The purpose of this essay is to celebrate the exegetical commentaries of biblical scholars, while urging them to “excel still more” in their dogmatic engagement with Scripture’s Christological teaching.¹ Such fuller theological engagement would ideally occur earlier in the exegetical process, with better hermeneutical understanding, than many technical commentaries presently reflect. To unfold this claim, given the perils of generalization on so vast a subject, the bulk of this essay examines a Christological interpretative crux, Phil 2:5–11. While that text’s call for phronesis, or Christ-like practical reason, cannot claim primary attention here, the final section seeks wisdom for commentary-writing in light of the test case.

1. Christology As Subject Matter: Philippians Commentaries As a Test Case

It would be impossible, of course, to survey the plethora of commentaries, classic or contemporary, for their treatment of almost any biblical subject, let alone Christology. Largely limiting generalizations to modern New Testament commentaries and supporting evidence to Phil 2:5–11, the present examination further limits its primary interest to whether that passage teaches or implies a traditional doctrine of Christ’s preexistence as God—with James D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright, and David S. Yeago as notable interlocutors. The hypothesis to explore is that Dunn’s challenge to an Incarnation-oriented approach in Philippians 2 may reveal some Christological strengths and weaknesses of recent scholarly commentaries.

¹ It is a great privilege to honor one such scholar, Grant Osborne, whose *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (2nd ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006) shaped my exegetical practice right from the beginning of seminary training and provided my first responsible encounter with hermeneutical theory. Grant’s graciousness to students and colleagues, service to the church, and wide-ranging excellence will leave a significant legacy.
A. Dunn, Wright, and Yeago

In 1980 Dunn published the first edition of *Christology in the Making*. On Phil 2:5–11 his crucial argument was that the contextual background of the hymn lay in a two-stage Adam Christology, namely, identification with humanity even unto death followed by exaltation to life as Lord over all. In Dunn’s view, this contextual background renders superficial the apparently straightforward, traditional readings of the text’s surface. The “form of God” actually connects to Adam as the image and glory of God, the “form of a slave” to postlapsarian humanity. “Equality with God” alludes to Adam’s temptation, “likeness of men” to the human condition that followed. Thus, “being found in form as a man” (2:7) recapitulates the one—Adamic—narrative shape of Christ’s story.² For Dunn it follows that “[t]he terms used in the hymn do not have an independent value; their sense is determined by their role within the Adam Christology, by their function in describing Adam or more generally God’s purpose for man.”³ The narrative in the early verses refers not to a specific event, but to the shape of Christ’s character representing everyone.⁴ Dunn even muses that the preexistence interpretation may owe to later Gnostic redeemer myths, thus discounting the force of the language in 2:6–8 and never reckoning theologically with the allusion to Isa 45:23 or Phil 2:9–11 in general.⁵

Wright’s lengthy engagement with Philippians 2 gained even greater prominence when incorporated in *The Climax of the Covenant* (1991).⁶ Wright questions how much we could reconstruct of Paul’s “hypothetical predecessors,” of “that shadowy phenomenon called pre-Pauline Christianity.”⁷ All the same, he accepts that the passage is an example of Adam- and therefore Israel-Christology. Yet, contra Dunn, Wright thinks that this does not preclude incarnational Christology but rather entails it. After an exceedingly thorough history—and, we might say, deconstruction—of interpretations, Wright offers an approach to Phil 2:6–7 that integrates well with the following verses, while integrating incarnational and ethical thrusts in the passage.

³ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 117.
⁴ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 120.
⁵ See Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 128; he makes incidental reference to Isaiah 45 on p. 118 but never clarifies his view of its meaning.
⁷ Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 57.