "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me" (Jn 5, 39).

That is why we considered appropriate not to count only on textual analysis but, as a follow up, to articulate to this the experience of the Holy Fathers, the ones who had the direct experience of knowing God, being filled with Holy Spirit, the One Who inspired the Holy Scripture.

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