In my last post I started talking about Paul’s “understanding of Christ” – that is, his Christology. It will take several posts to fill out the picture, and in this one I need to return to the Christ Poem that I talked about last week, expanding my discussion of it from what I said then. Just so you don’t have to flip back through to find the former post, here is what the poem says, set in poetic lines. It comes from Phil 2:5-7.

It is introduced by Paul’s exhortation to his readers to “Have this mind in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus”: And then he says

Who, although he was in the form of God
   Did not regard being equal with God
   Something to be grasped after.
But he emptied himself
   Taking on the form of a slave,
   And coming in the likeness of humans.
And being found in appearance as a human
   He humbled himself
   Becoming obedient unto death – even death on a cross.
Therefore God highly exalted him
   And bestowed on him the name
   That is above every name.
That at the name of Jesus
   Every knee should bow
   Of those in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth.
And every tongue confess
   That Jesus Christ is Lord
   To the glory of God the Father.

I have already made two points about the poem, that it appears to be a poem Paul is *quoting* rather than on the spot. There are reasons for thinking he didn’t write it himself, but I won’t go into that here. It doesn’t affect what I want to say one way or the other. The other point is that it embraces both an exhaltation Christology – that Christ was *exalted* to be equal with God, meaning he wasn’t at that level to begin with, AND an incarnation Christology – that he existed as some kind of divine being (i.e., an angel; probably THE head angel) prior to coming into the world in the first place.
Or DOES it teach an incarnation Christology. Some scholars have argued NO!! It’s an intriguing argument. Here’s how I discuss it in my book How Jesus Became God:

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The Christ Poem and Adam

Some scholars have had real difficulty imagining that a poem existing before Paul’s letter to the Philippians – a poem whose composition must therefore date as early as the 40s CE – could already celebrate an incarnational understanding of Christ. That seems rather early for such a “high” Christology. In part as a way of resolving that problem, an alternative explanation has been proposed. In this alternative interpretation, the beginning of the poem does not represent Christ as a pre-existent divine being. It presents him as a fully human being. In fact, it presents him as a human who was a kind of “second Adam,” a second appearance, in a sense, of the father of the human race.[1]

This is an intriguing interpretation, that I bet you don’t know about! If you do, I bet you don’t know why I don’t buy it! It’s not simple, as it turns out. Wanna find out? Join the blog!

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A Fuller Exposition of the Christ Poem in Philippians
Was Christ an Angel, According to Paul?