

(Sermon 13)
Philippians 2:25-30
The Illustrations of Joyful Humility: Epaphroditus
CRCC 4/23/17

Intro

We're all familiar with the expression, "I'm just not sure it's worth the risk?" Perhaps you use it talking about a business deal, the confronting of a close friend or associate, or an important decision about your children or financial affairs. But have you ever been accused of being risky? Not risky in a bad way like with money, relationships, or the execution of foolish dares. But a reckless courage gambling your life away for the sake of Christ and others? Perhaps it's never quite been put to you that way. But church history is full of risk takers, people who gambled their reputations and sometimes lives for the sake of God's kingdom and the people of that kingdom, including you and I who sit here today. We are reaping the fruit of men like Martin Luther and John Calvin and John Knox. Their courageous stands for truth resulted in the passing down of the purity of Reformed theology and the life of godliness that comes with it that we hold so dear. But what about those we know less about?

In the early days of the church, Christians were known as gamblers or risk takers. One such group was an association of called Parabolani, which means "The Gamblers". They made it their mission to visit prisoners and ministered to the sick, especially those with contagious diseases. They also proclaimed the gospel as they went, doing what most were not willing to do. In AD 252 a plague broke out in the city of Carthage where Cyprian was the bishop. Cyprian gathered together his congregation and they all buried the dead and nursed the sick of the plague-stricken city. In

doing so, they risked their lives and helped save the city from complete destruction due to the sickness. These were courageous risk takers. The Gamblers. The Parabolani.¹

The name of this group – Parabolani- is derived from the word Paul uses in our next passage of Scripture as Paul describes the servant spirit of a man named Epaphroditus who Paul says in v30 “*nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life.*” That word “risking” is the Greek word παραβολουσάμενος from which the name of that risk taking association derived its name, “The Parabolani”. It was a gamblers word used when staking everything on a throw of the dice.

If Paul was a sacrificial drink offering (17), Timothy a sincere and loyal servant, then Epaphroditus is the risk taker or the gambler. The name Epaphroditus, in fact means “favored of Aphrodite”. Aphrodite was the goddess of gambling. Men would yell, “Epaphroditus” as they threw their dice in hopes that their fortunes would be favored by this goddess. But Epaphroditus was a “Christian gambler”, if you will. He willingly and quite literally risked his life to minister to Paul’s needs while he was in prison by traveling a long distance from Philippi to Rome. This trip would have taken several weeks and somewhere along the way Epaphroditus got ill and should have died, but God’s mercy spared him. Paul takes time in vss 25-30 to speak of his service to the church and Jesus Christ.

I hope as we close chapter 2 this morning the theme of which is *joy in the pattern of Christian living* that you are able to see the descending list of the patterns for us to follow. Joy only comes through humility. And the point of the chapter is that humility only comes by good examples. So Paul began with the greatest example of all- Jesus Christ in vss 5-11. He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled

Himself coming to this earth and dying for sinners. As a result of such humility, God raised Him from the dead. He of course is set apart from all the rest as the perfect and supreme pattern to which we should model our lives. Then in descending order next comes Paul who was the greatest Christian to ever live. Paul humbly and subtly points to himself as a pattern to follow when he refers to himself as drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of the Philippians faith in v17. Next comes Timothy, a great Christian in his own right, but not an apostle. He had some glaring flaws. Nevertheless, he is set forth as an example worth following. And then you might say we take a deep descent down to a man virtually unknown- Epaphroditus. Who is this guy? He wasn't an apostle, and he may not have even been a pastor or elder. He of course *could* have been the pastor of this church. Paul calls him a "messenger" and "minister" in v25, but its unlikely. It's more likely he was an elder at the church of Philippi. But even this can't be proven. In all likelihood, not only is he not an apostle, he's not a pastor. And not only is he not a pastor, he's possibly not even an elder. But he was a willing servant of this congregation sent by the elders on an important mission to minister to their apostle in one of his times of greatest need. He carried with him a financial gift from the church to help with his expenses (18). He also ministered to Paul personally (25). But while doing so he become ill to the point of death and would have died had God's mercy not intervened. When this news reached Philippi. They become concerned. Paul writes this letter and puts it in the hand of Epaphroditus and sends him home to the Philippians.

What do we learn from this? First, we learn that we aren't to look up to the patterns we are most familiar with to the neglect of the lesser-known examples we are to imitate. There are people right here in this church that

you would do well to imitate. The Philippian congregation was no different than any other congregation. They had a tendency to overlook and discount the spiritual models they knew best. Epaphroditus strikes me as a quiet, unsung hero. This is perhaps why Paul speaks about him in such glowing terms. We are to remember that in God's providence he has placed us in relationship with "lesser-known" examples of godliness that we would do well to look to for encouragement, inspiration, and help.

All three of these men: Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus took the example of Jesus seriously. As one commentator aptly writes:

The Lord so consecrated himself in obedient service to God that He poured himself out for the benefit of others. They [these men: Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus] so consecrated themselves to God that self was subdued in the service of other Christians. The Lord is the Christian's model; they are model Christians.ⁱⁱ

Proposition: So Paul's high praise of Epaphroditus in vss 25-30 reveals his elevation of him as a model Christian worthy of emulating. And Paul shares 3 *messages* about Epaphroditus with the Philippians that encourage us to follow his example of service to Christ and the church.

Trans: The 1st message Paul gives about Epaphroditus concerns...

I. His Worthy Reputation (25)

As an introduction in explaining why Paul is sending Epaphroditus back to to Philippi, Paul reminds them of his great Christian reputation. He says: **I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need.**

Paul describes this man in a rapid-fire listing. There were so many great things to say about him that Paul just began listing them. He didn't have

time to explain them in detail, but his short descriptions of Epaphroditus' reputation are full of meaning.

First, he calls him **my brother**, which clearly indicates that he was a saved child of God. In fact, Paul uses the term **brother** more in this letter than any other prison epistle (1:12, 14; 2:25; 3:1, 13, 17; 4:1, 8, 21). Timothy was Paul's son; Epaphroditus his brother. It's another reminder to us and the Philippians that the church is a family. Christian brothers and sisters are to be the first type of people that we emulate. I love history and love reading history and my favorite type of books other than theology books are biographies. I can learn a lot from the lives of other successful men who have gone before me, how to lead right, how to make wise decisions, etc. This is true even about some who *aren't* Christians. But nothing replaces the examples of other Christians. We are a family. Just as a son emulates his father and a younger brother his older brother, so too should Christians first look to one another as examples to pattern their lives after.

Second, Paul calls Epaphroditus a **fellow worker**. This is a favorite word of Paul and he never uses it to simply describe a working relationship with someone else, but as a loving partnership. Paul had a loving partnership with many people in the church, Epaphroditus was one of them. Though he was an apostle, Paul viewed this man as his equal. He didn't talk down to him though he likely wasn't an apostle, preacher, or even elder. It's a reminder to us that one way you can experience deeper relationships with others in the church is by putting your hand to the plow of service with them. It deepens your affection for others when you work hard with them in the service of the church. It provides a special quality to the relationship.

When Geoff and I started to seriously consider planting a church. We prayed and talked and prayed and talked. One day we spent something like 12 hours together. It was almost midnight and neither one of us had eaten dinner yet. We didn't even realize it. We moved our conversation into the kitchen and Carrie made us some venison tacos. If you want a deep and meaningful relationship with other Christians, then start serving with them in the church. There's something about sharing a joint effort or load of work for Christ that creates a loving partnership. There is a job for every worker in the church and many (if not most) of these jobs require joint effort. We had a saying when doing drills in sports, especially soccer, "Grab a ball and partner up". You know what that meant? Get to work! If we want fulfilling and lasting relationships in the church that actually mean something we need to find a task and partner up!

We are scared sometimes to speak of work and effort because it may have overtones of legalism and rigid pietism. And yet, Paul isn't afraid of work or the word *work*. He just got through saying, "*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling*" (13). And we work because "*it is God who works*" in us (14). Christians should not be allergic to work, especially work in the church. And there is plenty of work to do in a church plant.

Notice third, Paul describes Epaphroditus as a **fellow soldier**. This is my favorite description of those who labor in Christ's kingdom. It echoes 1:27-30 where Paul encouraged the Philippians to "*stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith fo the gospel...not frightened by your opponents.*" The more we work for the Lord, the more warfare we will experience. Epaphroditus was in the battle with Paul standing right next to him. Calvin insightfully remarks the following on this verse:

Let those, then, who prepare themselves for edifying the church, know that war is denounced against them, and prepared. This, indeed, is common to all Christians- to be soldiers in the camp of Christ, for Satan is the enemy of all.

He then adds to this:

[F]ellow soldier...[is a term speaking of] what is the condition of the ministers of the gospel. [Though it applies to all Christians] [i]t is, however, more particularly applicable to the ministers of the word, who go before the army and bear the standard.ⁱⁱⁱ

This highlights the level of commitment Epaphroditus had. He was not just a worker, but also a warrior. He would stand for truth itself as well as by those who stood for truth. He wasn't afraid to work in the field, and he wasn't afraid to take on the enemy. He was someone who knew what it meant to fulfill the masculine mandate. It would have been a very long trip to Rome, one in which he got ill. His wife and children would miss him. But because he was undoubtedly a good leader in the home, they understood his mission and supported it though they knew it was dangerous. What would happen if Paul was executed. Would Epaphroditus himself be imprisoned, or worse executed for associating with Paul? He was a real man who had a real job and a real family and a real schedule. But he was a worker and warrior in the church. Today, God is still looking for a few good men who will be both workers and warriors. If **fellow worker** and **fellow soldier** pertained to Paul's special relationship with Epaphroditus, the next two titles, **messenger** and **minister** pertained to the Epaphroditus' relationship with the Philippians. First, in writing the Philippians Paul calls him **your messenger**. The word **your** shows that Epaphroditus was not on this mission to serve his own ego. He did it on behalf of the church. He was *their* messenger sent to do a task assigned

him by the elders. He was humble and did it. Now the word for **messenger** is ἀπόστολος. It's the word for *apostle*, but we don't need to read too much into this. An apostle is simply one who is sent on a special mission. He had not seen the risen Lord, so he didn't qualify to be an apostle with a capital "A" like Paul. Context must always help with interpretation. And the descending order of patterns tells us that he was an apostle in the lower case "a" sense. Paul was an apostle, Timothy an associate with the apostles. But Epaphroditus wasn't even that. But all Christians are apostles in this sense. Epaphroditus was sent by God and we are sent by God. The title that is really important, however is **minister**. Paul says that Epaphroditus was a **minister to my need**. The word **minister** is λειτουργός. This word is only used 5 times in the NT. It's the word that Paul's Bible (the Greek Septuagint) uses in the OT to describe priests and Levites who were consecrated for ministry in the temple (Ex 29:30; Num 16:9; Heb 10:11). Some believe this to be evidence that Epaphroditus was a vocational minister, perhaps the pastor of the Philippian congregation. Even Calvin refers to Epaphroditus as "pastor" in his commentary. Others have confused him with Epaphras who is mentioned in Colossians (1:7; 4:12) who was likely the founder and pastor of the church at Colossae. But these are two different people. Epaphroditus' true identity complicated further by the fact that Paul refers to himself "*a minister* [same word] of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles" (Rom 15:16).

In spite of all this, I don't think there is hard evidence to suggest Epaphroditus was the Senior Minister, if you will, of the Philippian congregation. It's helpful to remember that Peter calls the entire church a "royal priesthood" (I Pet 2:9) quoting OT language (Ex 19:6) because Israel was also a royal priesthood. They offered their sacrifices through

Him. The High priest represented all of Israel just as Christ is our High Priest. In fact, Heb 1:7 refers to Jesus as a “*minister in the sanctuary and the true tabernacle*”.

We may have a clue as to why Paul calls Epaphroditus a **minister** when we recall what he said in 2:17: “*Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.*” In Rom 12:1-2 we are called to be living sacrifices. That’s exactly what Epaphroditus was. He was a living sacrifice. He was a **minister** or priest following in the footsteps of Jesus the minister and High Priest who offered His life for sinners. Chapter 2 is all about joy in the pattern of Christian living. Paul calls Epaphroditus a **minister** for the same reason you can be called a minister. Here was a man who sacrificially gave himself to the church, to Paul personally, and to Christ ultimately. He was following in the pattern of Jesus as a sacrificial offering and we are to do the same. In fact, he uses a form of the same Greek word λειτουργός in v30 in reference to the Philippian congregation when he speaks of their “service” to Paul; their ministry.

What about you? What can be said of your reputation? Are you a *worker* and a *warrior* for Christ? Certainly you understand that you are a *messenger* sent by Jesus to *minister* to one another in the church on behalf of Christ. Remember: joy does not come apart from humility. And humility does not come without service. Spurgeon said one time: “*If God has called you to be His servant, why stoop to be a king?*” That resonates with us because so often we place ourselves instead of Christ on the throne of our heart. Paul is trying to reorient our lives to see that Christ comes first, then others, then you.

Remember Gracie's money bank. JOY stands for Jesus, Others, and then You. When you reverse the letters it spells YOJ. When you reverse the order it's impossible to have joy. Invest in Jesus and others and you will have joy.

Trans: So the 1st message Paul gives about Epaphroditus concerns his *worthy reputation*. The 2nd message Paul gives about Epaphroditus concerns...

II. His Work Report (26-28)

Very simply, because the Philippian church had sent Epaphroditus to stay with Paul and minister to him until he was either executed or released, Paul felt obligated to explain to them why he was sending him back. He gives a work report on Epaphroditus' faithfulness in vs 26-28 by providing 2 reasons for sending him back prematurely.

Trans: The first reason concerns the needs of Epaphroditus himself. The second concerns the needs of the Philippians.

A. Needs of Epaphroditus, 26-27

The 1st reason he was sending him back was for Epaphroditus himself. He wanted to go back. He wasn't tired of serving Paul nor was he homesick or anything silly like that. Paul just commended him for being a faithful worker and persevering warrior. Let's let Paul speak. Continuing his beginning thought from v25 that he thought it was necessary to send him back, Paul says in v26: **for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill**. Somehow the Philippians heard of his illness and got concerned. This concern led Epaphroditus to be concerned for their concern for him. He would have stayed with Paul if

directed to do so like any good soldier listens to his leader or any good worker listens to their boss. But he was **distressed** over the Philippians concern for him. And therefore he was **longing** for them.

You might remember that word **longing**. Paul used it earlier to describe his longing for the Philippians when he said in 1:8, “*God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ*”. Epaphroditus’ longing was intense and filled with deep affection as well. He wasn’t a mechanical *worker*, who was just doing his duty by going to Rome. He cared for the church so he took their gift. He cared for Paul so he took the gift. He was also not a cold *warrior* with no feeling for those around him. He fought for truth, but he didn’t forget that this same truth marked the lives of those he loved most- his church.

Even in the midst of his illness he was **distressed**. That word has not appeared in this letter until now. In fact, that word only appears (other than here) in the gospels in describing Jesus’ intense stress in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to drinking the cup of wrath for the church (Mk 14:33). To be sure Epaphroditus didn’t experience the same type of distress as our Lord because nobody ever has or ever will. It was horrific. But it is the same word and like his Lord he was deeply bothered in his soul, *not* over his illness but on the Philippians concern for his illness! His joy was literally sucked out of him in a sense because he didn’t like to see his fellow brothers and sisters so burdened about him when there was nothing he could do to comfort them. He had a heaviness of heart that was not selfish, but self less. It was not self-pity, but a burden about the burden he might be to them.

Now that sounds really quite sweet. But when we read v27 we see that it was downright noble. Paul reiterates so there is no doubt that this was not

the common cold or flu he had. He says: **Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him.**

Boy do we learn some important lessons here. *First*, it's interesting isn't it that though Paul had the gift to heal as an Apostle that he didn't use it on the man he clearly thinks the world of based on v25. Why is this? Well, Paul used this gift sparingly to begin with, and further as the apostolic age drew to a close, the gift of healing seems to have tapered off until it eventually ceased all together. To be sure, God still heals people through our prayers. But gone are the apostolic days when a man of God raises someone from the dead or heals them from cancer because they've been endowed with a special gift. The apostolic gifts such as healing were primarily for the Jewish people to believe in Jesus since they required a sign (I Cor 1:22).

But whether you believe the so called "signs gifts" have ceased or not, the *second* lesson is far more important. God does not always choose to heal us. In this case he did. But Paul is quick to point out that it wasn't Paul or another apostle who healed Epaphroditus, but God himself who **had mercy on him**. God's not obligated to heal us in our various sicknesses because number one "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). Sin is forgiven, but the consequences of sin still linger. But even more to the point, suffering (and yes this includes sickness) is a means of God sanctifying us. Perhaps God used this sickness to help what was lacking in either Epaphroditus' heart concerning his gratefulness for his brothers and sisters in the Philippian congregation, or to help the lack of gratefulness in their heart for him, or perhaps both. And don't miss what Paul says at the end of v27. God had mercy on Epaphroditus in healing him to be sure, but Paul goes on to say: **and not only on him but on me also, lest I should**

have sorrow upon sorrow. To spare Epaphroditus' life was to show mercy to Paul because he loved him so much.

It's easy to see isn't it, the deep emotional bond between the members of this church. They were tied together with the cords of theology, but this did not make them emotionally withdrawn from one another. They rejoiced with those who rejoiced and wept with those that wept. They felt each others pains, sorrows, and longings. This marks every healthy church. We return back to the them of Philippians 2: *joy in the pattern of Christian living*. Jesus is described as bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows (Is 53:4). Paul was burdened with the churches. Timothy shared that burden with Paul, for there was nobody like him Paul confessed to the Philippians who would genuinely be concerned for their welfare (20). And now Epaphroditus, the man who we don't even know if he had any official title with the church, was sincerely concerned for the Philippians concern for him. That's the first reason Paul was sending him back.

Trans: But if the 1st reason related to the needs of Epaphroditus, then the 2nd reason related to the...

B. Needs of the Phlippians, 28

He sent him back out of his love for the Philippians because there was nothing he wanted more than to have Epaphroditus by his side when he received his verdict. But still he says in v28: **I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious.**

Here we see some more lessons. *First*, though Paul was willing to die for the Philippians, and indeed he did in his 2nd Roman imprisonment, he hated to see someone else die on his behalf. Epaphroditus got ill by

trying to serve Paul so when God mercifully healed him, Paul viewed that as a mercy to him. He didn't want to live with the sorrow of losing a brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier and minister and messenger to his needs. We should emulate this about Paul. We should willingly serve others, and while we should accept their service to us, we shouldn't expect it with an ungrateful spirit.

Second, the type of concern the church has for one another is really perplexing to the world and can even appear crazy to us as Christians sometimes. So let me get this straight Paul, the whole occasion of your letter to the Philippians is rooted in their concern for you so they sent Epaphroditus to care for your needs while in prison? But in the process the one sent to express this concern got sick almost to death? And the Philippians hearing about this now got concerned about him? And because the Philippians were concerned about him, Epaphroditus grew in concern for them being concerned about him? So you got concerned for Epaphroditus because he was concerned about the Philippians concern for him because out of concern for you they sent him to you? So now that you are concerned about Epaphroditus' concern about their concern regarding Epaphroditus you are sending the one back who was concerned with you to begin with back to the church that was concerned about you? Wow. It sounds like this church was full of concerned people- concerned for one another to the point that they didn't want to do anything from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than themselves looking out not for their own personal interests but also the interests of one another (Phil 2:2-4). And so should every church be the same. The Philippians would **rejoice** in seeing that Epaphroditus was okay.

I hope you can see that the needs of Epaphroditus and the Philippians were one and the same. Paul sent Epaphroditus back because he *needed* to see the Philippians. And Paul sent Epaphroditus back because they *needed* to see he was okay. Both parties needs were the same. They were concerned for one another. And because Paul was concerned for both, he sacrificed his preference for Epaphroditus to stay with him.

Trans: Paul's work report regarding Epaphroditus is a positive one. He is sending him back not because he didn't fulfill his duty, but rather for his own sake and that of the Philippians.

Trans: But Paul's words about Epaphroditus don't end there. Paul's 1st message about Epaphroditus concerned *his worthy reputation*. His 2nd message concerned *his work report* and the reasons of his return. Finally, Paul speaks a word of encouragement about...

III. His Warm Reception (29-30)

Note how Paul closes a chapter on joy in the pattern of Christian living. He says: **So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.** Let me offer two quick notes of clarification and two quick notes of application from these verses.

The two notes of clarification are, number 1: Paul does not tell them to **receive him in the Lord with all joy** because he doubts that they will. The context is clear that the longed for him and he for them. They were concerned about him. They would be joyous that he was alive. And the second note of clarification is that when Paul tells the Philippians that Epaphroditus' completed **what was lacking in your service**, he was not complaining about their lack of concern for him. The whole occasion of

the letter is one of thanks for their financial gift. The only thing their service lacked was their personal presence. But they made up for this by sending Epaphroditus.

Now for the two points of application, first, as I said Paul does not tell the Philippians to receive Epaphroditus with joy because he doubts most of the church will do this. Rather, Paul says this I think to remind us that *it's okay* and acceptable to **receive** one another with joy. Perhaps there were some in the Philippian congregation who would treat him harshly as if his mission had failed; that he didn't have what it took to stick it out. It's a reminder to us, isn't it that we need to **receive** and accept one another just as we are. Whatever in God's providence God brings into our church, He brings it for a reason. We are not to blindly overlook sin. That in and of itself is sinful- to accept lifestyles and behaviors that are sinful. On the other hand, we aren't to be too harsh on one another. We are to recognize the spiritual gifts, work, and service of our fellow brothers and sisters in the church free of judgmental harshness regarding it's sometimes less than qualitative value. Epaphroditus was faithful and that was what mattered the most. So Paul also says, **honor such men**. The word used here has to do with holding someone in high reputation. Paul held Epaphroditus in high reputation as we saw in v25. And now he's calling the Philippians to do the same. And we are called to do the same with those like him in the church whether preachers, elders, deacons, teachers, and any other worker. We don't know Epaphroditus, but we know men *like* him. We should honor those who sacrifice for the church no matter who they are.

The second point of application is simply that others in the church might get on their high horse so to speak and downplay what Epaphroditus did. He *just* went on a trip to visit Paul in prison. What's the big deal? Such an

attitude of course is rooted in jealousy. Well, you know what Paul has to say about that? He calls what Epaphroditus did **the work of Christ**. Any task done in the name of Christ and to the glory of Christ is not menial.

The Philippians weren't to go about with their lives as if Epaphroditus was back so let's move on. They were to go down to the dock at Neapolis and meet him at the boat. They were to rejoice that he was back. They were to listen to his stories, his report about Paul, and how the Lord taught him so much through his illness and near death experience. The church is a family. They were to thank him for his service and encourage him for his sacrifice. Such recognition goes far less noticed than it should in the church so Paul tells the Philippians he was to have a warm reception. Those like him should be warmly received today as well.

18th century missionary David Livingston is responsible for starting modern missions into the heart of Africa. He was a pioneer that paved the way for others to follow. I have a close friend who is a missionary in Africa who is writing a book on David Livingston. Livingston is like Epaphroditus in that not a lot has been written about him- at least not when compared to all he did for the kingdom of Christ. But he once said, *"I am willing to go anywhere as long as it is forward in the will of God."*

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That's a great note to close Philippians 2 on. Patterns have been set before you. But you have a responsibility. Will you be a pattern for others to emulate. Where are you not willing to go? What are you not willing to do for the Lord? What area in your life do you not exemplify wholehearted servanthood for Christ? May God give us strength to go anywhere and do

anything as long as it is forward in the will of God. Let us be risk taking gamblers for God just like Epaphroditus.

Apart from humility there is no true service. And apart from service coupled with humility there is no joy in the Christian life. This is the lesson of Philippians 2.

ⁱ Barcaly, 59.

ⁱⁱ Motyer, 137.

ⁱⁱⁱ Calvin, 80.