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AN ARISTOPHANIC CONTRAST TO PHILIPPIANS 2.6–7[1]

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Commentators often note that the emphasis in Phil 2.6–7 on Christ's selfless giving is quite contrary to pagan concepts of divinity.[2] N. T. Wright, for example, writes that ἁρπαγμός, when construed as an abstract noun meaning 'snatching', 'grasping', or 'getting', 'refers, intransitively, to a particular way of life, namely, that which characterized pagan rulers, and indeed pagan gods and goddesses such as the Philippians might have worshipped in their pre-Christian days'.[3] Yet no commentator to my knowledge has referred to the excellent example of the grasping nature of pagan deities found in Aristophanes' comedy the *Ecclesiazusae* ('Women in Government').[4]

In this play the women, disguised as men, take over the assembly and enact a law that all goods and women are to be shared in common.[5] One citizen objects to taking his possessions down to a common pool and defends his action to the more obedient Chremes by appealing to custom and the nature of the gods. The relevant part of his speech goes as follows:

[1] Part of a paper read at the 52nd General Meeting of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, Birmingham, 7 August 1997.

[2] Notably C. F. D. Moule, 'Further Reflexions on Philippians 2:5–11', *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on his 60th Birthday* (ed. W. W. Gasque and Ralph P. Martin; Exeter: Paternoster, 1970) 272, 274. Moule's important essay is strangely overlooked by Wolfgang Schenk, 'Der Philipperbrief in der neueren Forschung (1945–1985)', *ANRW* 2.25.4 (1987) 3280–313.

[3] N. T. Wright, 'ἁρπαγμός and the Meaning of Phil. 2: 5–11', *JTS* 37 (1986) 349–50; reprinted in *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991) 89. He is followed closely by Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991) 214.

[4] Surprisingly, even J. J. Wettstein fails to cite this example, Η ΚΑΙΝΗ ΔΙΑΘΗΚΗ (2 vols; Amsterdam, 1752) 2.268–9.

[5] The parallels to Plato's *Republic*, Book V, have often been noted. The *Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (2nd edn, 1989, 56, 485) gives dates for the *Ecclesiazusae* and the *Republic* of 392 BCE and 375 BCE respectively. Of course, an earlier account by Plato, either oral or written, cannot be entirely ruled out. However, the majority of scholars think both writers are independently reflecting in different ways ideas that were current in their Athenian society; see K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (London: Batsford, 1972) 200–1; Douglas M. MacDowell, *Aristophanes and Athens: An Introduction to the Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1995) 314.

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οἴσειν δοκεῖς τιν᾽ ὅστις αὐτῶν νοῦν ἔχει; 777
οὐ γὰρ πάτριον τουτ᾽ ἐστίν, ἀλλὰ λαμβάνειν 778
ἡμᾶς μόνον δεῖ νὴ Δία· καὶ γὰρ οἱ θεοί. 779
γνώσει δ᾽ ἀπὸ τῶν χειρῶν γε τῶν ἀγαλμάτων· 780
ὅταν γὰρ εὐχώμεσθα διδόναι τἀγαθά, 781
ἕστηκεν ἐτείνοντα τὴν χεῖρ᾽ ὑπτίαν, 782
οὐχ ὥς τι δώσοντ᾽ ἀλλ᾽ ὅπως λήψεται.[6] 783

The use of οὐ . . . ἀλλά in lines 778 and 783 is similar to the usage in Phil 2.6–7, but the standpoint is quite the opposite to the Philippian passage. The following is B. B. Rogers' Loeb translation of the Aristophanic passage:

> What! Think you men of sense will bring their goods?
> Not they! That's not our custom: we're disposed
> Rather to take than give, like the dear gods.
> Look at their statues, stretching out their hands!
> We pray the powers to give us all things good;
> Still they hold forth their hands with hollowed palms,
> Showing their notion is to take, not give.[7]

Ὡς with the negated future participle in the final line is probably concessive, and the adversative future indicative with ὅπως is a final clause.[8] Lines 782–3 may be rendered more literally: '*they* [i.e. the statues, but meaning the gods] *stand, stretching out the hand with the palm up, not as though they were about to give something, but rather that they might get something*'.[9]

The contrast with Phil 2.6–7 could not be more stark: ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἁρπαγμὸν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ, ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβών ('Who, although[10] existing in the very form of God, "did not regard being equal with God as something to use [or to be used] for his own advantage", but made himself as nothing by taking the form of a slave').[11] Of course, what these words mean or even how to translate them is hotly

[6] Lines 777–83. I have used R. G. Ussher's text (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973) 47–8.

[7] B. B. Rogers, *Aristophanes* (LCL; 3 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Heinemann, 1924) 3.321–3.

[8] The future indicative with ὅπως is not uncommon in poetry and has the same purpose force as ὅπως with the subjunctive; see H. W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1920 and 1956) 496 (§2203).

[9] The Penguin edition gives a good popular rendering: 'It's not the Athenian way. Grabbing, not giving, is what comes natural to us. And to the gods themselves, for that matter; you can tell from the statues – the hands especially. All the time we're praying to them to give us the good things in life, there they stand with their hands outstretched – palm upwards!', David Barrett and Alan H. Sommerstein (trans.), *Aristophanes: The Knights, Peace, The Birds, The Assembly Women, Wealth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) 249.

[10] C. F. D. Moule has argued – less than persuasively to my mind – that the participle ὑπάρχων is causal and not concessive, 'The Manhood of Jesus in the New Testament', *Christ, Faith and History: Cambridge Studies in Christology* (ed. S. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton; Cambridge University, 1972) 97. He is followed in this by Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* (WBC 43; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983) 85; O'Brien, *Philippians*, 214, 216; Wright, *Climax*, 83 n. 110; Markus Bockmuehl, 'The Form of God (Phil. 2:6): Variations on a Theme of Jewish Mysticism', *JTS* 48 (1997) 21.

[11] The clause in double commas is from R. W. Hoover, 'The HARPAGMOS Enigma: A Philological Solution', *HTR* 64 (1971) 118. One may compare F. F. Bruce's earlier paraphrase, 'He did not exploit equality with God for His own advantage', *An Expanded Paraphrase of the Epistles of Paul* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1965) 167.

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contested; still, all would agree that the essence of Christ's act is in the opposite direction to personal gain.[12]

Obviously, Aristophanes is not writing serious theology; nevertheless, the comic poets reflect the minds of ordinary people and they reveal a growing cynicism towards the gods. Victor Ehrenberg has correctly underscored this: 'In spite of all the good fun and travesty, the picture of the gods which the comic poets paint reveals a profound and moving disillusionment.'[13] In the minds of many pagans, the gods were bent on acquisition not generosity; and the citizen's mordant appeal to the nature of the gods in the *Ecclesiazusae* is a graphic example of this.

Granted the considerable time gap between the two writers, the Aristophanic passage still provides a good illustration of Moule's contention that the humble condescension of Jesus portrayed in the Philippian 'hymn' is opposed to popular pagan ideas of divinity.[14]

[12] This is true even of advocates of an Adamic Christology like J. D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (London: SCM, 1980) 114–21, though the behaviour of pagan gods is less relevant, but not irrelevant, for such a position. For a defence of a pre-existence Christology see L. D. Hurst, 'Re-enter the Pre-existent Christ in Philippians 2.5–11?', *NTS* 32 (1986) 449–57, and Wright, *Climax*, 87–8.

[13] Victor Ehrenberg, *The People of Aristophanes: A Sociology of Old Attic Comedy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1951) 266; see the whole of Ch. 10, 'Religion and Education', esp. 259 where he comments that the gods, like us, preferred getting to giving.

[14] Both the passage's hymnic nature and its Pauline status are contested. Neither issue affects the point of this short notice. For discussion and bibliography see Bockmuehl, '"The Form of God"', 2–4. To his advocates of Pauline authorship can be added David E. Garland, 'The Composition and Unity of Philippians: Some Neglected Literary Factors', *NovT* 27 (1985) 141–73, esp. 158–9; Jeffrey T. Reed, *A Discourse Analysis of Philippians: Method and Rhetoric in the Debate over Literary Integrity* (JSNTSup 136; Sheffield Academic, 1997) 135–6. Both Garland and Reed supply extensive bibliographies.