

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*THOUGHT IT NOT ROBBERY TO BE EQUAL
WITH GOD.*

No words of Holy Scripture are more full of mysterious significance than the assertion in Philippians ii. 6 that at His Incarnation "Christ Jesus . . . emptied Himself." And, than the words which introduce this mysterious assertion, οὐχ ἀρπαγμὸν ἠγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἰσα Θεῷ, no words have presented to the expositor greater difficulty. Their difficulty, their importance as prefacing the greater words which follow them, and what seems to me to be a misinterpretation of them prevalent now in this country, suggest a careful investigation of their meaning.

For light upon the grammatical sense of a passage in one of St. Paul's shorter Epistles, we naturally turn first to Bishop Ellicott. He tells us that the word ἀρπαγμός, if we look simply at the usual significance of its termination, "would seem to denote 'the act of seizing;'" and quotes a passage from Plutarch (perhaps the only one outside Christian literature in which the word is found) in which it has indisputably this active sense. But the rendering adopted in the Authorized Version from the Latin Fathers and placed at the head of this paper, which gives to the word an active meaning, he rejects. And rightly so. For robbery implies injustice. And injustice is no part of the meaning of ἀρπάζω or of its derivatives. They denote simply violent seizure, grasping with a strong hand, whether the seizure be just or unjust. This is evident from the use of the word in the New Testament. So John vi. 15, "Seize Him, that they may make Him king;" Acts viii. 39, "the Spirit of the Lord snatched away Philip;" 2 Corinthians xii. 2, "caught up even to the third heaven:" also Acts xxiii. 10; 1 Thess. iv. 17; Jude 23; Rev. xii. 5; these being a large majority of the passages in which the word is found in the New

Testament. Moreover, it is impossible to conceive the Son thinking about the justice or injustice of being equal to God. If He were not essentially equal to the Father, He could not become so by violent seizure. If He were so, it would be needless and inconceivable for Him to lay hold with a strong hand of that which was already His secure possession. This exposition, therefore, we may, with Dr. Ellicott and most modern scholars, confidently dismiss.

But, while rejecting this one exposition, Dr. Ellicott is unable to find any other giving to the word *ἀρπαγμός* the active sense which, as he admits, its termination naturally suggests. He therefore supposes it to be equivalent to *ἀρπαγμα*, a less uncommon word denoting an object seized, or to be seized, that object being in this case *τὸ εἶναι ἰσα Θεῷ*. In this he is supported by Chrysostom and other Greek Fathers. But Chrysostom understands the word to mean something already seized; Dr. Ellicott takes it to mean something which might conceivably be seized. The authority of the Greek Fathers and the close connexion in thought between an action and its object make these meanings of the word possible. But we naturally ask why St. Paul rejected a not uncommon word ready to his hand and put into its place a very rare one. The simplest answer is that the more common word did not, and the uncommon word did, express the meaning he wished to convey. But the only difference between these words is in their endings, the one having an active, and the other a passive, significance. Why St. Paul, wishing to convey a passive sense, chose a rare word suggesting by its form an active sense, Dr. Ellicott does not attempt to explain. Certainly, an exposition which gives to the word *ἀρπαγμός* the meaning suggested by its form has so far a great advantage.

But Dr. Ellicott's exposition lies open to a far more serious objection. He not only fails to explain the termi-

nation of the word before us, but gives to the word itself, in its root idea, a meaning it never has. Of ἀρπάζω and its derivatives, the constant and well-known meaning is to seize, to grasp with a strong hand. This the Bishop admits by paraphrasing the sentence, "He did not deem His equality to God a prize to be seized." But he adds, "in other words, He did not insist on His own eternal prerogatives." Are these phrases equivalent? To "insist on His own eternal prerogatives," is to hold fast, and refuse to let go, that which had been for ever His. "A prize to be seized" is something not yet in our grasp. This strange meaning given to a derivative of ἀρπάζω, Dr. Ellicott does not support by even one example. He quotes Eusebius, *Ch. History*, bk. viii. 12: τὸν θάνατον ἀρπαγμα θέμενοι. But these words refer to men who flung themselves from high roofs, and thus laid violent hands on death and made it their own. Death was not theirs until they took it by force. So Chrysostom: *Ad Phil. hom.* 6. 2: εἶπε γὰρ, ὅτι ἐν μορφῇ Θεοῦ ὑπάρχων, οὐχ ἤρπασε τὸ εἶναι ἴσα Θεῷ· καὶ μὴν εἰ ἦν Θεός, πῶς εἶχεν ἀρπάσαι; . . . τίς γὰρ ἂν εἶποι, ὅτι ὁ δεῖνα ἄνθρωπος ᾦν, οὐχ ἤρπασε τὸ εἶναι ἄνθρωπος; πῶς γὰρ ἂν τις ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἀρπάσειεν; Throughout his long homily on this verse it is quite evident that this scholarly Greek writer had no other conception of the meaning of the word, than forcible seizure of something not yet in our hand.

Again, if the Son did not look upon His equality with God as something to be held, we must suppose that He actually surrendered it, that He ceased to be equal with God. An exposition which implies this, we cannot accept unless it be demanded by the plain meaning of the words used. That the Son actually surrendered for a time, by a mysterious act of self-emptying, "the form of God," *i.e.* the outward manifestation of His inward and essential equality to God, we readily admit. And this is implied in

the words before us. But we cannot conceive Him ceasing even for a moment, even amid His deepest humiliation, to be still in very truth equal to the Father.

Once more. The presence in this connexion of a derivative of ἀρπάζω, which always suggests a strong hand, would, in Dr. Ellicott's exposition, suggest also another strong hand, threatening to take away that which the stronger hand of the Son held but surrendered. In other words, the exposition I am combating does not explain the presence here of the idea of force which is always conveyed by the word whose meaning we are discussing.

The combined force of these objections seems to me fatal to the exposition we are considering.

The exposition of Dr. Ellicott is strongly supported by Dr. Lightfoot. He tells us that "the more usual form of the word" ἀρπαγμός "is ἀρπαγμα" (a very loose assertion altogether destitute of proof); and that "with such words as ἡγείσθαι, ποιείσθαι, νομίζειν, the word ἀρπαγμα is employed like ἔρμαιον, εὔρημα to denote 'a highly prized possession, an unexpected gain.'" He paraphrases the words before us, "*did not regard it as a prize, a treasure to be clutched and retained at all hazards.*" Here we have the common fallacy of loose equivalents. Is the phrase, "a highly prized possession" equal to "an unexpected gain"? That which we have held all our life by inheritance from our fathers may be a highly prized possession: it cannot be an unexpected gain. The chief thought conveyed by the latter phrase is acquirement, a thought entirely absent from the former. Oversight of this difference vitiates Dr. Lightfoot's entire note. He goes on to say that "ἀρπαγμα ἡγείσθαι frequently signifies nothing more than to clutch greedily, prize highly, set store by, the idea of plunder or robbery having passed out of sight." The idea of plunder, as is seen in the above quotations from the New Testament, quotations which might be

supplemented by many others from many writers, never had any place in the strict significance of the word. But wherever it is used we find the sense of taking hold of something not yet in our grasp. This sense of violent seizure is conspicuous in most of the examples quoted by Dr. Lightfoot.

Dr. Ellicott does not claim for his exposition any support from early Christian writers, except that he says "so in effect Theodoret," whose words he quotes *οὐ μέγα τοῦτο ἵπέλαβε*. But Dr. Lightfoot, in a valuable detached note, after paraphrasing his own exposition, which is practically the same as that of Dr. Ellicott, says, "This is the common and indeed almost universal interpretation of the Greek Fathers." Strange to say, the exposition for which this unanimity is claimed is, so far as I know, utterly destitute of support from the Greek or Latin Fathers. Certainly, it has no support in the writers quoted. It is quite true that the Greek writers agree with Dr. Lightfoot in rejecting the exposition noted at the beginning of this paper as accepted generally by the Latin Fathers. But they by no means accept the exposition which he advocates. This is evident even from Dr. Lightfoot's own quotations. For the more part the writers quoted merely reproduce St. Paul's difficult words without trying to expound them. Theodoret, following Origen, as does Theodore of Mopsuestia, gives the short exposition quoted by Dr. Ellicott: but this exposition suits equally well both the interpretation given by the two bishops and that advocated in this paper. That *ἄρπαζω* and its derivatives denote a taking hold of something not yet in our hand, is clearly shown in the quotation from Isidore of Pelusium, who contrasts the action of Christ with that of a liberated slave who would refuse to do servile work, whereas a born son, whose freedom was not acquired, would readily do such work.

Chrysostom, who expounds this passage at great length, understands St. Paul to say that the Son did not look upon His equality with God as an acquired possession; and reads into his words the idea that if the Son of God had looked upon His Divine prerogatives as acquired He would have clung to them as liable to be lost, whereas, knowing that they were His inalienable possession, He did not fear to surrender for a time the full exercise of them: an exposition akin to that of Isidore of Pelusium. This exposition fails because, according to it, St. Paul's actual words convey so small a part of the sense he wished to convey, leaving so much to be mentally added. It is now almost universally abandoned.

The truth is that no early exposition of this difficult passage is satisfactory. We are therefore left to seek by independent study the sense intended by the Apostle. Our only resources are the grammatical meaning of his words and the line of thought of the Epistle.

Let us give to the word *ἀρπαγμός* the meaning which Dr. Ellicott tells us the word "would seem to denote if considered apart from the context," *i.e.* its plain grammatical meaning, *viz.* "the act of seizing." We shall thus retain, as we have seen, the root idea of the word and the ordinary meaning of its termination. And this exposition will explain St. Paul's use of the rare word *ἀρπαγμος* instead of the more common one *ἄρπαγμα* and the phrase found elsewhere, *ἄρπαγμα ἡγεῖσθαι*. If this simple interpretation be correct, *τὸ εἶναι ἴσα Θεῷ* is not the object, but the subject, of the seizing; not the object grasped or to be grasped, but the hand which grasps.

It is no objection to this exposition that it assumes that a state, *viz.* "equality with God," might conceivably be deemed an activity, *viz.* a strong-handed grasping. For if a state is a basis and condition of activity, the two are coincident and in our thought identical. A good example

of this, and a close parallel to the passage before us, is 1 Timothy vi. 5, *νομιζόντων πορισμὸν εἶναι τὴν εὐσέβειαν*. Here we have, as in Philippians ii. 6, the termination *-μοσ* noting an active sense; and an underlying verb denoting acquirement. The men in question thought that piety and making gain went together. Had Christ looked upon the Divine powers He possessed in virtue of His equality with God as a means of taking for Himself the good things of earth, to His thought equality with God and high-handed seizure would have been coincident, and might have been spoken of as identical. This interpretation is therefore grammatically admissible. It remains to be seen whether it accords with the Apostle's train of thought and argument.

In Philippians ii. 4 St. Paul warns his readers against selfishness. He bids them not to be looking after their own enrichment, but to be looking after the good of others. This exhortation he supports by an appeal to the supreme example of Christ. He bids them think in their hearts the thoughts which were also in the heart of Christ. But instead of pointing to actions of Christ on earth revealing the thought of the Eternal Son, the Apostle directs us to one thought of the pre-incarnate Son of which His whole life and thought on earth was an outflow. That he refers to the not yet incarnate Son, is proved by the words, "having become in the likeness of men," which describe evidently His entrance into human life. The title "Christ Jesus" used of the pre-incarnate Son reveals St. Paul's deep consciousness of the personal continuity and identity of the Son, pre-incarnate and incarnate; and was perhaps suggested by the fact that it was in His life on earth that the mind and thought of the pre-incarnate Son were manifested as a pattern to men.

The mind of Christ which St. Paul desires us to cherish, he sets before us by a direct negative statement of His thought touching Himself and by a positive statement of

a mysterious action of the Son upon Himself, an action revealing His inner thought. The Apostle opens the sacred drama by presenting to us the pre-existent Son "in the form of God." His mode of self-presentation was the Father's mode of self-presentation. Practically, the "form of God" is the glory (John xvii. 5) which the Son had with the Father before the world was. For the glory of God is the outshining of the splendour of His invisible essence. The phrase is evidently chosen for contrast to the "form of a servant," in which the Son presented Himself to men on earth.

Form of God implies equality with God; for form without corresponding underlying reality (cf. 2 Timothy iii. 5) is deception. And St. Paul tells us that Christ did not look upon this implied equality with God as a "grasping," *i.e.* He did not use His Divine powers as a strong hand with which to lay hold of good things for Himself. Instead of this, "He emptied Himself." These words describe an action upon Himself the exact opposite of grasping. Like the rapacious man, the Son used force. But it was upon HIMSELF. (Notice the emphatic position of *ἐαυτόν*.) At His incarnation, for a time, He laid aside, by a definite action upon Himself, the full exercise of His Divine powers and whatever was inconsistent with the "form of a servant" and with His assumption of the "likeness of men." The negative thought underlying this positive renunciation, *viz.* the Son's mode of viewing His Divine prerogatives, is set forth in the foregoing words, *οὐχ ἀρπαγμὸν ἠγήσατο*. The object of the implied *ἀρπάξειν* is apparently the good things of earth, which the Incarnate Son, had He been prompted by selfishness, might have seized for His own human enjoyment. This is not inconsistent, any more than as we have seen is the title Jesus Christ in verse 6, with our sure inference that St. Paul is describing here the thought of the pre-incarnate Son. For He is described as

contemplating His approaching life on earth, and is here held up as a pattern to men on earth in danger of looking upon their various powers as means of seizing for themselves good things within their reach. The Incarnate Son might have claimed and taken for Himself the wealth, luxury, power, and splendour of earth: instead of doing so, at His incarnation He laid aside in some sense the operation of the powers with which He might have made good His claim. St. Paul tells us that this actual renunciation arose from His mode of viewing His Divine prerogatives. They were not in His sight a means of strong-handed self-gratification. Thus the positive assertion in verse 7 explains the foregoing negative assertion. For the Son's act of self-emptying, which took place in time, was an outflow of His eternal thought touching Himself.

Our English language affords no good rendering of the word *ἀρπαγμός*. We cannot translate it *plundering*. For this implies injustice, which is no part of the connotation of the Greek word. Moreover, there would have been no injustice even if the Incarnate Son had seized the good things of earth. The English word *grasping* most nearly reproduces the Greek sense; but is somewhat vague. The phrase *high-handed self-enriching* is clumsy. But it makes conspicuous the idea of force which is always present in the word, and the selfishness which so often prompts forceful seizure and which is present in St. Paul's thought here. In default of a satisfactory rendering, we may perhaps prefer, as open to fewest objections, DEEMED NOT HIS BEING EQUAL TO GOD a means of GRASPING.

The use here of the word *ἀρπαγμός* is specially appropriate to St. Paul's thought. He is warning against selfishness. Now the spirit of selfishness is essentially grasping. The selfish man uses his power to take hold of the objects within his reach. In absolute antithesis to this spirit is the mind of Christ. But instead of pointing us simply to

His disposition as manifested in His life on earth, the Apostle leads us up to the great renunciation which underlay that life, and to the eternal thought of which this renunciation was the outflow. He thus places before us an Eternal and Infinite Example of unselfishness.

The exposition given above is that of Meyer, than whom, both in grammatical accuracy and exegetical tact, we have no greater modern commentator on Holy Scripture. It is adopted in the very suggestive commentary of Hofmann, who in an earlier work, the *Schriftbeweis*, advocated another view. It is also adopted by Cremer in the new edition of his *Biblical and Theological Dictionary of New Testament Greek*. This new and improved and much enlarged edition is a valuable addition to our apparatus of New Testament scholarship. Meyer's exposition is referred to for a moment both by Ellicott and by Lightfoot; but is dismissed without due consideration. It is passed over in complete silence by the Westminster revisers, who give without any alternative the exposition of the two bishops. The same exposition is adopted in the *Speaker's Commentary*.

The whole passage before us is full of profound significance. Christianity differs from all other religions in that it sets before us a perfect Example, an absolute standard of excellence for all men and all times. Likeness to Christ is an infallible measure of moral worth. This being so, it might be thought that we should have a full portrait of the Son of God as Man on earth. Yet, strange to say, if we deduct from the Gospels the miraculous works which none can even attempt to imitate, and words the like of which none ever spoke or will speak, how little, comparatively, remains of the human life of Christ! It is well that it is so. Had we more definite details, our imitation might have taken hold of these instead of the mind that was in Christ. We are directed rather to those Divine acts of the Son which seem to be farthest from our imitation; to His Incarnation,

as in the passage before us and in 2 Corinthians viii. 9, a very close and compact parallel, and to His death for the sins of the world, as in 1 Peter ii. 21, iv. 1. That we cannot in the least degree imitate directly these mysterious acts of the Eternal Son, increases their value as an example. For the impossibility of direct imitation concentrates our attention upon the inner thought of which these are the outward expression. This inner thought of Christ, we are bidden by the great Apostle, himself a wonderful example of the imitation he desires in us, to make our own. And this inner thought of Christ, breathed into our hearts by the living presence of the Spirit of Christ, will mould our entire thought, and will change and raise and glorify our entire life.

JOSEPH AGAR BEET.

THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS.

XXV.

SALUTATIONS FROM THE PRISONER'S FRIENDS.

“Aristarchus my fellow-prisoner saluteth you, and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas (touching whom ye received commandments; if he come unto you, receive him), and Jesus, which is called Justus, who are of the circumcision: these only *are my* fellow-workers unto the kingdom of God, men that have been a comfort unto me. Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, saluteth you, always striving for you in his prayers, that ye may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God. For I bear him witness, that he hath much labour for you, and for them in Laodicea, and for them in Hierapolis. Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas salute you.”—COL. iv. 10-14 (Rev. Ver.).

HERE are men of different races, unknown to each other by face, clasping hands across the seas, and feeling that the repulsions of nationality, language, conflicting interests, have disappeared in the unity of faith. These greetings are a most striking, because unconscious, testimony to the