

Book Review: Kenosis: The Self-Emptying of Christ in Scripture and Theology¹

Mark Corner

Kenosis is a collection of essays by sixteen different contributors, and this always raises the question of whether these scholars have done much work sitting round a table (or these days Zooming) in order to discuss each other's papers, something that might be signalled by cross-referencing in the text. There doesn't seem to be much cross-referencing in this collection, stimulating though it is. For a reviewer, it would be easy to select a handful of points from a grab-bag of well-covered issues in these chapters. But there is something to be said for looking at the book by focusing on common themes that need to be considered whenever kenosis is discussed.

John McGuckin's chapter, 'Origen of Alexandria on the Kenosis of the Lord,' examines something fundamental to all analyses of kenosis. He highlights the problems (p. 95) innate in Origen's idea (if it was Origen's, since he had a habit of thinking out loud and was quoted by his enemies for things he didn't really mean) that it was the soul of the Saviour who 'did not think it robbery to be equal to God but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave,' to quote the famous Christological hymn (Philippians 2:5-11) that forms the basis of kenotic thinking. On this view the pre-existent soul then assumes (adds?) a body from Mary. It is easy to see how Origen got into trouble for this – ideas of pre-existent souls suggested Platonic rather than Christian thinking – but it did at least provide a way of seeing continuity between the pre-existent Logos and the earthly, incarnate Christ. There was always a danger that the Incarnation might be taken as representing a change in the Logos, who suffers some terrible metamorphosis like Kafka's Gregor Samsa, the assumption of humanity becoming something like waking up on earth to a lifetime of beetledom. Addition at least guarantees continuity, though it raises other problems – such as the unity of the person who emerges from the addition.

Kenotic theories have sometimes been lured down false alleys. They have decided that there must be some kind of pre-existent fleshless divinity (*logos asarkos*) who decides to throw off his protective divine gear before he dives down to earth. To counter this view, Matthew J. Aragon Bruce's discussion of Luther, 'Kenosis as Condescension in the Theology of Martin Luther' is worth quoting:

¹ Paul T. Nimmo and Keith L. Johnson (eds), *Kenosis: The Self-Emptying of Christ in Scripture and Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2022)

Luther's idea of kenosis is not that the eternal Logos divests himself of his divine attributes or somehow sets them aside in the hypostatic union, nor is it the temporary loss of his eternal divine power and glory in the assumption of human nature. Rather, kenosis means that the form of almighty God is veiled and hidden behind the form of a humble servant. For Luther - and here he moves beyond the precedent of the tradition - the subject of kenosis is the Incarnate Christ, the person of the hypostatic union and not the preexistent Logos asarkos. (pp. 174-5)

Paul Nimmo ('The Revisioning of Kenosis after the Critique of Schleiermacher') makes a similar point in his discussion of Schleiermacher, where he quotes Rowan Williams' *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*: 'the existence of Jesus is not an episode in the biography of the Word.' (p. 178, note 5). In other words, we must get out of our minds any idea of a troublesome period in the life of the Word away from the comforts of Heaven. Nimmo refers to Karl Barth's insistence that 'the movements of humiliation and exaltation are not predicated successively of the person of Jesus Christ but simultaneously' (p. 185). Such a view allows us to be clear that the humiliation is not a temporary episode of unnatural divine vulnerability but a revelation of God's eternal being. Kenotic theories, apparently determined to preserve God's willing embrace of vulnerability (through 'self-emptying'), can paradoxically end up undermining that self-emptying if they fail to recognise that it is not a momentary lapse into weakness but a revelation of the eternal nature of the divine being. As David Fergusson points out in his essay on 'Kenosis and the Humility of God,' quoting Charles Gore, 'In Christ God is revealed, not concealed' (p.199). Indeed, it is through a quotation from P.T. Forsyth that Fergusson puts the point most strongly (p.203) 'His self-limitation was so far from impairing his being that it became the mightiest act of it that we know.' The kenotic self-emptying refers not to the divine powers that the Logos left behind, or chose to conceal, but to the powers he retains even when incarnate. 'The mightiest act of it that we know.' This is the point. That self-emptying of which kenosis speaks is not a surrender of Deity but its clearest demonstration; it is not a jettisoning of omnipotence but the enactment of an omnipotence of love. This is crucial to a proper understanding of kenosis, and explains why Han-luen Kantzer Komline's chapter 'Augustine, Kenosis and the Person of Christ,' despite quoting passages of Augustine that permit the comment that 'in these more extreme statements, self-emptying, for Augustine, involves a kind of self-concealing,' (p.120) concludes by insisting that 'Kenosis is the best proof we have of God's love' (p.121). It is, in the end, a revelation, not a concealment.

But if this self-emptying in the incarnation is to be viewed as a demonstration of God's eternal being, how are we to avoid a sense of divine takeover in the very notion of the Word 'assuming flesh?' The incarnation cannot be seen (as discussed in the chapter 'Kenosis and the Mutuality of God' by Cambria Kaltwasser) as some kind of manipulation of the humanity by an overwhelming divine intruder, a

projection (as some feminist theologians have warned) of patriarchal control mechanisms into the process of the Logos being made flesh. No one is more conscious of this danger than Bruce McCormack, to whom this collection of essays is dedicated. His notion of 'ontological receptivity' is in part designed to counter it by insisting, as Kaltwasser puts it, that the indwelling Logos, rather than manipulating the humanity, 'allowed his earthly life to be co-determined by us and allowed himself to become subject to the claims of his fellows that, in big and little ways, made his mission what it was.' (p. 242). McCormack's notion of 'ontological receptivity', explored in the first part of his projected trilogy entitled *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, seeks to make clear that the vulnerability and dependence that kenoticists have always associated with the act of Incarnation itself is in fact a vulnerability and dependence at the heart of God's being. There is no change involved where the Incarnation is concerned, just a startling revelation of the self-emptying at the heart of God.

For this reason, we can see why Christoph Schwöbel asks: 'Is it necessary to assume a primordial kenosis, an Ur-kenosis, in the relation between the Father and the eternal son in order to make the incarnation as kenosis real?' in his contribution to the collection, 'The Generosity of the Triune God and the Humility of the Son' (p.270). He makes clear that the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation are closely related, for what Schwöbel calls the 'relational identity' of Jesus, (p.282) the fact that he exists only in relation to the Father and the Spirit, reflects the eternal nature of God as Trinity. The way in which Father, Son and Spirit are in eternal relation within the life of the triune God is revealed in the way Jesus appears on earth, the Father doing his works in him and the Spirit driving him into the wilderness. The 'ontological receptivity' shown in Jesus' openness to those around him and willingness to be determined by their response to him reflects the eternal nature of God as three persons, each of whom only has its being in relation to the others. Schwöbel's chapter represents the best account of what kenosis actually is, since it demands that we connect the life of a weak human being with the life of an all-powerful God. The less we imagine that such a connection must mean that God is hiding something, the more we are forced to confront the weakness at the heart of the divine being.

And yet the weakness, the vulnerability, the receptivity, must not imply some sort of cosy partnership between God and humanity as they become 'friends' again through the Incarnation. The most theologically passionate essay in this collection is the one by Katherine Sonderegger, 'Cyril of Alexandria and the Sacrifice of Gethsemane.' Picking up on Cyril's image of the divine and human natures in Christ reacting upon each other in the way fire acts upon a bar of iron, turning it molten and (one might say) giving it powers beyond its wildest imaginings, she writes as follows:

I do not mean by speaking of Christ's inner life as driven by the God he obeyed in such a way that he could not, nor did not, deeply love and treasure his earthly days in the Galilean hills. I mean rather that the beatific vision for Jesus Christ meant something unique for this Son of Man, something that drove him out into the hills, long nights alone in prayer, something that filled him with the conviction that he must be rejected by his own, betrayed and killed, something that turned his steps always and unmistakably to Jerusalem, the holy city of his holy death. That something in him terrified his disciples... Jesus Christ could be utterly overwhelming to his disciples, majestic in his anger, his stubborn insistence upon suffering, his sublime presence on a windswept sea, his radiance beyond all telling when they ascended with him to the top of Mount Tabor. Something in him the evangelist tells us made his opponents adamantly at war with him. It made his own family consider him out of his mind. He was like all of them; they knew that. Yet he was utterly unlike, a terrifying, majestic, and royal figure, to whom one goes down on one's knees: go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinner! (pp 134-5)

This strange and overwhelming presence is at the heart of the gospel message and reflects the fact that 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' is not a sufficient representation of what is going on in the demonstration at the heart of humanity of what Love in all its omnipotence might mean. Kenosis must not let its sense of God's self-chosen vulnerability make it neglect the fact that any direct encounter with God must be a fearful one that pierces us to the quick.

There are excellent, scholarly articles here in what the blurb on the back repeatedly calls a 'collection of essays.' They would make a stimulating edition of a journal called *Kenosis*. Whether they make a book on *Kenosis* is another matter. One feels that perhaps the authors have been asked to pop the word 'kenosis' into the title and then with such wonderful ingredients they will automatically produce the perfect stew. The acknowledgements talk of how the chapters were composed 'within a short time frame during a vicious global pandemic.' (p.ix) Even so, it might have been useful to spend more time making use of all the wonderful electronic means whereby the community of scholars can meet in hyperspace, even if they have to wear masks to do their shopping.