Condescension or Kenosis of Christ?

I’ve chosen this title because we will discuss a controversial passage, namely Philippians 2:7, which depending on your own your interpretation of the verb *kenoo*, which appears in this passage, affects how we view the incarnate Son of God. Some interpret this verb as indicating that our Lord emptied Himself of His divine attributes, while others state He voluntarily denied Himself of His divine attributes as a human being. These represent the liberal and conservative views of what we call in theology the “kenosis” of Christ. However, others contend that this verb simply presenting to us the condescension of our Lord. The latter is the view of this writer. One of the most controversial subjects concerning the person of our Lord is the “kenosis” of Christ. “Kenotic” theology is a theology that focuses on the person of Christ in terms of some form of self-limitation by the preexistent Son in his becoming man.” (Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, Second Edition, Edited by Walter A. Elwell, page 651; Baker Academic; Grand Rapids, Michigan)

The origins of “kenotic” theology began in Germany with a German Lutheran theologian named Gottfried Thomasius (1802-75). The major concern that brought about this theology was to find a way of understanding the person of Christ that allowed his full humanity to be adequately expressed (ibid, page 651). In other words, how do we explain the full humanity of Christ since the Gospels portray our Lord as a real human being with human limitations such as hunger and thirst? Secondly, another concern of the kenotic theologians was to affirm that God truly was in Christ. In other words, how do we explain that God was truly in Christ and maintain being one person when the gospels teach that He had to learn yet at the same time, as God, He was omniscient? Is He not two persons? Thirdly, kenotic theology sought to address a specific concern, namely that, if Jesus of Nazareth was both omniscient God and limited man, then did He not have two centers of consciousness?

Consequently, all of these concerns led to kenotic theologies in various forms. “All forms of classical orthodoxy either explicitly reject or reject in principle kenotic theology. This is because God must be affirmed to be changeless; any concept of the incarnation that would imply change would mean that God would cease to be God.” (Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, Second Edition, Edited by Walter A. Elwell, page 651; Baker Academic; Grand Rapids, Michigan)

Rodney Decker, the Assistant Professor of New Testament at Baptist Bible Seminary in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania lists the various forms of kenotic theology, he writes: “Less conservative views: (1) Christ had a human soul, to which the Logos imparted his divinity, little-by-little until he became completely divine. (= gradual incarnation, Dorner, who was an opponent of the Kenotic theologians) (2) Laid aside his deity which was then restored at the ascension
(Gess and Beecher, cf. summary in Hodge, ST, 2:435 f). Takes *morphē* as = divine nature &/or essence. This is also referred to as “incarnation by divine suicide.” (3) ‘Abandoned certain prerogatives of the divine mode of existence in order to assume the human,’ e.g., omnisciense; *morphē* is defined as God’s ‘permanent characteristics’ (Gore, The Incarnation of Son/God, 170f). Others explain that he surrendered the external, physical attributes of omnisciense, though retaining the attributes of love and truth (A. M. Fairbairn, The Place of Christ..., 475–78). This was also held by Thomasius (Hodge, ST, 2:434), Delitzsch, and H. Crosby. (4) He lived a double life from two, non-communicating life centers. As God, he continued his trinitarian and providential existence, and as man he was united with a human nature. He did not know consciously anything of his divine, Trinitarian existence (Martensen; cf. Berkhouwer [?], 328). (5) He disguised his deity and attributes, not by giving them up, but by limiting them to a time-form appropriate to a human mode of existence (eternal form > temporal form). His attributes could only be expressed in relation to the (human) time and space that his human form could experience (Ebrard; cf. A. B. Bruce, Humiliation of Christ, 152ff).

More conservative views: (1) ‘Old Orthodoxy’ (Strong’s desig., ST, 704) He gave up the use of the attributes (cf. Carson, FD&FPJ, 35). (2) He acted as if he did not possess divine attributes (Anselm). (3) He gave up the independent exercise of the divine attributes (Strong, ST, 703). (a) He did not give up the attributes nor their use. (b) He only exercised the divine attributes as directed by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of his Messianic/Redemptive mission. *morphē* = ‘that independent exercise of powers and prerogatives of Deity which constitutes his ‘equality with God’” (Strong, ST, 706). (4) He limited himself to the voluntary non-use of the attributes (Walvoord, JCL, 143–44, although he also uses the phrase ‘independent exercise of attributes’ in his summary!). (5) D. A. Carson (FD&FPJ, 37) modifies: ‘abandoned some substantial measure of independence in the use of his divine prerogatives.” (Philippians 2:5-11, The Kenosis, pages 2-3)

As noted earlier, the passage of Scripture that this subject revolves around is Philippians 2:7.

**Philippians 2:7, “but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.” (NASB Updated Version)**

“Emptied” is the third person singular aorist active indicative form of the verb *kenōo*. Kenotic theology spawned from this verb in Philippians 2:7. In this passage, this verb is employed with the reflexive pronoun *heautou*, “Himself.”

The verb’s usage goes back to the fifth century B.C. during the Age of Pericles of Athens. The word was used by the Herodotus, Thucydides, Hippocrates, Plato, Aeschylus, Josephus and Philo.

Liddell and Scott list the following meanings of the word in classical literature: (1) “To empty” (2) “To be emptied, to be made or left empty” (3) “To desert a
place” (4) “To empty be depletion, to evacuate” (5) “To make away with” (6) “To expend” (7) “To waste away, shrivel” (8) “To make empty (metaphorically), to make void or of no effect.”

Albrecht Oepke lists the following meanings of the word in his research: (1) “To make empty” (2) “To deprive of content or possession,” mostly with a genitive of object more rarely of person, or absolute. (3) “To empty” (medically) (4) “To be desolate” (passive) (5) “To nullify, destroy” (6) “To come to nothing” (passive) (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, volume 3, page 661).

Louw and Nida list the following meanings for the verb (Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains, volume 2): (1) To take away the power or significance of something – ‘to cause to lose power, to cause to be emptied of power, to make powerless’ (page 683). (2) To completely remove or eliminate elements of high status or rank by eliminating all privileges or prerogatives associated with such status or rank – ‘to empty oneself, to divest oneself of position’ (page 740).

A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature-Third Edition lists the following meanings for the word: (1) to make empty, to empty (a) of desertion by an earthly spirit (b) divestiture of position and prestige: of Christ who gave up the appearance of his divinity and took on the form of a slave (2) to cause to be without result of effect, destroy, render void, or of no effect (Page 539).

There are only two instances of kenoo in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) (Jer. 14:2; 15:9). The Hebrew equivalent in each case is the pulal of `\(\text{amal} \) (אָמַל), “to waste away, languish.”

Jeremiah 14:2, “The people of Judah are in mourning. The people in her cities are pinning away. They lie on the ground expressing their sorrow. Cries of distress come up to me from Jerusalem.” (NET Bible)

Jeremiah 15:9, “The mother who had seven children will grow faint. All the breath will go out of her. Her pride and joy will be taken from her in the prime of their life. It will seem as if the sun had set while it was still day. She will suffer shame and humiliation. I will cause any of them who are still left alive to be killed in war by the onslaughts of their enemies, says the Lord.” (NET Bible)

The word appears five times in the Greek New Testament (Rom. 4:14; 1 Cor. 1:17; 9:15; 2 Cor. 9:3; Phil. 2:7). It is found exclusively in the Pauline corpus.

Romans 4:14, “For if they become heirs by the law, faith is empty and the promise is nullified.” (NET Bible)

1 Corinthians 1:17, “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel – and not with clever speech, so that the cross of Christ would not become useless.” (NET Bible)
1 Corinthians 9:15, “But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing these things so that something will be done for me. In fact, it would be better for me to die than – no one will deprive me of my reason for boasting!” (NET Bible)

2 Corinthians 9:3, “But I am sending these brothers so that our boasting about you may not be empty in this case, so that you may be ready just as I kept telling them.” (NET Bible)

Philippians 2:7, “but emptied himself by taking on the form of a slave, by looking like other men, and by sharing in human nature.” (NET Bible)

The New Testament uses the verb *kenoo* in a literal and metaphorical sense. In Philippians 2:7, the literal sense of “emptied himself” appears in the RSV, NSRV, NET Bible and the NASB. However, the metaphorical sense of “made himself nothing” appears in the NIV and ESV. The KJV and NKJV interpret a metaphorical sense for the verb by rendering it “made himself of no reputation.”

The literal translation is incorrect and inaccurate since our Lord did not empty Himself of anything during His incarnation since He was still God according to Philippians 2:6.

Philippians 2:6, “who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped.”

“In the form of God” is the prepositional phrase *en morphe theou* refers to the fact that Jesus Christ has a divine essence or nature. The expression to *einaí isa theo*, “equality with God” also affirms the deity of our Lord and explicitly teaches that Jesus Christ is God, equal to the Father and the Spirit. This expression should be translated “existing equally in essence with God.” Therefore, we can see that the expressions “form of God” and “equality with God” affirm the deity of Jesus Christ.

Now, the translation “emptied himself” in Philippians 2:7 is not only inaccurate because our Lord did not empty Himself of anything but also because it conveys the idea that our Lord emptied Himself of His divine attributes or deity. This view is totally false since to say that Christ emptied Himself of His divine attributes is to say that He ceased to be God.

Philippians 2:7, “but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.” (NASB Updated Version)

Also, notice that the text of Philippians 2:7 says absolutely nothing about His divine attributes. Thus, to say that the verb *kenoo* refers to the fact that Jesus voluntarily denied Himself the use of His divine attributes or restricted their use as Walvoord states, is in error. Nor, does the text say that our Lord abandoned some substantial measure of independence in the use of his divine prerogatives as Carson contends. The reason both views are incorrect is that the text does not say anything
about His attributes. Therefore, the translation to “deny Himself” would be incorrect.

The context tells us that the metaphorical sense of *kenoo* is being used by Paul in Philippians 2:7 and not the literal sense. There are two participial clauses that follow this verb that make clear that the verb should be rendered “He made himself nothing” or “of no reputation.”

The first participle clause is *morphe doulou labon*, which is translated by the NASB “taking the form of a bond-servant” and “taking the very nature of a servant” by the NIV and “by taking on the form of a slave” by the NET Bible. The second is *en homoiomati anthropon genomenos*, which is rendered by the NASB “being made in the likeness of men” and “being made in human likeness” by the NIV and “by looking like other men” by the NET Bible.

The participle form of the verbs *lambano*, “taking” and *ginomai*, “being made” are what we call in Greek grammar a “participle of means” meaning that they indicate the means by which the action of a finite verb is accomplished. These two words are defining the verb *kenoo*, which is vague and begs to be defined. Therefore, these two participial clauses that are formed by these two verbs are presenting to the reader “the means by which” the Son of God “made Himself nothing” or of “no reputation.” Thus, the NET Bible captures the idea of the participles better than the other translations. So Paul is teaching us that God the Son made Himself of nothing or inconsequential or of no significance or we could say of no reputation by “by having assumed the essence of a slave by being born in the likeness of men.” (My translation)

So we can see that in actuality the verb *kenoo* in Philippians 2:7 is not referring to our Lord’s divine attributes but rather it is pointing to His human nature. The statements “taking the form of a bond-servant” and “being made in the likeness of men” are obvious references to our Lord’s human nature. Both are connected to the verb *kenoo* since the verb *lambano*, “taking” and *ginomai*, “being made” are participle of means meaning that they are indicating the means which the action of the verb *kenoo* is accomplished! This means that our Lord made Himself nothing or of no reputation by becoming a servant and being made in the likeness of men, though He had no sin nature like other men.

Our Lord made Himself nothing in the sense that through His human nature and servanthood, He veiled from the rest of sinful humanity, His divine nature. This in turn resulted in the removal from the view of the rest of sinful humanity, all the elements of His high status and rank as the Son of God. Through His human nature and servanthood, He eliminated from the view of the rest of sinful humanity all the privileges and prerogatives associated with His status or rank as the Son of God. He was still exercising His attributes during His incarnation but not in the presence or full view of the human race except when it was according to the Father’s will to
do so such as in His transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-3). Our Lord was still ruling and holding the universe together during His First Advent even though He added to His deity and sinless human nature.

Therefore, we can see that the Lord Jesus Christ did not empty Himself of anything. He certainly did not empty Himself of His divine attributes since the text of Philippians 2:6-8 does not say this. In fact, as we noted earlier, the text says nothing about His divine attributes. However, the text does say that God the Son made Himself nothing or of no consequence or of no reputation in the eyes of men by assuming the essence of a slave and by becoming a human being.

In this condition, He did not (not could not) manifest His divine nature. It was veiled. He still possessed this divine nature even though He added to this divine nature, a human nature. He did not cease to be God as a human being. His human nature and servanthood served as a temporary veil for His divine nature. At His transfiguration, our Lord manifested His divine nature to Peter, James and John.

Matthew 17:1-3, “Six days later Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John the brother of James, and led them privately up a high mountain. And he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.” (NET Bible)

God the Son humbled Himself by assuming the nature of a slave and a slave’s existence revolves around serving others. God the Son humbled Himself by being born in the likeness of humanity. The Lord Jesus Christ did not assert His superiority over members of the human race in order to benefit Himself but rather chose not to assert His superiority over members of the human race in order to serve them.

Humility is choosing not to assert an easily demonstrated superiority over others. Arrogance seeks to assert an easily demonstrated superiority over others. Paul uses this text in Philippians 2:6-8 to impress upon the Philippian church to be humble and serve each other just as their Lord humbled Himself by becoming a human being and making Himself of no consequence to serve sinful mankind by dying for their sins.

Therefore, the verb kenoo in Philippians 2:7 presents to us the “condescension” of our Lord. Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (11th Edition) defines the term “voluntary descent from one’s rank or dignity in relations with an inferior.” If we paraphrase this definition and apply it to this verb kenoo in Philippians 2:7, we can see that this verb depicts the condescension of our Lord in that He voluntarily descended from His rank and dignity as sovereign God by making Himself nothing or of no reputation or consequence in the eyes of the human race by becoming a human being and a servant at that in order to die for the sins of the world.