

Materialistic Theism in the Philippian Christ Hymn

Description

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Theism is belief in the existence of God. But what is God? While the world's religions have a variety of ideas about God, almost everyone agrees on certain aspects of his fundamental nature. Most would say that God is above and beyond the universe, for he brought the universe into existence. And if he is above and beyond the universe, he is beyond time and space and thus not restricted to the material world. God is viewed as an infinite and eternal mind who is literally everywhere present – a pure “spirit” without body or parts, having no inherent form, shape, size, location, etc.

While most today would accept this understanding of what God is, Jesus and his early followers believed in no such God. In fact, the God they believed in was so different from this in his fundamental nature that he doesn't even fit what most people take to be the basic definition of “God.” I'll explain what I mean and then get into the evidence. Some people back in the time of Jesus believed in a non-physical God, but Jesus and his followers were not among them. We can call the belief in a non-physical God “Immaterialistic Theism” since it is the belief in the existence of a God who is not material, or immaterial. Immaterialistic Theism existed among certain Greek philosophers, especially Platonists. But Jesus and his followers were not Greek philosophers, and they certainly weren't Platonists, nor was their view of God based on Platonist ideas. They were Jews whose view of God was rooted in the teachings of the ancient Hebrew prophets. The ancient Hebrew prophets did not believe God was an immaterial, formless, bodiless spirit. Just the opposite – God was a material person, with form, shape, location, body, parts, etc. And again, this was the view held by Jesus and his disciples. Their theism was a “Materialistic Theism” – belief in a God who is material, or physical. The evidence for this is overwhelming and you can expect different pieces of this evidence to be explained on the blog from time to time. It will be a recurrent subject. And for those of you who just can't wait for future blog posts (which I hope is all of you), you can read about the evidence for Ancient Judaism's Materialistic Theism in the writings of the early SDA pioneers. The early SDAs also believed in Materialistic Theism and they wrote many articles explaining the Scriptural view that God is a material person. I have compiled some of what they wrote into a booklet called [Materialism: Our Forgotten Foundation](#), and you can also find more of their writings on the subject through [the Personality of God tag](#) on this site.

Now, to the evidence. This is just one of the many pieces of evidence, but I think it's a fascinating piece since it comes from one of the earliest sources we have for the beliefs of the first generation Jesus-Movement. It comes from a piece of poetry quoted by Paul in his letter to the Philippians. Paul wrote this letter in the 50s (obviously, the 50s of the first century CE). The poem itself was clearly composed after the death and resurrection of Jesus since it references those events. This gives us a definite window of time for the creation of the poem. It must have been composed sometime in the period of 20 or so years between the resurrection and the writing of Paul's letter

to the Philippians; that is, between the early 30s and sometime in the 50s. Furthermore, as I mentioned in [A Vision of Christ](#), scholars have shown that the poem originated in a Hebrew or Aramaic linguistic context (the linguistic context of Jesus himself and his earliest followers). If you want a good source for what the earliest followers of Jesus believed, it doesn't get much better than this. So, what does it say? What does it reveal about the sort of theism they had? Here it is:

[Philippians 2:5-11](#)

5 ... Christ Jesus,
6 who, existing in the form of God,
did not consider being equal with God something to be grasped,
7 but emptied himself
by taking the form of a slave,
by becoming in the likeness of people.
And being found in appearance like a man,
8 he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to the point of death,
that is, death on a cross.
9 Therefore also God exalted him
and graciously granted him the name above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bow,
of *those* in heaven and of *those* on earth and of *those* under the earth,
11 and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ *is* Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (LEB)

The first thing to take note of is that this poem describes Christ as a being who existed before he became human, but who then underwent a transformation – he became human. This thus describes Christ as a divine being who underwent an incarnation – the man Jesus pre-existed his human life as a divine being. The language it uses to describe his incarnation – his becoming human – is that he took “the *form* of a slave.” And what does “form” mean here? The next two lines make it obvious by further describing his incarnation as “becoming in the likeness of people” and “being found in appearance like a man.” These three lines: “taking the form of a slave,” “becoming in the likeness of people”, and “being found in appearance like a man” are all parallel to one another and mean the same basic thing. So, what does “form” refer to? Clearly, it refers to the physical form. When Christ became human, he had the physical *form* of humanity – he thus *looked like* them – he had human *likeness*; his *appearance* was that of a man. And the word “appearance” here obviously does not mean “only an appearance” in the sense of “he only *appeared* to be a man, but he really wasn't.” No, it is talking about his physical appearance in the sense that we all have a physical appearance. Jesus had the appearance of man because he was a man, just like we all have the appearance of humans because we are humans.

So, why is it that this poem emphasizes that Jesus had the form/likeness/appearance of a man? I mean, shouldn't that be obvious? He was, after all, a man. Why point it out? The reason is that he wasn't always a man, as the poem already expressed. Before he became a man, he existed as a non-human, divine being. And the way it describes him in his existence before becoming human is

that he was “in the form of God.” But wait... how could he be in the form of God if God is formless? If God is an immaterial spirit who exists everywhere at once, then God wouldn’t have a form. But again, that is the view of Immaterialistic Theism. But this poem says that the pre-existent Christ was “in the form of God!” This is a plain declaration that God has a form and that the Christ, prior to his incarnation, also had a form and that it had the appearance of God’s form. Christ’s form looked like God’s form. This expresses, not Immaterialistic Theism, but Materialistic Theism. To the earliest followers of Jesus, God was not a formless spirit; He was a real being with a definite form – a form in the likeness of which other beings could exist, as was the case for Christ who was existing *in the form of God*, as verse 6 says.

The poem then describes Jesus’ humiliating death and subsequent exaltation upon his resurrection. And then it says that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of *those* in heaven and of *those* on earth and of *those* under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” Whose knees and tongues are we talking about here? We know we earthlings have knees and tongues, but the poem doesn’t just say that the knees of everyone on earth will bow, and the tongues of everyone on earth will confess. Indeed, their knees will bow and their tongues will confess, but not their knees and tongues alone – also the knees and tongues of those under the earth and those in heaven. It isn’t really surprising that those “under the earth” have knees and tongues since it is just a reference to the dead. The early followers of Jesus, like many Jews, expected the dead (both righteous and wicked) to be resurrected – raised from the dead. Resurrection is not a continued existence of an immortal “soul” or a disembodied “spirit” – it is a recreation of people who had died. They lived once as purely physical beings, but then they died, and resurrection is bringing those people back. A resurrected person is Version 2.0 of the same person who died – they were purely physical before they died (Version 1) and they will be purely physical as their resurrected, Version 2.0, selves. So yes, it is quite natural, that they will have knees and tongues.

But what of those in heaven? Usually, people imagine heaven as a wholly different realm of existence from what we experience with our bodily senses. It is thought to be a non-physical realm. But this is not at all the “heaven” spoken of in ancient Jewish Scripture. “Heaven” is actually just the sky. In fact, it is where birds fly (Gen. 1:26) and where the sun, moon, and stars are (Gen. 1:14-18). The ancient authors of the writings that were later compiled into bibles did not understand modern cosmology – they didn’t know that the earth is a planet orbiting the sun and that the sun is just another star in one galaxy among many others. They just knew they were walking on the earth and that when people die, we bury them under the earth, and that everything above the earth is in the sky, be it birds, stars, the sun and moon, or the many beings that dwell somewhere up there in the sky – like God and Christ (see verses like Psalm 14:2 and 102:19). According to this hymn in Philippians 2, the heavenly beings – those who live somewhere up in the sky – also have knees and tongues.

In conclusion, the earliest followers of Jesus did not believe that God is a formless spirit – they held to and promoted Materialistic Theism – the belief that God exists and is a material being with a definite form. Likewise, to them, “heavenly beings” were not immaterial wisps – they are beings who live somewhere out there in the sky and who are just as bodily as we are – having knees and tongues, and also (of course) legs and heads and throats and lungs and feet and... you know, all the parts it takes to have a sensible body.

