“My tender age in sorrow did beginne
And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sinne,
That I became
Most thinne.
With thee
Let me combine,
And feel this day thy victorie:
For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poore:
With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.”

(Herbert 389)

In George Herbert’s *Easter Wings*, the reader is presented with two poems shaped to resemble angels’ wings. The two poems depict the author in prayerful dialogue with God; the first “wing” of each pair expresses a falling/humiliation and the second “wing” of each pair resolves in a rising/exaltation. This theme of humiliation/exaltation is prevalent within New Testament Christological hymnody, specifically evidenced in Philippians 2:6-11. Its shape must obviously be examined; “the poem will not yield its meaning unless one reads the visual shape as part of its carefully controlled symbolic language” (131). With the shape in mind, along with the theme of humiliation/exaltation, this essay will focus on the presence of spatial metaphors in *Easter Wings* and a possible “key” to understanding its biblical inspirations. The point of this scrutiny is to better understand the biblical backing of the poem; this essay will begin by examining the poem’s most prominent feature, its shape, and then literary themes then briefly observe it under the bright light of the Christological hymn of Philippians 2:6-11. Now, to begin, the shape and its meaning must be clearly understood.

Shape and Themes

The poems’ shape is inescapably full of meaning; it embodies something of a key, if not paramount, point of the poem and provides a structure, which is itself imbued with meaning. “Herbert's pattern poems are like emblems in which poem and picture are combined in the very shape of the poem in the inverse of the doctrine of signatures: instead of letters being imprinted on a thing, here a thing is imprinted in an arrangement of letters; the printed letters are the physical stuff of the pictogram” (Elsky 255). Rowhaninamesh states that Herbert was well known for his pattern poems (also called shape or concrete poems) and that *Easter Wings* “might be called one of the most celebrated examples of concrete poetry” (158). Herbert was a master of the shape poem; one of his other shape poems, *The Altar*, is among the most recognized shape poems of literary history. “Herbert enacts a disciplined theological imagination that is winsome and
A Look at the Poems

The First Poem. The theme of flight is connected to the theme of rising and falling as if on the wings of eagles. The poem is positively pregnant with spatial metaphors of up and down, “…The effect of the declining and growing of the lines of the poem as being expressive as an ‘image’ of ‘the rise and fall of the lark’s song and flight’” (Brown & Ingoldsby 131). In the first “wing” of the first pair, the narrator is seen as, in a sense, “falling” into sorrow, sickness, shame. “My tender age in sorrow did beginne/And still with sicknesses and shame/Thou didst so punish sinne./That I became/Most thine.” The meaning of sickness might lean more towards a spiritual sickness rather than a physical one, as God responds in punishing the narrator’s sin rather than healing his body at this point. The event of falling leads the narrator to the most depraved state of being sickly in his spirit or heart. The level of depravation is evidenced in the decreasing size of the lines. The fluctuating length of the lines possibly corresponds to the depth of pride in the narrator. It is upon arrival at his lowest point that, upon imping his wings to Christ’s, the narrator begins to rise again on the second “wing” of the poem. “With thee/Let me combine/And feel this day thy victorie/For, if I imp my wing on to Christ’s in order that Christ’s discipling which he is experiencing may turn out for his own good. Yet another paradox, affliction caused by Christ ultimately turns out to “further the flight” of the narrator. “Metaphors of engrafting are not uncommon as illustrations of grace” (Brown & Ingoldsby 134). This leads into the second poem.

The Second Poem. The second poem is a depiction on Creation, the Fall, and Christ’s subsequent act of redemption. The first wing begins at man’s creation and Fall; man loses by disobedience what God gave him in the garden. “Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store/Though foolishly he lost the same/Decaying more and more/Till he became/Most poore.” The falling action here is man’s decay under the reign of sin and death. The second wing goes on to consider the easter-imping of the narrator to Christ’s, the life of the lark and Christ’s subsequent act of redemption, “Between the cherubim” (137). The mind’s first thought upon seeing the wings is that they represent angels; this is certainly not untrue, they do signify angels and/or cherubim, but the pair of them together points more towards the character of Christ than to the cherubim themselves. “They signify fullness of knowledge, contemplating the mercy seat… a figure for Christ” (137). Thusly, the space in between the two “angels” signifies the presence of the incarnate Christ; the pray-er is then seen as contemplating the immanence of Christ and a life of ups and downs always with Christ in mind. These “ups and downs” are understood, not only in the shape of the poem, but also in the language and reveal spatial metaphors that flip the way that the world sees what is good and bad on its head by way of paradox.

Christology and Paradox. The Christological themes reveal a paradox; the narrator is a man but the subject is Christ. “Both poems show by their words and shape the decline yet unexpected rise of the speaker. By subject and shape the poems both recount the Fortunate Fall and show it graphically” (Wood 99). This paradox is, as so far can be perceived, two-fold; first, the narrator is a man and the subject is Christ, and second, the rising and falling paradox shows that one must fall in order for their to be a rising. Wood argues that the theme of imping is where we find one of the cross-section of this paradox;

“The speaker grafts his damaged self to Christ through Baptism, although that is not mentioned in this poem, and grows up – or goes up – with him in his resurrection. Herbert doubtless knew perfectly well that to imp a feather is to use a healthy one to repair a deficient one. Using the word in ‘Easter-wings’ gives him just another way to express the miracle by which a seeming fall or other deficiency can be turned into a positive gain when the deficient is imped onto the perfect” (99-100)
The importance of the humiliation/exaltation theme in the resurrection of the Messiah. The narrator to be raised, he must first be humbled. The humiliation/exaltation of the narrator corresponds to Christ's previous humiliation/exaltation in Philippians 2:6-11. It is then natural to conclude, all must be tied together in one final summary.

Humiliation/Exaltation. The Christological aspect of the poem takes preeminence in this poem, indeed, “The Christological magnetism is evident throughout” (Begbie 53). The narrator would not even be able to rise and fall without the Messiah as the second character within the poems; the narrator is inherently dependent on Christ, which is certainly by Herbert’s design. To separate the Christological from the anthropological would be to separate the crucifixion from the resurrection as it were. Elsky sums up the poem’s theme of man’s redemption in the light of Christ, and how it unfolds throughout the structure, wonderfully,

“The central image of the poem is man’s falling and rising in the historical scheme of redemption, … The spatial metaphor of rising and falling is translated into the physical space taken up by the words printed on the page… corresponds to the amplification and diminution of the metrical units of spoken language; rising is translated into the filling out of the meter… Similarly, the short middle lines in both stanzas represent the fallen spiritual state. To ‘sing … thy victories,’ then, is to reify units of speech in a visual lexicon that graphically represents both the spatial and temporal schemes of redemption” (257-258).

Philippians 2:6-11. This is where the two themes of Christology and spatial metaphors come together in biblically-inspired poetry; the poems are incredibly similar to the Christological hymn of Philippians 2:6-11. In the hymn, there is a systematic “falling” of Christ, where Christ empties himself, humbles himself, takes on the form of a slave, finds himself in the likeness of a man, and ultimately becomes obedient unto death on a cross. “[Christ], though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6-8, English Standard Version). There, at the point of death, the hymn shifts to Christ’s subsequent exaltation over the world to the Glory of God. “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11, English Standard Version). Looking at the hymn in light of spatial metaphors, the hymn draws out a general map of Christ’s great enactment of humility; the statement can easily be made that the downward direction and the upward result of humility are that which Paul explains to be the mind or attitude of Christ. Herbert employs the same general structure spatial structure in the two poems where the result of humility is exaltation by God. The spatial metaphors of “up is good” and “down is bad” become reversed and “down becomes good.” In order for the narrator to be raised, he must first be humbled. The humiliation/exaltation of the narrator corresponds to Christ’s previous humiliation/exaltation in Philippians 2:6-11. It is then possible to use Philippians 2:6-11 as a kind of hermeneutical key for Easter Wings. Now, to conclude, all must be tied together in one final summary.

Conclusion

Herbert’s Easter Wings find themselves in a very purposeful place in the order of Herbert’s The Church; place in the middle of “the section of ‘The Church’ concerned with Holy Week. Its immediate context may be gathered from the preceding poem, ‘Easter’” (Brown & Ingoldsby 133). It is by no accident that this is so, it rather to solidify the importance of the humiliation/exaltation theme in the resurrection of the Messiah. The immediate context becomes the great spiritual word, the Resurrection of God, the Incarnation, and the Christological hymn of Philippians 2:6-11.
‘Easter’” (Brown & Ingoldsby 133). It is by no accident that this is so, it rather to solidify the importance of the humiliation/exaltation theme in the resurrection of the Messiah. The two pairs of wings denote the mercy seat, where the Presence of God, the Incarnate Jesus Christ, sits. The prayerful words of the narrator denote his own dependence on Christ for his own rising and falling modeled after Christ’s own humiliation/exaltation portrayed in Philippians 2:6-11. Herbert seems very careful to always point everything towards Christ but to do it in such a way that it engulfs a myriad of other themes, of which there is little space to examine here. Suffice it to say, a profound rendering of Christology reverses the spatial metaphors of up is good/down is bad and displays the paradox of humility of which Herbert would be very familiar.

Works Cited: