The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD
Episode 46–Anti-imperial Christology in Philippians (Part 2)
The podcast that aims to start conversations about the oneness and unity of God and about the humanity of Jesus
Donations can be sent here: https://www.paypal.me/10mintruthtalks

Introduction
Last week we began to examine Paul's letter to the Philippians to see whether anti-imperial christology could be observed within it. Sure enough, Paul's message to the believers in the Roman colony of Philippi depicted Jesus in a manner that subverted Caesar and the claims surrounding him. From Paul's perspective, if Jesus was the true savior and lord, then Caesar was neither of these things. This christological teaching served to draw Paul's disciples into a fully-dedicated faithful relationship with Jesus and his kingdom instead of trying to maintain a divided allegiance with both Jesus and Caesar.
This week we will begin to look at the massively important christological passage in Phil 2:5-11. This passage reads:

> *Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,*
> *who, while existing in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be exploited,*
> *but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, and being made in the likeness of humanity.*
> *Being found in appearance as man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*
> *For this reason, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name,*
> *so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*
> *and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* Phil 2:5-11

Could Paul also be making anti-imperial claims in this passage, especially in the declaration that every knee will bow to the Lord Jesus Christ? This episode will begin to explore how Paul's original Philippian readers of this letter would have understood this christological passage in light of their former loyalties to Rome and her emperor. In fact, there is enough material regarding imperial readings of Phil 2:5-11 to cover this episode and at least one more, so stay tuned for that episode as well! My research for this episode draws upon the work of Peter Oakes and his studies on Philippians. He notes several areas in the Philippians 2 passage that are anti-imperial in nature. Let's begin by examing their merits, both theologically and historically.

1. The Shared Language with the Anti-Imperial Passage of Phil 3:20-21

When one examines the Greek text of Phil 2:5-11 and Phil 3:20-21, the passage we examined at length in our previous episode, it becomes clear that Paul has intentionally linked the two passages. What this means is that since Phil 3:20-21 is clearly anti-imperial in its depiction, then the Philippians 2 passage sharing its vocabulary is also anti-imperial. As a reminder, Phil 3:20-21 says:

> *For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.*

Let's look at the specifics:

- "Form" in 2:6, 7 (*morphe*) and "conform" in 3:21 (*simmorphos*)
- "Existing" in 2:6 (*iparchei*) and "is/exists" in 3:20 (*iparchei*)
- "Transform" in 3:21 (*metaschimatizo*) and "apperance" in 2:8 (*schima*)
- "Humble state" in 3:21 (*tapeinosis*) and "humbled" in 2:8 (*tapeinosis*)
- "Subject all things (*panta*)" in 3:21 and "every (*pan*) knee will bow" in 2:10
- "Jesus Christ *is* Lord" (*kurios iesous christos*) in 2:11 and "Lord Jesus Christ" (*kurios iesous christos*) in 3:20
- "Glory" in 3:21 (*doxa*) and "glory" in 2:11 (*doxa*).

Many of these words are rare in Paul, increasing the likelihood that their appearance in 2:5-11 and 3:20-21 is deliberate and intentional. Furthermore, Jesus is mentioned by name twenty-two times in Philippians, and only twice with the phrase "Lord Jesus Christ", and both of these occurrences are in our two passages.

2. Philippians 2 Describes Christ as Having Universal Authority

Paul declares in Phil 2:9-11 that Jesus received from the Father the name that is above every name, that every knee would bow unto him, and that every tongue would confess him as "lord". This seems to be an obvious jab at Caesar, the only person in the Greco-Roman world of the 1st century who could ever be described as having universal authority. Not even Zeus and his followers suggested that Zeus held the sort of authority praised upon the emperor of Rome. The global authority claimed by the Roman emperor can be observed on both coins and ancient inscriptions. For example, coins were minted with Caesar Augustus on one side and Nike, the goddess of conquering, standing upon a globe. An inscription in Pergamum offered these lofty claims: "The Emperor, Caesar, son of god, the god Augustus, the overseer of every land and sea." A similar inscription in Greece focussed on Nero, the emperor ruling during the time of Paul's writing of Philippians. It reads, "Nero, the lord of all the world." These coins and

inscriptions were produced by the common populace, by ordinary citizens, praising Caesar's claim to worldwide authority. So for Paul to come along and argue that every knee would bow to Jesus and that every tongue would confess Jesus as lord, this is deliberately aimed that the emperors of Rome and their claim of universal authority. In fact, the phrase "every knee" presumably includes Caesar's knee as well!

3. The Authority was 'Granted' to Jesus

It would be too easy to read Phil 2:5-11 and suggest that Jesus' authority was rewarded to him for his faithfully obedient human life, or that he was vindicated with this authority. However, when we read Paul's wording closely, the primary sense seems to be that Jesus gained authority from God. This can be observed in that the human Jesus is the subject of verses 6-8 while God the Father becomes the primary subject in verse 9. The tone shifts toward the Father who highly exalts Jesus and bestows upon Jesus the Father's authoritative name. Jesus emptied himself but it was the Father who exalted Jesus. Christ did not raise himself from the dead and Christ certainly did not crown himself with universal authority. This is highly significant because it was understood that the Roman emperors had their authority granted unto them. This is why the family line of emperors, beginning with the Julio-Claudian line where each new Caesar was declared son of god, namely the deified former emperor who transfers his authority upon the newly appointed emperor. This concept of Roman emperors having their authority granted unto them was so widely held that Emperor Hadrian, who was accused of seizing his authority by force, had to produce a story about how the former Emperor Trajan adopted Hadrian on his deathbed. In other words, the Roman emperor was the lord of the world because that power and authority were bestowed upon him by a competent body, and Paul, therefore, argues that Jesus is the true lord of the world because the true God has raised and highly exalted him to a position of authority.

In conclusion, we have observed that:

1. The massively important and complex christological passage of Phil 2:5-11, which depicts the obedience of the human Messiah who was exalted by God to the position of lord of the world, appears to subvert the imperial claims about Rome and her Emperor on many points.
2. Paul argues that God invested universal authority upon Jesus, and the only other person in the first century AD world was said to possess this sort of authority was Caesar. One day even the mighty emperors of Rome would bow their knees and confess that Jesus is the true lord.
3. In a culture where Caesar's authority had to be granted unto him by a competent body, Paul argues for the highest possible person of authority to bestow upon Jesus his lordship and authority--God the Father.

If you enjoy the Biblical Unitarian podcast, please consider supporting us. To give by PayPal, use this link: https://www.paypal.me/10mintruthtalks.