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 Epictetus14 and Josephus15 as first century CE literary authors: here the connotations of ταπεινο- 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,16 defined by socio-political needs of interaction.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.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 even shouldering crucifixion, and hereby taking the blame of the disenfranchised, Jesus has been exalted by God himself. Jesus thus can consequently claim divine kyrionotes, that is, cosmic sovereignty (Phil 2:11). Even though the Christ-exemplum is the

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14 Epictetus, Diatr 3.24.56.
15 Josephus, BJ 4.494.
16 Aristotle, Eth nic.
18 On the examples used in Philippians, more in general, cf.: P.-B. Smit, 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: