

BY WILLIAM WARREN

A Word Study
CONFORMED



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB HOVELL, JR. (35/42/3)

Left: Modern bronze statue of Aristotle in Aristotle's Square in Thessalonica.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ/ CAPITOLINE MUSEUM/ ROME (20/19/11)

Right: Bust of Plato; from Rome. Aristotle and Plato taught that *morphe* emphasized the external form.

Right: Gnostic seal showing the god Horus surrounded by animals. During the age of Gnosticism, *morphe* came to refer to a person's inward essence.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ/ ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM, TORONTO (23/16/19)

PAUL STATED in Romans 8:29 that God's purpose is for Christians to be "conformed to the image of His Son" (HCSB). The word "conformed" in this phrase is the translation of the Greek word *summorphos* and basically means "to share the same form" as something or someone else. The Greek word is a compound of the preposition *sun* (often translated as "with") and the noun *morphe* (often translated as "form"). Since words have a range of meanings depending on the contexts in which they are used, we should

first attempt to understand this larger range of meanings for the word "conformed" before discussing specifically the passage in Romans.

Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle noted a distinction between the external form or *morphe* that is assumed by a given being and the material substances contained within or comprising the form. *Morphe* referred to the outward appearance of a person, such as the specific physical form of the person.¹ While the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the

Septuagint, does not use the term *summorphos*, it does use the term *morphe* in this same sense of outward appearance.

In the religious contexts of Gnosticism and the mystery religions of the Roman period (when Christianity emerged), however, a shift in the meaning of *morphe* occurred. During this time, people began to use the term *morphe* to refer not only to the outward form, but also the inward essence of the person or being, such as when a person sought to have his character or behavior become similar to that

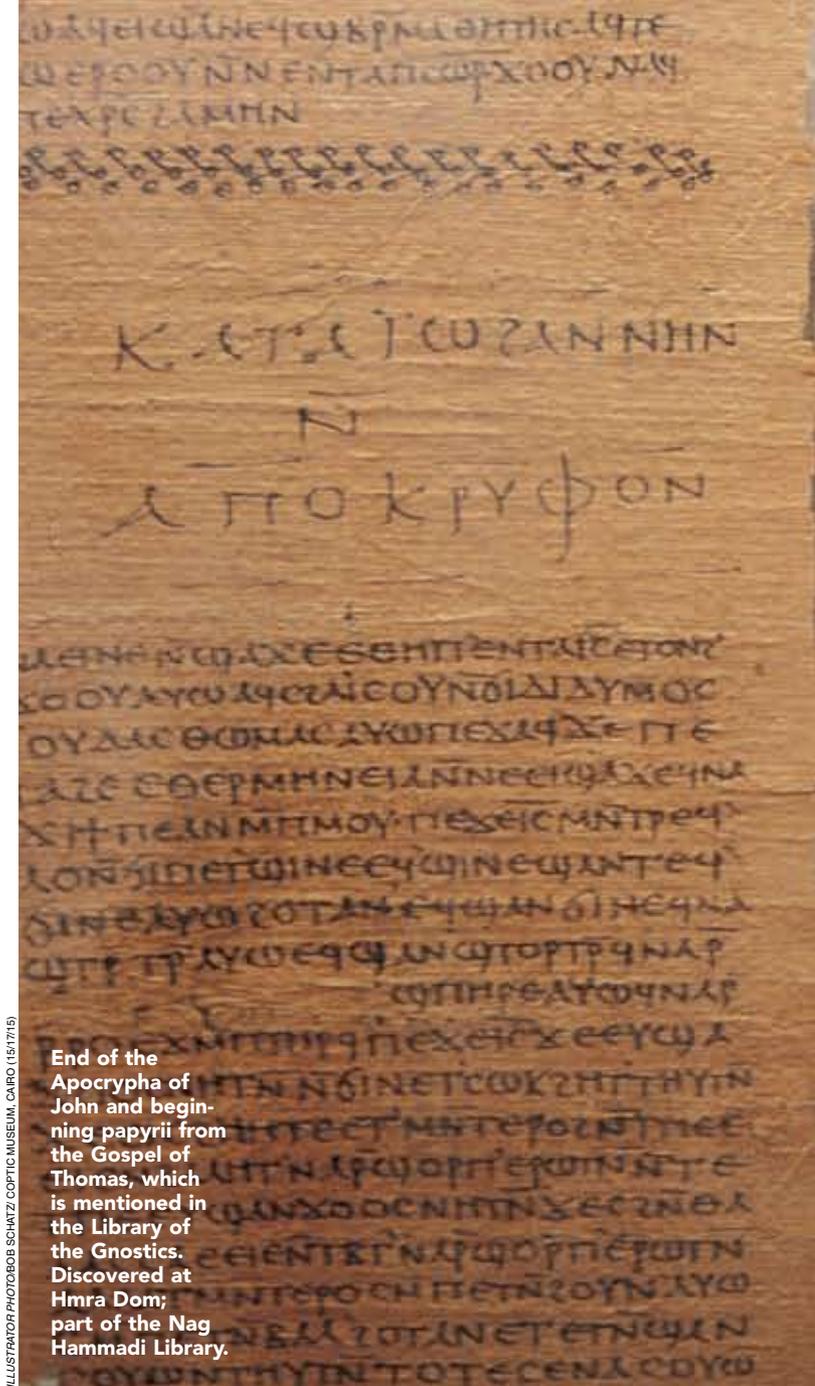


ILLUSTRATION PHOTO: BOB SCHWARTZ / COPTIC MUSEUM, CAIRO (15/17/15)

End of the Apocrypha of John and beginning papyri from the Gospel of Thomas, which is mentioned in the Library of the Gnostics. Discovered at Hmra Dom; part of the Nag Hammadi Library.



of his god.² For example, in the *Corpus Hermeticum* 13, a Gnostic treatise, a son asked his father to explain to him how rebirth happens. The father had experienced an inner change and sensed that he had reached a new spiritual plane. Thus, referring to himself, the father replied that he was changed in such a way that now his true form was deep within (in his mind or innermost being). The story illustrates the shift, with mystery religions accepting persons being changed, in both a literal and a symbolic sense—with the literal outward

form sometimes being indicated, while at other times emphasizing the inward character. Furthermore, people of this era increasingly attached a religious context to this inner essence or symbolic emphasis.³

We likewise see this shift in meaning in the New Testament, where the writers use the word *morphe* in both the literal sense of the outward form and in the symbolic sense of the inner essence of the person. For example, in the transfiguration scenes the Gospel writers used the related term *metamorphoo* to describe the

change in Jesus' outward appearance (Matt. 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-10). Jesus was "metamorphized" or changed in such a way that those with Him saw the difference in His outward appearance by way of the brilliance of His face and clothing. Such was also the case in Mark 16:12, when Jesus came alongside the two disciples, but they did not recognize Him because He was in another "form." This difference meant

LESSON REFERENCE
BSFL: Romans 8:1-30

they did not perceive this traveler was Jesus, the One they had known prior to the crucifixion.

Outside of these three instances in Matthew and Mark, all of the other New Testament examples of this word group come from the writings of Paul. Besides the adjective *summorphos*, Paul used several forms of the word group derived from *morphe*, including the verbs *metamorphoo* (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18), *morphoo* (Gal. 4:19), and *summorphizo* (Phil. 3:10), and the noun *morphe* (Rom. 2:20; Phil. 2:6,7; 2 Tim. 3:5). What we notice in these verses is the different ways Paul used the terms. In Romans 2:20 and 2 Timothy 3:5, Paul used the noun *morphe* in a context of people claiming to have a superficial outward form of knowledge or godliness. In Philippians 2:6-7, Paul wrote of Christ being “in the form of God” and of His taking on “the form of a bondservant” (Phil. 2:6-7, writer’s translation). A person with a Jewish background would hardly speak of God’s “outward” form due to the strong belief in God not having a finite, physical form. So in Philippians 2:6-7, the reference is to the essential being of God and the essential being of humanity.



Left: Transfiguration Church atop Mount Tabor in Galilee. Mount Tabor, which is about 6 miles southeast of Nazareth, rises about 1350 feet above the Valley of Jezreel.

Below: The mold of a pilgrim's flask showing a depiction of Abraham offering Isaac. The mold is Byzantine and dates from the 4th–5th centuries A.D.

On the other hand, when Paul used the verb forms, he referred to an inner transformation of being “formed into Christ” (Gal. 4:19, writer’s translation) or being “transformed” into a new reality in Christ versus being conformed to this world (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18).

What we gather from these usages is a tendency in Paul to use the word group from *morphe* in a spiritual, “inner essence,” or symbolic sense, especially when he used the word in a character-forming context.

So how does this help in understanding the adjective *summorphos* in Romans 8:29? We can garner some help from the only

other New Testament occurrence of this word, which comes from Paul in Philippians 3:21: “He will transform the body of our humble condition into the likeness (*summorphon*) of His glorious body, by the power that enables Him to subject everything to Himself” (HCSB). Here Paul was speaking of believers being totally changed into the likeness of the glorified Christ by the working of God. Obviously Paul was not saying we will all physically look exactly like Jesus, but rather that we will all have glorified bodies and have a change in our character or inner essence to be like Christ.

Turning directly to Romans 8:29, the meaning of *summorphos* (“conformed”) in this passage likewise teaches that believers are to be changed in their inner essence to be like Christ. Paul used the word “image” to communicate that believers are to become representations of Christ, not in the sense of exact physical appearance, but in glorified bodies and in the sense of being like Christ in their character and traits, in their inner form or essence. Building upon Romans 8:28, Paul taught that all things work together for good for believers because God will use all things to cause us to become conformed to Jesus in our inner being or character. **B**

1. G. Braumann, “μορφή” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1986), 705.

2. *Ibid.*, 705-06.

3. *Ibid.*; William C. Grese, *Corpus Hermeticum XIII and Early Christian Literature* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1979), 1-33.

William Warren is director of the Center for New Testament Textual Studies and professor of New Testament and Greek, occupying the Landrum P. Leavell II Chair of New Testament Studies, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, Louisiana.