VIII Paul as *homo humilis*

1. Paul: The humble letter-writer

Within the epistolary correspondence between Seneca and Paul, from the 4th century CE, the attributes of humbleness and humility play a major role. It seems to be significant, though, that *humility* as such is only applied to Paul: As Alfons Fürst has argued, it is Paul in particular who appears as a humble person in that he, in a formal sense, mentions the addressee before himself as the letter-writer: *Annaeo Senecae Paulus salutet.* The literary portrait of Paul, shaped by the anonymous writer, shall in general differ significantly from his fictitious partner of epistolary correspondence, Seneca. “Seneca erscheint als Heide, der sich an die paganen Gepflogenheiten hält, Paulus als Christ, der aus Bescheidenheit und Demut seinen Namen erst hinter dem des Adressaten nennt.” It is specifically in Letter X of the correspondence that the phenomenon of epistolary humility is even discussed explicitly by the fictitious letter-writer “Paul”: “Paul” expresses his wish of putting himself in an inferior position which would – as he sees it – match the requirements of his religion (*sectae meae*).

Thus, in several ways, Paul is continuously molded as a humble person and letter-writer. Albrecht Dihle has described the ancient literary modes of showing (epistolary) courtesy and modesty. In this context, Dihle points out, that the actual concept of Christian “humility” cannot be traced back to notions of modesty that exist in the Greco-Roman “Vulgärethik.” The point of departure for the Christian concept of (epistolary) humility has to be found elsewhere: It is, as this contribution argues, to be traced back to Paul’s letter-writing, more particularly, to his letter to the Philippians, which is probably Paul’s latest writing. In this letter, addressed to the community in Philippi, Paul shows himself more than in any other writing as a *homo humilis*. In a comprehensive way Paul molds himself as a humble person who presents Christ-oriented humility (Phil 2:1-18) to be the ultimate ethical guideline of community life. By imitating

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1 Jerome’s notion of and reference to the epistolary correspondence (*Vir ill 12*) is to be seen as the *terminus ante quem*, cf. A. Fürst, “Einführung,” 3-22.
2 Cf., e.g., *Ep Paul Sen II*.
Paul and practicing *mimesis*, the community will finally learn about humility example-wise.²⁷

Paul’s comprising conceptualization of “Christian humility” must have had a huge impact not only on Christian theology, but also on Christian literary history: If we move further on in the history of early Christianity and even beyond the field of epistolography, we can see that it was Paul as a literary author who stimulated a specific Christian writing culture,²⁸ particularly among monastic authors of the Byzantine era like Cyril of Scythopolis (ca. 525-560 CE). Those authors make use of an “image of Christian authorship” which is “attentive to the function of self-consciousness through which the ascetic imagined and formed himself anew ... In such a context ... claims of inadequacy are ascetic performances, expressions of piety achieved through rhetoric. Rather than a rhetoric of false modesty, it might be more accurate to speak of a rhetoric of longed-for humility.”²⁹ However, as Derek Krueger also points out, humility “posed the greatest problem for authors of texts” in the sense that the claim of humility actually contradicts the literary ambitions of an author, especially when he is acting as hagiographer.³⁰ “Paradoxically, the performance of humility demands the renunciation of agency in one’s own asceticism,” and the “denigration of style.”³¹ How then did the image of a humble Christian author develop – how does it emerge, how does it work in Paul? Why did it inspire Christian theology as much as literary history for such a long time? Even Martin Luther, who in general criticizes the contemporary cultural and ecclesial attitude of humility, does not spare with expressing his humility when writing his letter to the emperor Charles V: In this letter, dating from April 1521, Luther uses many expressions of humility and humbleness in order to show his subservience to the monarch. So, where does the phenomenon of Christian (epistolary) humility originate?

We have to go back to Paul’s letter to the Philippians, but we cannot only study how Paul as a letter-writer refers to his personal humility. Rather, in this letter we find Paul’s *epistolary concept of humilitas* presented in a most extensive sense: In Philippians we come across various rhetorical techniques, semantics, metaphorical language as well as argumentative strategies by which Paul makes humility to be the *key concept* not only to his ethical teaching (Phil 2:3) but also

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²⁸ In what follows, we will focus on the literary image, rather than on the theological and ethical implications of the Christian concept of humility – to the latter, cf., e.g.: J. J. Schuld, *Foucault and Augustine*; D. Konstan, *Before Forgiveness*, 125-145. A classical contribution to biblical anthropology still is: L. Adler, *The Biblical View of Man*, 49-53.
³¹ D. Krueger, *Writing*, 103-104.
and rather more to his literary self-configuration, especially in chapters 1-3. In the first step we will thus depict how Paul in Philippians conceptualizes, interconnects and personally applies the various literary elements and strategies of *humilitas*; in the second step we have to evaluate how and why Paul’s self-molding as a *homo humilis* in Philippians can be seen as a way in which Paul finally performs as a *homo novus*.

### 2. Paul’s epistolary concept of humility in Philippians

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul conceptualizes humility as an epistolary strategy in – as far as I can see – seven dimensions: first, the apostle presents ταπεινοφροσύνη as an ethical principle that has to be practiced by the community members; ταπεινοφροσύνη appears as a working tool of ecclesial or communitarian interaction that is, second, illustrated by four narrative examples (Phil 1-3), and that is third implemented by the apostle’s personal authority to impose ethical parenesis; fourth, Paul inscribes his own fortune as apostle wise in terms of ταπείνωσις (Phil 3:20-21), as he – fifth – already in the letter’s prescript chooses metaphorical language of subordination (δοῦλος) which is, again, already exemplified by Jesus’s paradigmatic practice of humility (δοῦλος: Phil 2:7) and obedience (ὑπήκοος: Phil 2:8), and which has consequently to be mirrored by how the Philippian community itself shall perform (ὑπακούειν: Phil 2:12); sixth, in Phil 4:10-20 Paul bases his humble way of life on a concrete waiver of material prosperity; and seventh, in the overall letter-writing to the Philippians Paul uses – as is typical of his style of letter-writing – the genus *humile* which he only occasionally leaves for matters of textual significance (Phil 2:6-11).

In Philippians, thus, Paul’s language and literary style as much as the pragmatics and the propositional force of his letter-writing coincide: it is this kind of argumentative and literary consistency that makes Paul as a letter-writer to be the “ideal” representative of *humilitas* – in other words, he performs by means of letter-writing as a *homo humilis*. Let us now explore in more detail the seven dimensions mentioned of how Paul conceptualizes literary humility, and let us hereby also refer to the specific textual passages that are relevant. We have to start with Phil 2:3 and Paul’s invention of the Greek term for “humilitas”: ταπεινοφροσύνη.

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2.1. The ταπεινοφροσύνη as an ethical principle

In Phil 2:3 Paul admonishes his readers to practice humility: “make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves” (Phil 2:2-3, NRSV). By suggesting ταπεινοφροσύνη as an ethical and an ecclesial principle to the Philippians, Paul introduces a substantive term which is not attested in Greek-Hellenistic literature and/or epigraphy prior to him. Beyond a few instances in post-Pauline New Testament literature (Acts 20:19; Col 2:18, 23; 3:12; 1 Pet 5:9) – instances that are probably directly inspired by Phil 2:3 – the term ταπεινοφροσύνη only occurs in Epictetus\textsuperscript{14} and Josephus\textsuperscript{15} as first century CE literary authors: here the connotations of ταπειν- are continuously negative, and the semantic field is used in a pejorative sense.

To Paul, in contrast, ταπεινοφροσύνη has to be understood as an attitude (“Gesinnung” as τοῦτο φρονεῖτε: Phil 2:5) or as a communitarian, Christ-oriented mindset that can typologically be seen in close affiliation to how Aristotle has conceptualized the so-called dianoetic virtues such as φρόνησις: as guiding principles for right and righteous action within communitarian settings,\textsuperscript{16} defined by socio-political needs of interaction.\textsuperscript{17}

2.2. Narrative examples

In Philippians 1-3 Paul presents various narrative examples by which he illustrates how “humility” has to be practiced. We have to look at these textual passages more comprehensively, and we will begin with the Christ-exemplum in 2:6-11, the most important of these narrative examples.\textsuperscript{18} On the one hand, it exemplifies especially the attitude of a precursory waiver of rights (“Rechtsverzicht”) on behalf of communitarian unity and unanimity (cf. Phil 2:1-2). On the other hand, the Christ-example visualizes to the reader how the practice of humility promises a reward: after exercising the ultimate form of kenosis and evenshouldering crucifixion, and hereby taking the blame of the disenfranchised, Jesus has been exalted by God himself. Jesus thus can consequently claim divine kyriotes, that is, cosmic sovereignty (Phil 2:11). Even though the Christ-exemplum is the

\textsuperscript{14} Epictetus, \textit{Diatr} 3.24.56.
\textsuperscript{15} Josephus, \textit{BJ} 4.494.
\textsuperscript{16} Aristotle, \textit{Eth nic.}
\textsuperscript{18} On the examples used in Philippians, more in general, cf.: P.-B. Smit, \textit{Paradigms}. 
most severe manner of practicing humility, it finally reveals itself to be a story of success: God not only provides compensation for Jesus’s practiced waiver of rights, but even exalts his status in a cosmic dimension.

Philippians 2:6-11 is framed by three more exemplary stories which productively highlight various other aspects of how ταπεινοφροσύνη is practiced by the apostle himself and his close co-workers: in Phil 2:19-24 Timothy is presented as a personal example of unanimity (2:20) and probation in regard to the proclamation of the gospel (2:22) and the care for the Philippian community during Paul’s personal absence from Macedonia and Northern Greece (2:20). Immediately afterwards – in Phil 2:25-30 – Epaphroditus is characterized as ἀδελφός, συνεργός, συστρατιώτης, ἀπόστολος, λειτουργός (2:25). Even though he came close to death because of his sickness (2:27, 30), he has never balked at being engaged in Paul’s missionary activities; he has always supported the apostle, and in that sense he has assumed the Philippians’ role of providing help and (financial) support to Paul’s apostolic ministry (2:30).

The list of personal examples that are presented to the Philippian community is opened up and finalized again – not accidentally – by Paul’s own personal exemplum. In Phil 1:21-26 Paul explains to his readers how his actual situation of imprisonment challenges him, and how he himself had to demonstrate moral probation herein: though he was wishing for his imminent death (1:21) – perhaps because of age, sickness, and/or the conditions of imprisonment (Paul does not really explain) – and though he was at the same time longing for his final communion with Christ (1:23), he had to stay alive in order to continue his apostolic mission on behalf of his communities. He is in particular concerned with the successful progress of the Philippian community (1:26).

In Phil 3:12-16 Paul, again and here for the last time, presents himself as a personal example to his audience. Once more, the micro-context of this argument is especially significant for interpreting the exemplary speech: After admonishing the Philippians (3:1) and addressing in an invective polemics (3:2-4a) the risk of splitting and conflict which will be caused by possible “enemies of the cross” (3:18), Paul refers back to his own “apostolic career” (3:4b-11), and in this frame also depicts his eschatological expectation of participating in the ἐξανάστασις ἐκ νεκρῶν (3:10-11). In order to ultimately request of the Philippians to become “imitators” of him (3:17: συμμιμηταί μου γίνεσθε), Paul has to show his present stage of aiming at conformity with Christ (3:10: συμμορφιζόμενος): Paul’s paradigm exemplifies most clearly how the status of Christ-believers is characterized by aspiring after communion with Christ rather than already claiming the goal of perfection and completeness:
Not that I have already obtained this or have reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained (3:12-16, NRSV).

According to Paul, the lack of perfection is primarily not to be seen as a temporary anthropological deficiency that could somehow be corrected by moral progress19 – according to Paul it rather functions as a crucial element of an even deeper experience of humility because it corresponds to the eschatological implications of ταπεινοφροσύνη: since the future hope focuses on Christ “He will transform the body of our humiliation (τὸ σῶμα τῆς ταπεινώσεως) that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself” (3:21, NRSV), current completeness or perfection would only be a misleading contradiction. In narrative terms, then, Paul puts himself in a structural analogy to Christ: as Jesus – after having practiced humility in an ultimate sense (2:6-8) – has been exalted (2:9-11), Paul expects for himself a future transformation (μετασχηματίζειν) of his τὸ σῶμα τῆς ταπεινώσεως (3:21) by which he himself will participate in Christ’s cosmological rulership (3:21).

### 2.3. The apostle’s personal authority

In Phil 2:3 Paul implements ταπεινοφροσύνη in an exhortative setting. The community members are urged by Paul to “complete” his joy, not to do “something from selfishness,” and after that: “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (2:4, NRSV). Paul uses the parenetical form here as he does in various other passages in Philippians (e.g., 1:27-30; 2:12-18; 4:1ff.). The attitude of τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε is expected of the Philippian community in order to perfect the apostle’s joy (χαρά).

Paul’s parenesis thus is empowered by his insistence that the community’s ethical behavior will directly impact the apostle’s condition and mental state in his imprisonment. The parenesis in Phil 2 is personally authorized by Paul’s apostolic affiliation to Christ (e.g., 1:13), which – in the letter to the Philippians – is outlined as a direct subordination to Christ (δοῦλος: 1:1).

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19 In that sense John T. Fitzgerald, for instance, misperceives Pauline ethics when he looks at it in close analogy to the idea of “moral progress” which we can find in Hellenistic-Roman philosophy, cf.: J. T. Fitzgerald, “Passions,” 1-25.
2.4. Paul’s personal ταπείνωσις

As mentioned already, Paul applies the ταπείνωσις-semantic directly to his person and his self-understanding, and, thus, semantically molds his own personal fortune to the concept of humility. In Phil 3:20-21 Paul picks up in an anaphoric sense the lexicon that he had used already in 1:27-2:3: In chapter 1 the exhortation to exercise “your citizenship in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (ἀξίως ... πολιτεύεσθε: 1:27)20 was followed up by Paul’s admonition to practice ταπεινοφροσύνη (2:3); in chapter 3 Paul finalizes the polemics against the “enemies of the cross” (3:18-19) by deriving the unique socio-religious status of the Philippian community from its eschatological hope. In the argumentative frame of chapter 3, and similar to 1:27ff., Paul makes πολίτευμα and ταπείνωσις to be an interacting lexicon: “But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior ... He will transform the body of our humiliation” (3:20-21, NRSV).

2.5. Language of subordination

In his study: “Epiktet und das Neue Testament” from 1911, Adolf Friedrich Bonhöffer already pointed out that in Greek-Hellenistic literature the ταπείνωσις-semantic is frequently used synonymously to δειλός, δοῦλος, ἀγεν(ν)ής κτλ.21 Accordingly, Paul’s concept of ταπεινοφροσύνη has to be seen in close affiliation to his language of subordination: it is not accidental then that Paul, already in the letter’s prescript, introduces himself – and his co-worker Timothy – as “slaves of Christ” (δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ: Phil 1:1) to his audience. In his previous writing to the Christ-believing community in Rome, he had made use of this expression in a formal sense for the first time (Rom 1:1; but cf.: Gal 1:10). In Philippians, however, Paul explores more comprehensively what the role of a δοῦλος really implies: since Jesus himself had chosen the image of a slave when he shifted roles from one who was equal with God (Phil 2:6) to one who waived his rights and was finally crucified (Phil 2:7-8), the acceptance of the slave-model will consequently mean no less than an appropriate imitation of Christ, which holds an eschatological promise.

It is typical of a slave to be obedient to his master: Even Jesus has practiced in an ultimate sense obedience and submission (γενόμενος υπήκοος: Phil 2:8). As the highest paradigm of ταπεινοφροσύνη Jesus thus also exemplifies how obedience and the role of a slave correspond. In that Paul defines his ministry as a δοῦλος Χριστοῦ, he presupposes for himself the attitude of the ὑπακοή. He

20 Translation according to: J. Reumann, Philippians, 261.
21 Cf. A. Bonhöffer, Epiktet, 65.
makes use of language of subordination when he admonishes the Philippians to practice ὑπακοή themselves. As Paul claims, he only demands of the Philippians what his own ministry per definitionem is about. In consequence, Paul fosters the Philippians’ communion with himself while being absent: When practicing obedience and the image of submission, the Philippians will also come to imitate Paul (Phil 3:17).

2.6. A waiver of material prosperity

The practice of humility can soon be transformed to rather concrete issues of daily life. In Phil 4:10-20 – according to Hans Dieter Betz the “Beilage einer Quittung” (πιττάκιον, χειρόγραφον) – Paul expresses his thanks for the financial support that he had received from the Philippians (cf. also similar remarks: 1:5-7; 2:25-30). As Klaus Wengst has pointed out, Paul’s expression of thanks (Phil 4:10-20) reflects the apostle’s freely chosen way of life: “Die Lebensweise als ταπεινός ist … für Paulus … nicht ihm von vornherein vorgegebener Zwang, sondern bewusste Wahl” (cf. also 2 Cor 11:7).

At the same time, Paul’s reaction to the Philippians’ gift and care reflects a deeper and a more nuanced understanding of the nature of humility: Since Paul in general insists on rejecting any kind of wages that are paid by the communities to reward the apostle for his apostleship – here we meet one of the crucial principles of Paul’s self-understanding as apostle, which is even contrary to early Christian missionary practices (1 Cor 9:14) – he has to show humbleness when receiving a gift since he has to give up his understanding of his apostolic ministry. The attitude of humility, implying a waiver of rights, forces Paul to accept wages from the community. In this case, humility does not consist in refraining from wages and possibly comfortable living-conditions, but rather in receiving financial support and donations.

2.7. Genus humile and genus medium

In general, Paul’s letter-writing is stylistically performed as genus humile. This applies also to his epistolary style of writing to the Philippians. Only Phil 2:6-11 might be an exception: this passage functions as a narrative exemplum

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22 H. D. Betz, Der Apostel Paulus, 16.
23 Cf. J. Reumann, Philippians, 676.
25 Cf., e.g.: Cicero, inv 1.15.20; Rhet Her 4.8.11. Cf. H. Lausberg, Elemente, 154: The genus humile “hat wenig ornatus, da es nur lehren (docere) und beweisen (probare) will. Seine virtutes sind so puritas und perspicuitas.”
which is arranged in a specific literary style; by this *exemplum* Paul depicts ταπεινοφροσύνη as the *materia* of his argument. In Phil 2:6-11 Paul thus shapes a condensed literary text by which he moves from the *genus humile* to the *genus medium* in order to reach the affect of *ethos*.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul’s self-understanding for the most part coincides with his literary style of writing. Since Paul especially in this letter makes humility to become the key term of his apostolic ministry, Christology, and ecclesial ethics, it is particularly this letter in which Paul can exemplify or even identify himself as a *homo humilis*.

### 3. Results and perspectives

In Philippians, Paul uses the self-chosen literary image of a *homo humilis* in order to mold himself in close conformity with Christ. On the one hand, Paul’s self-molding as a *homo humilis* functions as a literary strategy in that it enables the apostle to enforce obedience and a mimetic approach to ethics (*imitatio*) among his readers. It is evident to Paul how promising and demanding the practice of humility is (Phil 2:6-11): he points out impressively how the installation of Christ as a cosmic ruler ensues from his practice of humility and obedience. At the same time, humility can only be practiced by people of high rank – like kings. Humility – as presented by Paul – presupposes a king-like status, as John Chrysostom will later argue as well. When Paul in his letter-writing to the Philippians makes humility to be the key principle of conformity with Christ, he does no less than prepare his audience in epistolary terms for the experience of a Christ-believing kingship.

On the other hand, the *homo humilis* image finally reveals itself to be more than a crucial literary concept of Paul, the letter-writer, who performs as a “*homo novus*”: The *homo humilis* concept is – if we apply Adolf Deissmann’s terminology and expand it further – a “self-made” image by which Paul wants no less than to strengthen the community among and with his reading audience: Paul wishes to prepare himself and his readers for conformity with Christ.

The self-fashioning as a *homo humilis* is initially conceptualized as part of a rhetorical strategy, but it soon transforms into Paul’s narrative image, and from here it finally becomes – as a kind of an *alter ego* – a pattern of literary

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27 Cf. Solomon: 3 Kgs 3:5-9LXX.