

EXEGETICAL BRIEF

ἐπέχοντες in Philippians 2:14-16

What Makes Stars Shine?

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¹⁴Do everything without complaining or arguing, ¹⁵so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe ¹⁶as you **hold out** [footnote: **hold on to**] the word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing.

Philippians 2:14-16 (NIV84)

Paul was in prison in Rome, but the work of God was by no means coming to a halt. Paul himself ministered by conveying the Spirit's power through his pen, bringing divine words to brothers and sisters in the faith in Philippi. He highlighted the danger of placing confidence in human things, human accomplishments, human prominence. He passed along heartfelt affirmation, offering praise for God's work in their hearts. They had chased him down with gifts after he left their community. They continued to be gospel partners in many ways in his absence. Yes, Paul's imprisonment did not bring God's work to a halt, in large part because the Philippians saw that God's work was their work too.

Paul propelled them down this path of gospel service by highlighting the servant heart of Christ. A poetic recounting of Jesus' humiliation and exaltation summarized the securing of salvation. Paul concludes with grand anticipation of that day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

In view of such a Savior, who offered such an example, Paul appeals to the Philippians to press on in their life of service. He invites them to maintain loving relationships within their church family. As they grow in their lives of sanctification, they will continue to stand out as different in the middle of a crooked and corrupted world. And in this dark world Christians shine like stars. Sin brings gloom. Christians glow. They glisten.

Those shining stars are further described. Paul says that they are ἐπέχοντες the word of life. What does ἐπέχοντες mean? What is Paul focusing on as a critical part of shining like a star? Translation paths part. Does the participle mean "holding out/holding forth" or "holding

onto"? The first option is found in the King James Version ("holding forth the word of life") and the NIV84 ("as you hold out the word of life").¹ The second option is reflected in the ESV ("holding fast to the word of life"), the NIV2011 ("as you hold firmly to the word of life"), and the HCSB ("Hold firmly to the message of life").² The question is this: is Paul connecting their shining as stars with their personal gospel proclamation to unbelievers, or is he connecting their shining as stars to a personal iron-grip hold on the word of life?

Finally, one does not exist without the other. An individual who loves the word of life will naturally, according to his new person, work to share the good news with others. And one involved in sincere gospel proclamation is naturally presumed a Christian. But can we pinpoint an emphasis in Philippians 2:16? Is Paul highlighting that shining stars are spreading the gospel? Or is he reminding Christians that those who are stars in a dark world are ones hanging tightly to the word of life? Said another way, is ἐπέχοντες focusing on evangelism or on personal possession of spiritual life?

There are certainly examples in classical Greek where ἐπέχω means "to hold out," or "to offer." In Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a father reminds his son of past kindnesses shown: "When you would cry for a drink using baby talk, I would understand you and ἀν πειν ἐπέσχω—hold out/offer something for you to drink."³ In the *Iliad*, the man who raised Achilles is speaking to his adopted son: "I brought you up to be the sort of man you are . . . you would only go to a feast if I was the one who put you on my knees and satisfied your hunger, preparing small pieces of meat and οἶνον ἐπισχών—offering wine."⁴ Plutarch, in his *Concerning the Fortune of the Romans*, describes the she-wolf that nursed Romulus and Remus: "She circled around the infants and θηλὴν ἐπέσχευ—offered that which gives suck."⁵ And finally, Pausanias, in his *Description of Greece*, describes the relationship the goddess Nemesis had to Helen of Troy: "Of Helen the Greeks say that Nemesis is the mother, but that it was the goddess Leda who μαστὸν ἐπισχέειν αὐτῆ—held/offered a breast for her."⁶

One notices two things. First, the definition "to hold out" or "to offer" is of long standing, reaching back to the time of Homer and continuing into and beyond the first century AD. Second, the meaning of

¹Also, *The Message and Young's Literal Translation*.

²Also, *NASB, RSV, NRSV, NKJV, NET* and the *NIV 1984 footnote*.

³Aristophanes, *Clouds* 1382. Aristophanes lives from approximately 446 to 386 BC.

⁴Homer, *Iliad* 9.485-489.

⁵Plutarch, *On the Fortune of the Romans* 8. Plutarch lived from approximately 46 to 120 AD.

⁶Pausanias, *Attika* 1.33.7. Pausanias lived from approximately 110 to 180 AD.

“to hold out” or “to offer” seems to appear predominantly in the context of offering sustenance, and repeatedly to a child. One might say, then, that the verb often appears to have a rather specialized meaning when used in the “hold out” or “offer” sense.

Is it possible that this is the imagery Paul intends? Is he inserting the picture of a mother offering milk or a father offering a cup into his description of the role believers play in an unbelieving world? There is an attraction to that. We think of the inspired word as milk.⁷ We think of offering milk to the world. Yes, commentator J. B. Lightfoot, who preferred the translation “hold out,” wrote that “if therefore we are to look for any metaphor in ἐπέχοντες, it would most naturally be that of offering food or wine.”⁸

At the same time, Lightfoot acknowledged the consequent jarring images—shining like stars in the universe, and offering food as to a child. Both pictures stand on their own. Both are vivid. But would it have been most natural for Paul to combine them so closely—stars offering milk? It need not inevitably lead the reader to puzzle as one might with an authentically mixed metaphor. Yet the combination poses an element of challenge. Lightfoot, even as he preferred “hold out” as a translation for ἐπέχοντες, acknowledged, “At all events it seems wholly unconnected with the preceding image in φωστῆρες.”⁹

There’s more. As will soon be demonstrated, ἐπέχω is used in many other contexts with a meaning other than “offer/hold out.” To make the case for the comparatively rare, and then seemingly focalized, definition of “offer,” one would hope for contextual hints that require such a definition. Such hints are nonexistent.

But perhaps there were no other vocables that could offer a more generic sense of “hold out/offer,” if that is what Paul was intending to convey. In fact, there would have been other options. προέχω can mean to “hold forth, offer.” προΐσχω serves in similar fashion—one can “hold out” hope. Another possible choice could be παρέχω—one can “make available, give up, offer, present” something to someone.

Promoting the translation “hold out” or “offer” for Philippians 2:16 presents some challenges. Yet one might not consider the challenges insurmountable. Whatever one’s leaning, it remains important now to ask, “What other definition options are possible for ἐπέχω?”

In Luke 14:7 and 1 Timothy 4:16, ἐπέχω is used with the dative to mean “hold one’s attention onto something”—“*observing* how the guests

⁷1 Peter 2:2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.

⁸St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians, p. 118.

⁹Ibid.

picked the places of honor;” and “*hold your attention to/watch your life and your teaching.*” Acts 3:5 presents a similar sense: “So the man gave them *his attention*” . . . he *held onto them* (ἐπέιχεν αὐτοῖς) with all of his faculties, a cripple eager to see what Peter and John would give.

In these references, one recognizes the sense of “hold fast to,” or “hold on to,” without any connotation of “holding forth” or “offering”. But the verb is used with a dative. Such examples aren’t so helpful, because in Philippians 2:16 ἐπέχοντες has an accusative object.

Codex Bezae, a fifth-century Greek New Testament manuscript, uses ἐπέχω with an accusative object. In a variant to Luke 4:42, Bezae replaces κατέιχον (“the people *were trying to keep* Jesus from leaving”) with επειχον (επειχον αυτου του μη πορευεσθαι απ αυτων). They were *preventing* Jesus from doing something. They were *holding him back*. They were “grabbing” him, as it were, with an intent not to let go.

This sense of “hold fast to,” and with an accusative object, occurs elsewhere. Josephus, in the *Antiquities*, describes the impact Haman’s demise had on Jews throughout the Persian empire: χαρὰ δὲ . . . καὶ τοὺς κατὰ πόλιν τῶν Ἰουδαίων καὶ τοὺς κατὰ χώραν ἐπέιχεν—“*joy seized/grabbed hold of* both the Jews in the city as well as those in the countryside.”¹⁰ In his *Jewish Wars*, Josephus explains how Titus was able to pitch his camp not far from the walls of Jerusalem: ἐπισχῶν πᾶν τὸ μεταξὺ μέχρι τοῦ Κεδρῶνος—“*having laid his hands on* all the intervening space up to the Kidron Valley.”¹¹ Again in the *Jewish Wars*, Josephus explains how Cleopatra begged Antony to kill Herod the Great (Herod knew of her lust for the Judean kingdom, and this motivated him to rebuild Masada). Josephus reports that Cleopatra τὴν αὐτῆς γνώμην οὐκ ἐπέιχεν—“*she did not hold tightly* to her opinion,” but let her thoughts turn freely into spoken words.¹²

The sense for ἐπέχω of “laying hold of” is found repeatedly. It must be noted that this *holding fast* is often in the sense of *restraining, preventing something from escaping*. For example, one holds fast the sin-prone tongue.¹³ But there is also a more generic sense, the sense simply of “holding on to,” or possessing/occupying: “[the sun] *holds/possesses* the middle place” in the solar system.”¹⁴

¹⁰*Antiquities*, 11.285.

¹¹*Wars*, 5.303.

¹²*Wars*, 7.301.

¹³Philo, *That the Worse is Wont to Attack the Better*. 23. ἔστι δ’ ὅτε μάρτυρος ἢ κατηγοροῦ λαβῶν τάξιν ἀφανῶς ἡμᾶς ἔνδοθεν ἐλέγχει μηδὲ διαραῖ τὸ στόμα ἔων, ἔλλαμβανόμενος δὲ καὶ ἐπιστομίζων ταῖς τοῦ συνειδότος ἡνίαις τὸν αὐθάδη μετὰ ἀφημισμοῦ δρόμον γλώττης ἐπέσχειν.

¹⁴Philo, *Who is the Heir of Divine Things*, 223. ἐπεὶ μέσην ἐπέχει χώραν. Philo goes on to explain that the solar system reflects the seven-lighted arrangement of the

Where does that leave us?

Consider again Philippians 2:15-16: . . . ἐν οἷς φαίνεσθε ὡς φωστῆρες ἐν κόσμῳ, λόγον ζωῆς ἐπέχοντες: “in the middle of those who are crooked and depraved, you are shining as stars in the universe, ἐπέχοντες the word of life.”

The meaning “hold fast to” is exceedingly more prominent in contemporary Greek literature than the definition “hold out/offer.” When ἐπέχω does mean “hold out,” its connotation of “food and drink” and “young children” so regularly appears that an exegete must ask whether his safest option, in a seemingly more generic context, is to employ such a definition. Admittedly, the connotation associated with “hold fast” is often one of restraint, but one could suggest that this actually highlights what Paul is saying to his brothers and sisters in faith: “Hold fast to that word of life, and don’t let it go!”

This is precisely how Jerome saw it.¹⁵ In his Latin translation of Scripture, he translates ἐπέχοντες with the term *continentes*. This term means to “retain, keep safe, restrain, keep, hold fast.”

And this is precisely how Jerome’s contemporary Chrysostom saw it.¹⁶ In his *Homily VIII on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Philippians*, Chrysostom writes, “What does this mean, ἐπέχοντες the word of life? It means this: that you are ones who expect to live forever, that you belong to those who are being saved.” With this section of Philippians, Chrysostom does not highlight the importance of proclaiming the gospel. Rather, he focuses on one’s personal hold on true life.

And this is precisely how Luther translated it: *ihr haltet ob dem Wort des Lebens*—“you hold fast to the Word of life.”¹⁷

menorah . . . in the solar system, the sun is in the middle, with three planets (Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars) being above the sun and three planets (Mercury, Venus, and the Moon) being below it.

¹⁵c. 347–420 AD

¹⁶c. 347–407 AD

¹⁷Luther’s 1545 Bible. See *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*, <http://woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB/?lemma=ob>, II.4. Luther used the same “halte ob” combination for Titus 1:9 . . . “und halte ob dem Word, dass gewiß ist und lernen kann” (and hold fast to the Word, with is faithful and can teach). Luther reflected this same understanding in numerous writings in Latin. In comments on Malachi 1:11, he writes, “Qui igitur spiritum Christi habent, tametsi pauci, tamen sunt per omnem terram dispersi et in omni loco propter euangelium, quod ubique est, lucent sicut luminaria in mundo *retinentes* verbum vitae.” (Therefore those who have the spirit of Christ, although they may be few, nevertheless are scattered throughout the whole world, and in every place, on account of the gospel, which is everywhere, they shine just as lights in the world, holding onto the word of life.) [American Edition Vol. 18, p. 397; Weimar 13.682]. Also, in his *Bondage of the Will*, Luther writes, “Paulus luminaria mundi vocat

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul has noted the love Christ demonstrated through humiliation and exaltation. Paul has rejoiced that they have come to share in this grace of God. Paul has reminded them that their union with Christ naturally transforms one's living; growth in sanctification makes Christians stand out in a crooked and depraved generation.

And among the unbelievers God's children shine like stars, *as they are holding onto the word of life.*

What is at the heart of making these stars shine? Surely every Christian is eager to join Paul in the work of ensuring that "Christ is preached" (Philippians 1:18). But here, Paul seems to be saying something more foundational. He is reminding you that your status as a star is linked intimately to one simple but forever life-changing reality: holding tightly to that which brings you life. What makes a star shine? Spirit-given, humble faith in the joyful word that announces, "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life" (1 John 5:11-12).

Holding tightly to the word of life, you shine.

lucida, quia (inquit) verbum vitae *tenetis*." (Paul calls them shining lights of the world, because he says, 'You are *holding to* the word of life.')

[American Edition Vol. 33, p. 93; Weimar 18.655]