A NECESSARY DETOUR: PAUL'S METAPHORICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE PHILIPPIAN HYMN

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"Can Christian existence be based upon mythical schemata?"1

"In this eschatologically new context, set over against all worldly contexts, words have to function as metaphors. The language of faith is constituted by μεταφορά."2

"... but the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor: it is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive grasp of the similarity in dissimilars."3

I. Introduction

With the force, honesty, and verve that have been his hallmark, Ernst Käsemann refashioned the interpretation of Phil. 2:6-11. His 1950 essay stands as a watershed in the history of the exegesis of this passage; agree or disagree, every interpretation of the passage since that time has needed to face his critique of the traditional ethical interpretation of the hymn. Throughout the essay Käsemann insists, and forcibly shows, that the "ethical idealism" that had dominated previous analyses was misguided and wrongly adduced. But Käsemann's critiques are never written to produce yet another essay or to appoint himself sole arbiter of a discipline. Rather, he writes to call the guild of biblical scholars and the church they address to a self-critical analysis of their procedures and claims. Hence, he tells us: "Occasionally it becomes necessary to elucidate for ourselves, by means of a concrete example, the course and condition of exegesis in our own generation. This is a fruitful and sometimes exciting undertaking, since it brings forcefully to mind not only the problems of the particular text but also the problems of exegesis in general."4

Clearly, though it is an exegetical essay, the desire for responsible scholarship is Käsemann's expressed goal in this undertaking. What
is it that Käsemann wants us to review? Three things: 1) the problems
exegesis incurs when it neglects a self-critical attitude to its procedures
as well as its results, 2) a recognition that exegesis is often driven by,
and so a result of, dogmatic concerns, and 3) the substitution of the
gospel's critical form by an interpretation fitted for general consump-
tion by the public or the church disqualifies that interpretation as true.
One can hardly quibble with such goals or ignore their real force, and
thus Käsemann's opening remarks bear some close attention.

When he begins to explore this set of problems Käsemann discovers
two forces that cause exegeses to go awry: one—if you will—moral,
the other theological. The first results from an uncritical production
and acceptance of offered readings that result when systematic anal-
ysis is supplanted by the use of arbitrary intuitions. The second, the
theological critique, suggests that religious commitments can also wreak
havoc with the integrity of an analysis, unless the interpreter recog-
nizes those commitments as commitments. Thus, he writes that, when
the biblical scholar attempts to address the church, "this often means
no more than a rather questionable orthodoxy, or a completely inap-
propriate pietism, and these make even more difficult the return to
a genuine relationship to the proclamation of the church. For the gos-
pel, whenever it is proclaimed in its purity, has been a critical matter.
Thus, especially in the present situation, a critical stance could well
be a sign of true responsibility to the subject matter, and should serve
as a protection against mere impressions." Thus, Käsemann warns
that even an apparently methodologically rigorous exegesis can pro-
duce interpretations that are incorrect if they are controlled by covert
dogmatic interests. Hence, unless the manner and results of exegesis
come under close scrutiny and are tested by open debate they stand
the danger of disqualification, whether from methodological or theo-
logical quarters.

Käsemann is no prophet, but his words, written over forty years
ago, still ring true as a challenge to this generation of interpreters. The
present-day exegesis of biblical texts also faces the double dangers of
hiding itself from extra-disciplinary critique and an unrecognized sub-
mission to dogmatic control. It seems possible that rhetorical criticism(s)
can help to develop the critical self-consciousness needed to combat