

FACE *to* FACE

The Kenosis of God before Christ



Master's Thesis

Virginia Theological Seminary

Ryan Wiksell

Faculty Advisor: Stephen L. Cook, Ph.D.

Faculty Consultant: The Rev. Katherine Sonderegger , Ph.D.

Outside Reader: Victor H. Matthews, Ph.D.

Prepared in fulfillment of the Master of Divinity program at Virginia Theological Seminary,
Alexandria, Virginia.

Cover Art: *Mount Sinai* by Mira Eisen. Acrylic on canvas.

For Christina.

Contents

Abstract.....	6
Synopsis	7
Author’s Note.....	15
ORIGIN	17
Who Am I?	19
Pentecostalism.....	20
Messianic Judaism	24
Anglicanism.....	25
ASCENT	29
Image of God	31
Attributes of God.....	34
Kenotic Events.....	43
SUMMIT	60
Scriptural Context.....	63
Moses’ Appeals and the Kenosis of God.....	67
Ark & Tabernacle: Instructions and Construction.....	75
DESCENT.....	77
Presence of God	78
Call and Response	90
Christian Worship and Devotion	92
DESTINATION.....	95
A Kenotic Life.....	95
The (Chief) End	95
Acknowledgments	98
Bibliography	99

*When you said, "Seek my face,
my heart said to you,
"Your face, O LORD, I shall seek."*

Psalm 27:8 (NASB 1995)

Abstract

Many Christians, in my observation, are more comfortable with the idea of an exalted Father than an intimate Abba. Perhaps this is because we regularly overlook the self-emptying, personal divine presence so consistently depicted in the Hebrew Scriptures, and subsequently revealed in the person of Christ.

It is for this reason that I strive to reveal a biblical portrait of God characterized by relational acts of Kenosis—or self-emptying—long before this Greek term appears in Philippians to refer to the Incarnate Christ. As such, God may be understood as eternally transcendent by way of divine essence, but temporally immanent by way of divine revelation. This immanence is manifested progressively in the scriptural narrative, in a cumulative series of “Kenotic Events”, wherein God relinquishes certain attributes associated with transcendence. At the center of this series of events is Moses’ theophany atop Mt. Sinai, which serves as the focal point of this work.

Perhaps it is when we recognize God’s Kenotic immanence that we will truly know God, as Moses did, “face to face.”

Synopsis

The intent of this Thesis is to reveal a biblical portrait of God as eternally transcendent by way of divine essence, but temporally immanent by way of divine revelation. This immanence is manifested progressively in the scriptural narrative, in a cumulative series of “Kenotic Events”, wherein God—in the context of theophany—sacrificially relinquishes certain entitlements and attributes associated with transcendent divinity.

Origin

In this effort, I as the author do not claim scientific objectivity, but recognize the habits and biases of my own perspective and personal journey. These habits and biases arise largely from my experiences in the worlds of Pentecostalism, Messianic Judaism, and Anglicanism, respectively. In its New Testament Trinitarianism, the Assemblies of God—the denomination of my childhood—firmly roots itself in the tradition of Pentecost, but also draws powerfully from Old Testament narrative. As such, ideas like the *Shekinah* dwelling of God amongst humanity factored strongly in my early spirituality. Although my Pentecostal experience included abundant depictions of an exalted God, this ancient notion of divine indwelling presence strengthened my perception of the immanence of God.

In my observation, such an emphasis on the immanence of God tends to produce (or correlate to) simpler, flatter authority structures, and an emphasis on God’s transcendence with more complex and vertical hierarchies. I believe this holds true with the Pentecostal tradition, as well as with the Anglican tradition. Before entering the Anglican tradition as an adult, however, I

found my way—as a Gentile—into the Messianic Jewish movement. This is another segment of Christianity which (understandably) emphasizes both the person of Jesus Christ and the Hebrew tradition. Though the work of Jesus was indeed celebrated as the pinnacle of salvation history, the Cross was set in continuity with—not in contrast to—the narrative arc of the Hebrew Scriptures. This idea will be developed in the work that follows—that every aspect of the mission of Jesus was designed to build upon the incarnational work of God that came before, with Creation, with humanity, and with Israel.

That brings me to my current tradition of Anglicanism. While it is true that this is the tradition with which I have chosen to identify, and commit myself in ministry, I maintain certain concerns about two of its most central aspects: Anglican liturgy and Anglican authority. These may be the two areas which suffer most from an overemphasis on the transcendence of God. In my opinion, we Episcopalians are more comfortable worshipping an exalted Father than an intimate Abba. Perhaps this is because our theology is, in fact, stacked against us, as we continue to perceive, and thus to worship, our God as exclusively “high and lofty” instead of the self-emptying, self-effacing, immanent personal Presence so consistently depicted in the Hebrew narrative.

In my exploration of this self-emptying—or *Kenosis*—of God, especially before Christ, there is no better example than Moses. Thus, the character and story of Moses provides both the centerpiece and structure of this Thesis, especially in his experiences at the summit of Mt. Sinai. Moses was the only prophet who ever knew God “face to face”, which is the claim that lends itself

to the title of this work. The ideas that lead up to this climax are described as the “ascent” and its implications and applications as the “descent”.

Ascent

Human language is, in essence, a complex hierarchy of metaphors. One of the most central metaphorical concepts in language is the category of “up/down” or “high/low”. Whatever impact this mode of thinking has on our language, its impact on our theology is perhaps greater still. We humans have always looked down at what we deem less important, and looked up at what we consider superior. Thus, the most superior of all beings—a God who created the universe—must necessarily abide in the highest of high places. However, a crack appears in this premise in the very first chapter of the Bible, when God says, “Let us make humankind in our image.” This is the juncture where the clear line between mortal and immortal becomes blurred. Before, there was one Spirit-being, and many corporeal-beings (the animals). Now, there is a hybrid. An earthy figure with a divine spark. A body with a soul. A human-being created in the image of God—the *Imago Dei*. And God called it “very good.”

In the second chapter of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, the Apostle introduces a word into Scripture which had not previously applied to God: *Kenosis*, or “self-emptying”. Paul used it to refer to the *Son* of God, but the concept may indeed be more broadly applicable. It may be that, just as God was “filling up” the beings created in the *Imago Dei*, God was simultaneously emptying Godself of something. If this is true, the *Imago Dei* becomes not just a human attribute, but a gift of God which is both costly and priceless, paving the way for a unique spiritual

communion between heaven and earth. Unfortunately in the narrative, the inborn capacity of human beings to connect with God is lost almost immediately, and only a select few find themselves in any kind of intimate communion with their Creator. Of these, there is perhaps no one individual more noteworthy than Moses.

Summit

It is atop Mt. Sinai that we read of what is perhaps the central Kenotic Event in the entirety of Hebrew Scripture. Moses' experience in this scene is the centerpiece of the Kenosis of God before Christ because it represents the greatest vulnerability of God with humanity, and the initiation of the most significant covenant to occur between the time of Adam and the time of Christ.

Following this mountaintop experience is an extended series of encounters, leading up to the consecration of the Ark and the Tabernacle at the end of the book of Exodus. While the "glory of the LORD" continued to function as a guiding pillar of cloud/fire, it also served to distinguish the brand-new Tabernacle as the singular home for God's manifest presence. Indeed, if the theophany to Moses on the peak of Sinai was the grandest Kenotic moment in Hebrew Scripture, the Ark and the Tabernacle represent the most significant ongoing Kenosis of God apart from the work of Creation.

Three times, Scripture mentions that Moses was the only one who knew God "face to face."¹ God took risks with Moses that were unthinkable with any other prophet, priest, or king, and at

¹ Ex 33:11, Nu 12:8, Deut 34:10 - Rohr, p. 53

the least (or perhaps most) opportune time: the aftermath of Israel's most shameful rebellion. God's dilemma—to punish the rebellion or honor the divine promise—motivates the impassioned exchange between God and Moses in 32:7-14, wherein God appears to ask Moses' permission to destroy the Israelites and begin again with Moses. Moses averts this disaster by “reminding” God of the covenant promise, not just to him, but to Israel.

Such a gambit by a mere mortal in the presence of the Almighty would be preposterous, had the Almighty not already willfully entered a Kenotic state by way of the covenants. God's promises to Adam & Eve, to Abraham, to Moses and to the people Israel have brought us to this divine dilemma. The reader of this encounter does well to note the brazenly human characterization of God's interactions with Moses, culminating in Moses' climactic appeal in Ex 33:18: “Show me your glory!” This is perhaps the most audacious request in all of Scripture. Here, Moses is asking God to risk something big, to relinquish something big—to come closer to humanity than ever. In return, Moses is risking his life. God agrees, but only insofar as Moses' life can be preserved. Since it is clear that the divine Face may not be experienced, “The fullest vision flesh and blood can sustain is of the divine back, still part of God's essence but a side less fraught with his dangerous aura than his Face or front side. The context suggests that God's Face is constituted by God's attributes of mercy and punishment, through which God interacts with humanity (34:6-7). Whether or not we, the reader, are meant to imagine God in physical form, we are most certainly meant to see God in Kenotic form. Given the choice between breaking a

covenant promise, and sacrificing transcendence, God chooses the latter, and comes to be with us. The glory of God had encountered the face of Moses, and both were changed forever.

The notion of divine Kenosis is nothing short of absurd, of course. But perhaps the absurdity itself is the point. So long as God agreed to such a laughable self-limitation, there was hope that God would keep the covenant promise to Abraham and to Moses, to establish the people in the Land and make them into a great nation after all.

Descent

What is the appropriate Christian response to the story of God and Moses on Mt. Sinai? Regardless of our theological school of thought, most readers can agree that this covenantal scene is designed to depict a God who draws near to humanity, at a moment when God had every reason to withdraw. Implicit within that condescension is an invitation for humanity to draw near to God in return, through obedience, through worship, and through trust in God's promises. This is the Call of God, so what is our response?

God's Kenosis with Moses, and with Israel, is a particular message designed explicitly to be conveyed to the universe of nations, that our Creator has indeed encountered humanity on the most intimate level imaginable.

As a consequence, we need not oppose the notion of God's embodiment, on the grounds of fairness. The narrative of Scripture shows us that God indeed chooses particular individuals, particular nations, particular times and particular spaces, to function as stage for the divine drama of redemption.

The self-emptying of Christ in Philippians 2 stands alone as *the* Kenosis—the supreme example of sacrificial love, flowing from the Source of love itself. This notion flies in the face of the popular image of God the Father, as essentially angry, cold, or forbidding, which bolsters our presumptions about the supposed absolute transcendence of the Father, in contrast with the incarnational immanence of the Son. We must consider that the Father sent the Son, not to break new ground in divine-human relations, but to serve as the culmination of a long series of Kenotic Events. Perhaps our Messiah was a culmination of the Way of Love that was always there.

I received glimpses of this in my Pentecostal experience described at the outset. Many Pentecostal expressions of the divine are high and exalted—just as in any Christian tradition. However, in my most vulnerable encounters with God, I was not impressed with the bigness of God, but rather the smallness. Perhaps God is far more interested in connecting with us than ruling over us, and this is the exact reason humanity was created in God’s image—to make this connection possible.

Destination

In this work, I have endeavored to explore in what sense God’s transcendent attributes are willfully relinquished (in a temporal period of *kenosis*, or self-emptying, especially in the encounter with Moses at the top of Mt. Sinai in Exodus 33) in order to achieve relational immanence with humankind. In the process I have become deeply impressed by the infinite effort God has made, not only to rescue me from death, but to breathe into me abundant life. The

only questions that remain in my mind and heart are whether I am willing to empty myself in response.

Author's Note

This work is submitted to the reader, not as a systematic treatise designed to counter opposing arguments, but rather as an invitation to a personal theological journey. This particular journey has a starting and ending point. It begins with me, in my early Christian experiences, and ends with the conclusions of my research. Just as the journey is personal, the interpretations are as well. Many scholars have studied these ideas who are far more accomplished than I, and I have tremendous respect for their conclusions, even when they diverge sharply from my own. I am thankful for all of them, because we belong the Kingdom of God is built on diversity, and more importantly, on our ability to love those who differ from us.

A Canonical Reading

In my research for this project, I have drawn heavily on the biblical witness, using a canonical approach in my examination of the Bible. Rather than entertain academic debates regarding historicity or authorship, I am writing in the same spirit in which we, the Protestant Church, have received the body of Holy Scripture. Although there is great value to these efforts, I believe the Church's best opportunity to enter the relational presence of God is to immerse itself in the words of Scripture, as we have received them.

A Word About Judaism

My personal story, included in the early portion of this work, includes a journey through the world of Messianic Judaism. I recognize that this is a controversial subject, and there are many important voices on both sides of the issue. However, it is outside the scope of this work to touch

on that debate. Instead, I have taken this opportunity to outline the personal lessons I've gained from my experience, and how they have factored into my perception of the God revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as the Jewish back story of the person and work of Christ.

In the process I have benefited from the wisdom of many Jewish scholars. Chief among these is Abraham Joshua Heschel—a devoted practitioner of Judaism with a passion for interfaith relations. I have drawn great encouragement from a statement of Heschel's about the importance of Christians like myself regaining their reverence for the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Jewish roots of our faith. Speaking to Union Theological Seminary in 1965, he declares that "Nazism has suffered a defeat, but the process of eliminating the Bible from the consciousness of the Western world goes on. It is on the issue of saving the radiance of the Hebrew Bible in the minds of man that Jews and Christians are called upon to work together."

Thus, I present the work which follows in that spirit of creativity, but also deep humility. I have endeavored to find a corner of established Jewish Theology that helps bring Christian Theology of the nature of God the Father into sharper focus. I hope that these ideas would be recognizable to all those great minds and hearts whose work has been brought to bear. And perhaps not only recognizable, but intriguing. And perhaps not only intriguing, but revelatory, so help me God.

ORIGIN

“Standing face to face with the world, we often sense a spirit which surpasses our ability to comprehend. The world is too much for us. It is crammed with marvel. The glory is not an exception but an aura that lies about all being, a spiritual setting of reality.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel²

“Thou shalt not covet,” the tenth commandment instructs us, in no uncertain terms. We are not to be envious of our neighbors’ spouses, their possessions, or even their animals. Fortunately, the divinely inscribed tablet said nothing against being jealous of the animals themselves. This wistful sensation has indeed struck me from time to time, as I have watched our pet rabbits leap with joy in reaction to a freshly cleaned hutch, or our dog chase a squirrel with abandon, or our cat squeeze between us on the couch and instantly fall into a blissful sleep. Though these animals can, and do, suffer loneliness, disappointment or pain, one thing we can be assured that they never question is their own self-concept. None of them ask themselves what it means to be “fully canine” or “fully feline”, and, unlike us humans, they never wonder if something more and better is out there, waiting for them.

² Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 85

Ignorance may indeed be bliss. While bliss is all well and good for our pets, it turns out humans are not good at it. This notion is expressed cynically by Agent Smith in the Matrix film: “Did you know that the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world? Where none suffered, where everyone would be happy. It was a disaster. No one would accept the program ... The perfect world was a dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from.”

If we are not called to a life of Bliss, then we are not called to a life of Ignorance. As Heschel expressed in the quote above, God has created us with a reach that would always exceed our grasp—a curiosity that will forever outstrip our comprehension. James Kugel echoes this sense of perfect imperfection when he observes that “the world itself as we conceive of it has little cracks in it here and there. We conceive of it in one way, and most of the time it goes along with that conception; but now and again people turn out not to be people and ordinary reality turns out to be something quite different from what we thought.”³ It would seem that our reality, the realm of matter and energy that engages our five senses, intersects with another, extrasensory, realm. Judging by centuries of spiritual reaching, we have concluded that this realm contains the key to our humanity. It must explain why people turn out not be people. It must explain why the world is so crammed with marvel, and why it keeps oozing out of the cracks. There must be a larger truth, which has, in the words of Heschel “lain dormant as a sediment in the soul, in the deepest

³ Kugel, *God of Old*, p. 36

strata of thought” waiting to “suddenly burst forth out of the depths, to illuminate the whole world.”⁴

Though I quote Christian thinkers, I am not speaking of Christianity. Though I quote Jewish scholars, I am not speaking of Judaism. It is a reaching for—and an indomitable hope of grasping—some connection with this other realm. Conversely, it is the failure of this hope that lies behind the whole of human adversity. Some call it the human condition.

After thousands of failures to grasp this transcendent realm, a human being may be excused for envying a rabbit. If only we could lower our expectations, we would never be disappointed. Unfortunately, without the assistance of a stiff drink (or worse), blissful ignorance turns out to be *even more* unattainable than spiritual enlightenment. Therefore, we must be wired to seek it. Humans must have been composed differently from canines and felines. One might even surmise that, if there is indeed a “Creator God”, we have been created in his or her image—empowered to reach for the hands that once made us and seek out the face that once smiled upon us.

That is, before something went horribly wrong.

Who Am I?

My name is Ryan Wiksell, and I was created in the image of God. Shortly thereafter, things got a bit more complicated. Although my childhood and family life were fairly average and

⁴ Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, p. 108 – referring more specifically to the notion of God suffering loss and needing redemption alongside Israel.

straightforward, my path through religious faith was anything but. The product of this circuitous journey is a very particular mind, attempting to explore a very universal system of truth. It is a comfort that even the very best mind in this field (whoever that might be) is still just one, particular mind, with its own story and odd collection of habits and biases. The habits and biases which I propose to add to the conversation arise largely from my trip through the worlds of Pentecostalism, Messianic Judaism, and Anglicanism.

Pentecostalism

I was born a Pentecostal, though none of them would say so. Like every strain of Evangelical Christianity, faith not a matter of blood or birthright, but of personal, independent confession. Nevertheless, the Assemblies of God—the world’s largest Pentecostal denomination—was the spiritual air that I breathed exclusively for the first ten years of life, rendering my eventual confession at age eight virtually inevitable. Moments before being plunged into the baptismal waters, I confessed a childlike faith in a God who wanted to be near me. Granted, Pentecostal belief is not without its share of fear and anxiety—about the Rapture, the Judgment, and the specter of eternal damnation. But those of us who paid the most attention in Sunday School learned quickly of a Holy Spirit, who led us to Jesus, who gladly reconciled us to the Father. It was a comforting arrangement, indeed, but only available—in the Pentecostal economy—to those who first submitted themselves to the work of the Holy Spirit, who received a great deal of attention.

Pentecostal preaching and worship frequently emphasize that the Spirit's purpose is not to be the center of attention, but rather to point to Jesus. Nevertheless, it was not uncommon in my experience for the Holy Spirit to take center stage. As mentioned above, this often took the form of an invitation (which sacramental Christians might recognize as an informal version of their *Epiclesis*) for the Spirit to “come”, to “fill” and to do the work in us that only the Holy Spirit can do. This dynamic of coming and filling is, by its nature, intimate, and thus expresses the immanence of God. This is by design, since the Spirit is consistently brought to bear in the biblical narrative as a means of connection between God and one or more human beings. This dynamic is brought to a climax at the Great Pentecost described in the second chapter of Acts, wherein many people are filled with (or “baptized in”) the Holy Spirit. This opens the door for literally anyone (not only prophets and spiritual leaders) to have the same experience, and Pentecostals—whose name is derived from this event—continue to promote this same experience, along with Charismatics, as part of their identifying expression of spirituality. The outworking of this inward experience was typically characterized by passionate expressions of worship, words of prophecy, and glossolalia—or “speaking in tongues”—which Fundamental Truth #8 of the Assemblies of God identifies as “the initial physical evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit”.

The Holy Spirit functioned in our faith as a “means of connection” (as I mentioned above, in regard to the biblical narrative) to Christ, and not as a self-referential divine presence. Jürgen Moltmann supports this notion by characterizing the Spirit as an abstract energy or power which

lies behind the comparatively concrete works of the Father and the Son. In both Scripture and the Pentecostal tradition, prayers are not found addressed to the Holy Spirit, apart from that obligatory invitation to come, fill and work in us. The picture being developed here of the Spirit might thus be characterized as “impersonal intimacy”.⁵

Although my subsequent spiritual path has diverged from the Assemblies of God several times over, I have come to recognize just how many of my philosophical assumptions—about God, about the Church, about the Bible, and about myself—remain rooted in that rich soil. While it was recognized, and at times appreciated, that it takes a great diversity of personalities to make a church, there was nevertheless a singular experience of God that defined us and united us as a denomination. By way of a brief Trinitarian chiasm, that experience could be described as follows: “God the Father, who is utterly perfect, powerful and exalted, responded to sin by sending his Son Jesus as a man, who, in turn, sent the Holy Spirit to give us an intimate experience with the Son, who connects us back to the Father.”

In its New Testament Trinitarianism, the Assemblies of God is firmly rooted in the tradition of Pentecost, but also draws powerfully from Old Testament narrative. If a link between the two was needed, one might look no further than the veil in the Temple, torn from top to bottom at the moment of Jesus’ death on the Cross. (This topic will be explored further in a later section.) Rabbinic tradition assigns the term *Shekinah* to the “dwelling” of God among people, most

⁵ This phrase “impersonal intimacy” is an intentional oxymoron, meant to convey the indirect manner in which the Holy Spirit facilitates connection between human beings and God.

specifically at the Mercy Seat, over the Ark of the Covenant, in the Holy of Holies, in the Tabernacle and subsequently in the Jerusalem Temple. This is a highly concentrated presence of the divine, to the extent that those who disrespect it are instantly killed.

As a concentrated presence, it is also highly particular, until the moment the veil around the Holy of Holies is torn. It is at this point, in the Pentecostal mind, that the *Shekinah Glory* of God departs the particular and becomes universal to any who would receive God through the witness of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As this presence enters our places of worship, and indeed our very souls, it remains powerful, but not deadly as before. In this way, Pentecostalism maintains a notion of *Immanu-el*—“God with us”—which extended far beyond our Savior Immanuel’s earthly ministry two thousand years ago. This divine presence imbues Pentecostal worship with an immediacy and intimacy which is obvious—and sometimes frightening—to those who observe it from the outside. Transcendence and Immanence mingle together in a volatile suspension, capable of profound transformation, but also prone to fanaticism and tribalism.

This potential for both good and evil touches on one of the central questions of this work. How does our emphasis on God’s transcendence or immanence—as received in the revelation of Scripture—influence our systems of worship and fellowship? Or, instead, is the tail in fact wagging the dog? Perhaps our cultural constructs of ecclesiology are shaping our view of God as either small and close, or grand and distant. As I intend to demonstrate, an emphasis on the immanence of God tends to produce (or correlate to) simpler, “flatter” authority structures, and

an emphasis on God's transcendence with more complex and vertical hierarchies. Though this is not an analysis of church authority or organizational social science, I propose that there is a great benefit in recognizing the ways in which our Trinitarian theology directly affects our ideas of church, and indeed our daily lives as Christians.

Messianic Judaism

There is little about Pentecostalism that could have prepared me for my Messianic Jewish experience, but there were two things in particular. One was the aforementioned love of Old Testament narrative. The other was the emphasis on spiritual gifts, which were also embraced by the decidedly Charismatic strain of Messianic Judaism in which I found myself.

Allow me to back up to provide some context. When I was ten years old, my father moved our family from Bartlesville, Oklahoma to nearby Tulsa, so he could attend seminary at the charismatic Oral Roberts University. During his studies, he developed a sincere interest in the ancient Jewish story in general, and the modern Messianic Jewish movement in particular. Upon receiving his Master's in Divinity, we moved to Kansas City to join this movement, as Gentile members of a Messianic Jewish congregation. We were not alone—a substantial percentage of those who worshipped on Shabbat, in both English and Hebrew, in both major and minor keys, had no Jewish blood or heritage. One thing that many congregants did have in common, however, was our Charismatic leanings. The spiritual gifts of glossolalia, prophecy, and words of

knowledge were combined with passionate singing, dancing, and healing ministries to produce an extremely colorful Friday evening—or Saturday morning—worship experience.

As a *Messianic Jewish* congregation, a strong focus was naturally placed on the person and work of Jesus Christ – or, as he was known to us there, *Yeshua HaMashiach*. However, this did not come at the detriment of a deep grounding in the Hebrew tradition. This is where I gained my love for the Levitical festivals, the Hebrew language, and the stories that form the backdrop to the New Testament. Though the work of Yeshua was celebrated as the pinnacle of salvation history, the Cross was set in continuity with, not in contrast to, the narrative arc of the Hebrew Scriptures. This idea is one I will build upon as my thesis progresses—that every aspect of the mission of Jesus was designed to build upon the incarnational work of God that came before, with Creation, with humanity, and with Israel.

Anglicanism

My introduction to Anglicanism, by way of the Episcopal Church, came a number of years after the end of my stint with Messianic Judaism. Though I am privileged to say that all my prior religious experiences were generally positive—or at least neutral—Anglicanism represented a sharp U-turn in my faith journey, on a number of levels. Whereas my past experiences with liturgy were relatively fluid and contextual, Anglicanism was very structured and formal. Whereas my past experiences with church authority were relatively flattened and simplistic, I found Anglicanism to be hierarchical and systematic. While it is true that Anglicanism is the

tradition with which I have chosen to identify myself in perpetuity, I believe these two subjects—liturgy and authority—may be the two aspects of Anglicanism which suffer most from an overemphasis on the transcendence of God. In my opinion, we Episcopalians are more comfortable worshiping an exalted Father than an intimate *Abba*. Why is this?

Allow me to back up by a few years to tell a story. When I was the pastor of a small, non-traditional church plant in Springfield, Missouri, I preached a sermon related to the idea of the *priesthood of all believers*. To drive the point home, I designed a fancy certificate template and printed out several dozen copies on high-quality paper. Then, at the end of my sermon, I invited every Christian in attendance to come forward so I could add their name to a certificate of ordination to the priesthood. Underneath their name were eight blanks, provided for each recipient to walk around to their fellow believers to get their signatures affirming their ordination. In retrospect, this occurs to me more as a cheeky stunt than a well-founded object lesson. It flies in the face of the process of discernment, candidacy and ultimate ordination that I have followed over the past five years. Nevertheless, I believe my teaching on priesthood was consistent with 1 Peter 2:5,9.

The English word “priest” is derived from the Greek word *presbuteros*, which is commonly rendered into Bible English as “elder” or “presbyter.”⁶ Some traditions carried these terms forward as such, others settled on words such as “pastor” or “minister”, and still others—such as Catholicism and Anglicanism—used the derivation “priest”. Their respective decisions are

⁶ <https://www.catholic.com/qa/where-in-the-new-testament-are-priests-mentioned>

outside the scope of this work, but may be linked to the characteristic dichotomies mentioned above. Churches with flexible liturgy and flattened hierarchies are more likely to favor the terms “pastor” and “minister”. They reject the term “priest” largely—in my opinion—because they favor the “priesthood of all believers” mentioned above. If we are all priests, then we are none of us priests. All have equal access to the throne of God in prayer.

This is good theology in the Anglican tradition as well. Nothing about being an Episcopal priest guarantees one privileged access to God, to act as a necessary liaison between heaven and earth. Still, the use of the title “priest”, along with the vestments, choir and organ music, and highly orchestrated sacraments, can make it difficult for laypeople to believe that they are qualified to encounter God directly.

I will tread carefully here, because I have no quarrel with anyone in Episcopal leadership. As in all other offices, there are good apples and bad apples. Nevertheless, wherever a conflict of interest exists it needs to be identified. In this case, it is important to recognize that complex hierarchies and liturgical norms may indeed benefit those who manage them—namely, Episcopal bishops and priests. The perceived disqualification of laypeople to engage with God supports the ongoing necessity of spiritual mediators. This conflict of interest may even qualify as the original sin of the Jewish authorities in the gospels, in their opposition to Jesus. “If God has indeed emptied himself to take on flesh, what need would the people have of us?”

As I move forward into the Episcopal priesthood myself, I hope that this question can remain fixed in front of all of us who aspire to such spiritual leadership. Are we here to function

as shepherds (or “pastors”), empowering and facilitating people to connect directly with God? Or do we pretend to serve as go-betweens, translators, or mediators without whom the faith of the people would be impossible? My hope, of course, is in the former. Unfortunately, our theology may very well be stacked against us, as we continue to view, and to worship, our God as exclusively “high and lofty” instead of the self-emptying, self-effacing, immanent personal Presence so often depicted in the Hebrew narrative.⁷

In my exploration of this self-emptying—or *Kenosis*—of God, especially before Christ, there is no better example than Moses. According to Deuteronomy 34:10, Moses was the only prophet who ever knew God “face to face”, which is the claim that lends itself to the title of this work. Quite appropriately, the climax of the story of the remarkable relationship between God and Moses takes place on the top of Mt. Sinai, where God establishes the Covenant with Israel and inscribes the commandments. In the following sections of this work, I propose to examine the sense in which God undergoes the most dramatic Kenosis in Hebrew Scripture in this very encounter. My analysis will unfold in a manner that evokes Moses’ own journey: from Ascent (overviews of Imago Dei, the Attributes of God and the Presence of God), to Summit (an exegesis of the mountaintop scene in Exodus 33-34) to Descent (the human response to God’s Kenosis.)

⁷ I am promoting the idea of God’s immanent Presence in addition to (not in opposition to) God’s transcendent Presence. The issue, in my opinion, is when God is depicted as *exclusively* or *primarily* transcendent.

ASCENT

*“If I had to make a statement about God,
one that is fundamental to Judaism,
it would be that God is in search of man.”*

Abraham Joshua Heschel⁸

The human brain is essentially a metaphor machine. We can barely think without analogies, metaphors, and similes. I even used one in the first sentence of this paragraph: a metaphor machine. We read this and imagine a clanking contraption between our ears manufacturing word pictures one after another and shooting them out of our mouths (or our fingers, onto a keyboard.) These metaphors could be classified into multi-layered taxonomies much like that of the animal kingdom. In such a schematic, one of the major categories would be the “up/down” family. Heights and depths, mountains and valleys, heaven and hell, tall and short, rising and falling, climbing and descending. The impact of this mode of spatial thinking on our language is unfathomable. Even the word “unfathomable”—from the word “fathom” refers to the depth of a body of water.⁹ If something is unfathomable, it is too deep to be known.

Whatever impact our “up/down” thinking has on language, its impact on theology is perhaps greater still, and it has the potential to both enrich, and deprive, our spirituality. Cynthia

⁸ Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 158

⁹ A fathom is equal to six feet. It would seem this word missed a golden opportunity in 2020, to be resurrected for social distancing purposes.

Bourgeault writes that, “for the vast majority of the world’s spiritual seekers, the way to God is ‘up.’ Deeply embedded in our religious and spiritual traditions—and most likely in the human collective unconscious itself—is a kind of compass that tells us that the spiritual journey is an ascent, not a descent.”¹⁰ And why not? We as humans like to put our important things up high. The “highest” quality beverages are considered “top shelf”. The revered edifices in our cities are built taller than necessary and placed on “holy hills”. A comedian mocking an authority figure is said to be “punching up” while tax breaks supposedly “trickle down” from the “upper classes” to the “lower”. Bible students learn quickly that within the three-tier cosmology of the ancient Near East the “deep” is below us—the abode of the dead—and the “heavens” are above us—the realm of the gods. This cosmology is by no means limited to the ancients, however. As evidenced by my previous examples, humans continue to look down at what they deem less important and look up to that which seems superior. So, when the time comes to “seek the Kingdom of God (or *heaven*)” naturally we will crane our necks to look as far upward as we can manage. A God who created the universe would naturally abide in the highest of high places.

This perception is on full display in the post-liberation scenes of the book of Exodus, when the Israelites find themselves gathered at the same mountain where Moses first removed his sandals before the burning bush: Mt. Sinai. In these passages, beginning with chapter 19, God is revealed among the people, but not at the base of the mountain as with the call narrative of Moses in chapter 3. Rather, the explosive sights and sounds of the Mt. Sinai theophany in Exodus

¹⁰ Bourgeault, p. 66.

19:16-20 emanate from the very summit, and Moses, in order to engage directly with this manifestation of the divine, must *ascend*.

Image of God

The first chapter of Genesis opens with a sweeping depiction of God’s voice, bringing order out of chaos over the course of six days, then endowing that order with light and life. Something new is coming into existence which had never existed before. Still, through the middle of day six there is a clear distinction between the Creator and the created. One is object, one is subject. And God called it “good”.

Then in verse 26 comes the climactic moment when God says, “Let us make humankind in our image.” This is the juncture where the distinction between mortal and immortal becomes muddled—the line becomes blurred. Before, there was one Spirit-Being, and many corporeal-beings. Now, all of a sudden God switches from speaking to sculpting. And then, from sculpting to breathing. God’s own breath enters this new creation, and suddenly there is a hybrid. An earthy figure with a divine spark. A body with a soul. A human-being created in the image of God—the *Imago Dei*. And God called it “very good.”

When we ponder that concept—creation in one’s own image—we may imagine an artist painting a self-portrait, or a novelist writing a memoir. This, however, would fail to meet the standard set by *Imago Dei*. It is clear from the biblical narrative that human beings are not merely intended to reflect or represent God’s likeness, reminding the world who is in charge, like a

portrait of the governor hanging in the post office. A better parallel is a child, genetically predisposed to look like (and more importantly to *be like*) his or her parents, for the sake of the relationship. When parent and child see themselves in each other, obstacles to communication and connection grow weaker. Few metaphors are better supported by Scripture than the notion of our status as God’s children.

As Shawn M. Copeland writes in *Enfleshing Freedom*, “Human beings, created in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*), have a distinct capacity for communion with God.”¹¹ David¹² expresses this eloquently in Psalm 8—a creation story in miniature—as he gazes at the stars after the manner of Abram in Genesis 15. When we join David in considering the heavens, and the majesty and glory of all that God created, we are all likely to succumb to a certain sense of inferiority. “What are human beings?” we may ask. Until we remember—or are reminded—that we have been made “a little lower than God . . . crowned with glory and honor.”

A little lower than God. Are we made a little lower than God? Or the angels? Or the heavenly beings? Translations disagree sharply on the rendering of the Hebrew word *Elohim* here. Entire books exist on the subject, so I will not explore it deeply here. But the question is a demanding one: what if we were indeed created “a little lower than God”? Would that mean that God is only a little higher than us? How could a being of such underwhelming status create and rule the

¹¹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, p. 24

¹² Psalm 8 is attributed to David, and some scholars argue against his actual authorship. For present purposes, I have adopted a canonical reading of Scripture. Rather than entertain academic debates regarding authorship, I am writing in the same spirit in which we, the Protestant Church, have received the body of Holy Scripture. If any of its details are inaccurate, then I am prepared to be inaccurate in solidarity with it.

universe, or be worthy of any of the praises attributed to him or her in the Scriptures, not to mention in this very same Psalm?

How indeed unless this God came down from the heights of heaven to meet us there? Perhaps when God stooped to the earth to sculpt a human being from the dust, and then to distinguish men and women with a rib, God remained to dwell in that liminal space, *a little higher* than us. This presents a certain challenge to the classical divine attribute of omnipresence since omnipresence is not compatible with movement. A being cannot leave a space behind—such as the highest heavens—and remain omnipresent. More important than the “downward” vector of this movement (which, as I have discussed, is an arbitrary value judgment based on human constructs) is the relinquishing of the attribute of omnipresence. As I will explore later, this relinquishment represents a divine phenomenon identified by the Apostle Paul in the second chapter of Philippians as *Kenosis*, or “self-emptying”. It may be that, just as God was “filling up” the beings created in the *Imago Dei*, God was simultaneous emptying Godself of something. If this is true, the *Imago Dei* becomes not just a human attribute, but a gift of God which is both costly and priceless. It is one thing to be invited to dine with a king. It is another thing altogether to receive the king’s own dinner, every single day, while he goes without.

This picture of divine-human connection is apparent in the earliest chapters of humanity, as Adam and Eve walked with God in the garden. Unfortunately—not to spoil it for anyone—things go wrong almost immediately. The inborn capacity of human beings to connect with God is lost, and only a select few find themselves in any kind of intimate communion with their Creator. Of

these, there is perhaps no one more intimate with God than Moses. Heschel affirms our divine likeness as he writes about Moses' encounters with the divine:

“Rabbi Akiva taught that it is possible for righteous and worthy individuals to behold the Shekinah. He based this view on the belief that the Creator resembles his creatures; that the human stature is higher than that of the angels; and that Moses, who was even higher, certainly merited to see the Divine Glory. Devotees of plain meaning were strongly opposed to this view, on the grounds that whoever raises the stature of man to the borders of heaven thereby detracts from the glory of heaven. The attempt to sanctify the profane, reduces the holy to the mundane.”¹³

The fundamental debate is framed well here, as some religionists welcome the notion of (certain) human beings encountering the *Shekinah* presence, or Divine Glory, and others insist that such Glory, by definition, requires greater distance between the human and the divine.

Attributes of God

The discussion of one of the classical attributes of God—omnipresence—has already been introduced here and will be revisited again at the end of this section. First, it is important to explore the divine animus to do anything at all, and especially to do something so sacrificial to qualify as *Kenosis*. The most common Scriptural refrain claims that God is motivated by Love.

¹³ Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, p. 303, referring to the legendary first-century (CE) rabbi Akiva ben Yosef, who is often cited (namely by Heschel himself) in opposition to his contemporary, Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha, who is implicated in Heschel's reference to certain “devotees of plain meaning”. The “Shekinah” (spelling changed for consistency within this work) is the manifest presence, or “dwelling” of God, especially as it refers to the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle and Temple.

This is found most ubiquitously in the writings attributed to the Apostle John, with John 3:16 standing at the very center. Though this may seem obvious to the casual believer, it is bolstered by assumptions which cannot be taken for granted in the realm of systematic theology. Namely, the assumption that God is “impassioned”.

German theologian Jürgen Moltmann refers to the passion of God in the sense of divine suffering when he argues against a Neoplatonic theology: “In the manner of Greek philosophy ... the divine substance is incapable of suffering; otherwise it would not be divine.” This is supported by classical Christian theology which equates suffering with change and change with imperfection. Though this chain of logic is conclusive for many theologians, Moltmann asks, “how can Christian faith understand Christ’s passion as being the revelation of God, if the deity cannot suffer?”¹⁴ Indeed, the Hebrew Scriptures frequently present God as impassioned, and as capable of suffering, along with other emotions like sadness, regret, joy, and of course, love. The examples are so ubiquitous as to overwhelm the boundaries of this work. Nevertheless, Moltmann credits Heschel—a *twentieth-century* scholar—as “one of the first people explicitly to contest the theology of the apathetic God ... It was Heschel who perceived for the first time that the divine pathos is the appropriate hermeneutical point of reference for the anthropomorphic utterances of God in the Old Testament.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 21

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 25-6

In making this claim, Heschel describes the aforementioned notion of the *Imago Dei* as something which not only enters human beings upon their creation, but in doing so, actually departs from the person of God. “In his *pathos* the Almighty goes out of himself, entering into the people whom he has chosen. He makes himself a partner in a covenant with his people.”¹⁶ The presentation of this *pathos* in Scripture, as Heschel suggests, is consistently couched in anthropomorphic language. Readers of these references at every level are confronted with a choice—to interpret these as purely metaphorical and poetic, or as something more corporeal. And the more corporeal the interpretation, the greater the self-emptying—or *Kenosis*—required for the encounter.

The next attribute of God which demands exploration, after the divine passion, is God’s omniscience. For present purposes I will limit this exploration to a cursory glance at the idea of theological presentism. I believe this is required by the nature of God’s anthropomorphic encounters with human beings recorded in Scripture, primarily because of God’s frequent expressions of apparent ignorance. In these expressions, God seems unaware of basic information—such as where Adam is (Gen 3), or who told him he was naked, or how many righteous people live in Sodom (Gen 18), or whether Abraham will sacrifice his son (Gen 22), or Jacob’s name (Gen 32), or what is in Moses’ hand (Ex 4:2), or how Pharaoh will respond (Ex 4:8), and so on and so on. These scenes are frequently interpreted into oblivion with the blink of an eye. Granted, many of these may indeed be rhetorical questions rather than genuine inquiries.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 25 (quoting Heschel)

But often we jump to these conclusions, simply because it satisfies our need for God to maintain absolute omniscience.

There is, of course, theological precedent for the partial ignorance of God, in the person of Christ. Though he maintains his status as “fully God”, Jesus regularly operates within the normal confines of human knowledge. Exhibit A is Matthew 24:36, when he defers to the Father regarding the knowledge of the timing of the passing away of heaven and earth. At other times, when Jesus does possess superhuman knowledge, it is clear that he has received this knowledge from the Father, through the anointing of the Holy Spirit, in the same manner that prophets and apostles receive miraculous knowledge. Thus, it is not necessary for God to know all things, at all times, in order to be God. This is especially true in the context of a Kenotic revelation, wherein God has voluntarily relinquished the property of omniscience, for the sake of covenant relationship.¹⁷

Our expression of that divine relationship, in Christianity, is called worship. That worship can take many, many forms from one era to the next, from one denomination to the next, and from one congregation to the next. Even within a single parish, within a single liturgy, one might observe two widely divergent expressions of relationship—one of which approaches God as

¹⁷ The relinquishment of divine omniscience can be seen in God’s promise to “blot out” transgressions and iniquities (Gen 6:7). For the sake of renewed relationship, God blots sins out (Ps 51:1, 9), remembering sins no longer (Isa 43:25). Naturally, the degree to which this constitutes actual relinquishment, or “divine ignorance” depends upon the approach one takes to the text. (cf. Stephen Cook)

“exalted” while the other approaches God as “intimate”. Compare this to references of God as “Father” versus “Abba”.

This divergence may be equated, in more formal theological terms, to the *transcendence* and *immanence* of God. Both attributes of God are supported by abundant evidence in Scripture, despite the apparent contradiction. The dichotomy represents one of the oldest debates in Christianity, as theologians have asked whether God’s apparent immanence should be viewed in the context of God’s essential transcendence, or vice-versa. Perhaps, instead, the two should be held in dynamic tension, as a divine paradox which will forever defy human logic. Personally, I am not prepared to plant my flag in any of these camps, as it is clear to me that not every angle has been explored. Toward that end, I intend to paint a picture of God as eternally transcendent by way of divine essence, but temporally immanent by way of divine revelation. This immanence is manifested progressively in the biblical narrative, in a cumulative series of Kenotic Events, wherein God—in the context of theophany—sacrificially relinquishes certain rights and attributes associated with transcendence or exaltation.

Heschel evokes Rabbi Akiva yet again, to support a rather extreme view of God’s immanence. “The Akivan paradigm has a core belief in the immanence of the divine,” Heschel writes, framing Akiva in opposition to the Ishmaelite paradigm and its emphasis on transcendence. “God and Israel are both in need of redemption, for the *Shekinah* goes into exile with Israel, and even God is depicted as being chained!”¹⁸ Heschel thus concludes that the Akivan

¹⁸ Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, p. 104. The notion of God joining Israel in Exile is supported in Ezekiel 11:16.

position, in stressing the immanence of God, prioritizes mercy as the primary attribute of God, even at the price of God's ultimate power. In other words, God has relinquished absolute omnipotence—through a series of Kenotic acts—in favor of mercy, for the sake of covenant relationship.

Even a more modest approach to God's potency acknowledges a certain relinquishment of God's omnipotence. William of Ockham defines this relinquishment in his dichotomy between God's ordained power [*de potential ordinata*] and absolute power [*de potential absoluta*].¹⁹ As the argument goes, once God has made a choice (or "ordained") to act, God's choice to *not act* is no longer available. Although this argument seems designed simply to avoid logical contradictions in the concept of omnipotence, the logic of it may be extrapolated to help interpret God's self-limitations, first in the context of Creation, and subsequently in the revelation of God's covenant narratives. If there is anything that God *cannot* do, it is only because God has freely chosen to relinquish that ability. It is a divine impotence which springs directly from divine omnipotence. This is another picture of *Kenosis*.

Having briefly examined the classical divine properties of omniscience and omnipotence, I will now turn to God's omnipresence. A fascinating conversation takes place on this subject in Heschel's mind, as he evokes Rabbis Ishmael, Joshua ben Levi, Simeon ben Azzai, and other contributors to the Talmud. This conversation may be rightly introduced by the question posed by the English translator of *Heavenly Torah*, "Is God present in some places more than others?"

¹⁹ William of Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions*, VI, q. 1. (McGrath, *Christian Theology Reader*, p. 184)

Is there a danger in bald omnipresence, Heschel asks, such that “if we say God is everywhere, we will be less likely to experience the Divine Presence anywhere?” If a child’s parents promise to attend his or her recital, but also promised to be at every other child’s recital, some doubt as to their meaningful presence is only natural. Even if the parents had the superhuman ability to do this, it is doubtful that *any* of the children whose recitals they attend would find any meaning in it, including their own.

A thematic centerpiece in the question of Divine Presence in Scripture is that of the Tabernacle. As a statement of purpose, Heschel quotes Rabbi Joshua ben Levi: “The Holy and Blessed One stipulated to the Israelites in Egypt that they would be taken out from [Egypt] only on condition that they build God a Tabernacle so that the Shekinah could dwell among them.”²⁰ To understand why God would want this, Heschel quotes Rabbi Simeon: “When the Holy and Blessed One created the world, he desired a dwelling below just as one existed above.” Thus, God entered into the world upon its creation, but the sins of humanity caused the Divine Presence (or *Shekinah*) to depart from the world, only to re-enter upon the eventual consecration of the Tabernacle.²¹ The Talmud further supports this in the following teaching: “When did the Shekinah take up residence in the world? On the day that the Tabernacle was set up.”²²

²⁰ Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, p. 79 (PR 18b, Friedmann’s note ad loc., Tanhuma Naso 22; Numbers Rabbah 12:6; Midrash on Psalms 114:5)

²¹ Ibid, p. 80 (PR 18b) (Footnote: R. Simeon teaches that “The Tabernacle is not merely a human convention but the right, fitting and unalterable form through which the content of the Divine Presence (Shekhinah) is manifested.”)

²² Song of Songs Rabbah 3:15

The term *Shekinah*, or Divine Presence (or literally, “dwelling”) denotes a certain particularity of God’s location. One would not speak of God’s *Shekinah* being equally everywhere, all the time. The term is intended to distinguish one moment from the next, and one place from the next. On the other hand, Rabbi Ishmael dissents from this in his claim that “God’s *Shekinah* is everywhere”.²³ This is supported by declarations such as the one in Isaiah 6:3 that “the whole earth is full of his glory.”²⁴ If that is the case, then what did it mean for God’s *Shekinah* to be present in the Tabernacle? Rabbi Simeon ben Azzai cites it as evidence of God’s love for the chosen people. “See the consequences of God’s love for Israel: this immense glory, which fills heaven and earth, was forced to appear to speak over the curtain between the two Cherubim!”²⁵ This is a reference to the Ark of the Covenant, in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. Note the key word: consequences. The Tanhuma Vayyakel describes God’s localization as a *reduction*: “The Holy One reduced His Shekinah in the Tabernacle ... Thus the Holy One was within the Ark.”²⁶ God’s love for Israel is so monumental and unthinkable, precisely because it accepts the scandalous consequence of God’s self-reduction—God’s *Kenosis*.

This divine paradox—the apparent clash between localized, or “manifest” presence and omnipresence—was especially prescient to early Christians, who maintained their spiritual and

²³ Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, p. 95

²⁴ Although most references to the earth being filled with God’s glory are voiced in the future tense, avoiding any contradiction with the Tabernacle era. Isaiah 6:3, with its present-tense declaration, appears to be the main exception.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 99 (Sifra Vayyikra 4:4)

²⁶ Ibid, p. 99 (Tanhuma Vayyakhel 7)

ethnic identity as Jewish monotheists, while wrestling with the idea of Christ's incarnation and dual nature. To believe that Jesus, the man who walked, talked, and ate with them was also fully God was to necessarily accept that God is simultaneously *present everywhere*, and also *especially present here*. When Jesus visited a town, and then left (or even more pointedly, while he was in the tomb) his followers were forced to contend with an *absence* of God. This absence may be grudgingly accepted as simply a necessary element of Incarnation, until God the Incarnate laments the absence of God the non-Incarnate in the Cry of Dereliction: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" To witness one person of the Godhead existing in corporeal form on a cross (and nowhere else), describing another person of the Godhead as absent from the scene, is to recognize the localized presence/absence of two-thirds of the Trinity.

As the Story of God, the Scriptural narrative makes such ubiquitous use of God's localized presence that the conclusions are unavoidable. Regardless of the ultimate—or eternal, or essential—nature of the Triune God, we as humans are intended to somehow understand the "omnipresent" God as *One who moves*—who arrives and departs, who fills one space and abandons another. Without this recognition the Bible becomes virtually incoherent.²⁷

Now let us shift from a discussion of God's presence as a divine attribute, to God's presence as a subject unto itself, especially as it is depicted in the Hebrew Scriptures.

²⁷ This argument is aptly summarized in the Oxford Biblical Studies entry on the subject: "There were theological difficulties in reconciling the idea of the localized presence with that of the one God who could be encountered throughout the world; but the concept provides a way of holding that God is both transcendent and immanent, and it became available to Christians who struggled to relate their Jewish monotheism with a doctrine of the incarnation of Christ." Browning, Oxford Biblical Studies Online.

Kenotic Events

Before I proceed to an examination of the two-word construction “Kenotic Event” it is important to define each word individually. Kenosis, for the purposes of this work, is defined by the willful, temporal relinquishment of divine attributes described earlier. Though I will primarily use the word relinquishment as a catch-all, this action of God may also be described as “suspension” (briefly relinquishing divine properties in a discrete time frame), or “containment” (maintaining divine properties but limiting their scope in some way.) An additional term, “binding”, is similar to “containment”, but especially relevant to the establishment of covenants, as God is described as becoming willfully “bound” to a person or people group. This is important, because the most prominent Kenotic Events serve the purpose of initiating or affirming a covenant relationship between God and the chosen person and/or people group. Heschel describes covenant, in his “theology of the divine pathos” this way: “the Almighty goes out of himself, entering into the people whom he has chosen. He makes himself a partner in a covenant with his people ... suffering with them in their struggles and being wounded in his love because of their sins.” Two variations on Kenosis also appear in this work, each with its own original label. The first is Peri-Kenosis, defined above as the eternal and mutual self-emptying which occurs among the persons of the Trinity. This concept is derived from and built upon the Cappadocian Fathers’ concept of *perichoresis*. Since this work is focused on the relational work of God with human beings, I will reserve my analysis of Peri-Kenosis for another time. The second variation is Kairo-Kenosis, which I will define and examine in the paragraphs that follow.

The second word, “Event”, is used for present purposes to describe a “tangible theophany,”²⁸ in which something “happens” in space and time for the purpose of conveying some explicit message to the observer. An Event will regularly (but not always) include some kind of tangible evidence, such as a meal, an altered appearance or physical state. By contrast, divine encounters involving personal visual or auditory messages, of a subjective or non-evidentiary nature, are identified with the catch-all label, “Visions”. This, combined with the definition of “Kenosis” above, helps the reader to identify a Kenotic Event wherever it appears in Scripture.

The Bible exists to serve as God’s written self-revelation, so naturally a thorough examination of the Hebrew Scriptures produces a long list of revelatory scenes. Each one is vital to the fullest possible understanding of God’s nature, and God’s work in the world. However, some revelatory scenes are more central, or “load-bearing” than others. In order to focus more clearly on God’s purpose in the revelatory narrative, I have sorted the revelatory scenes of the Hebrew Scriptures into five categories. The first three involve a Kenosis, or some variation of it: Kenotic Events, Kairo-Kenotic Events, and Kenotic Visions. The last two do not involve any kind of Kenosis: Non-Kenotic Events, and Non-Kenotic Visions. Having already defined a Kenotic Event, I will provide definitions and examples of the other four before returning to it.

²⁸ In the Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology, William C. Williams defines “theophany” as a “Manifestation of God that is tangible to the human senses.” For the purposes of this examination I will use the words “event” and “theophany” interchangeably. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/theophany.html>

First, the Kairo-Kenotic Event. Unlike in a Kenotic Event, God's relinquishment in a Kairo-Kenotic Event is confined to the duration of the theophany (thus the addition of the Greek prefix *kairos*, referring to "a propitious moment for decision or action".) One example of a Kairo-Kenotic Event occurs in Genesis 32, as God wrestles all night with Jacob. In order for God to be physically present (v. 28 "you have struggled with God" and v. 30 "I have seen God face to face" testify to this, in addition to the physical evidence of Jacob's limp) the divine property of omnipresence must be relinquished, suspended, or contained. Furthermore, the apparent inability of this "God-man" to overpower Jacob points to a suspension of omnipotence, and his questioning of Jacob's name implies a suspension of omniscience.²⁹ In this case the divine properties apparently return to their previous state at the end of the scene, and no new aspect of God is realized in the process, which is why I have identified it as a "Kairo-Kenotic Event."

Second is the Kenotic Vision. There are occasions where divine Kenosis occurs outside the context of a theophany. The most prominent example of a Kenotic Vision is the establishment of the Davidic Covenant. Consistent with the establishment of any covenant, God is binding God's self to David and his lineage, relinquishing the freedom (or future omnipotence) to one day choose an eternal king from another line. However, unlike the establishment of the covenant with Abraham or Moses, God does not appear to David in the process, but instead communicates the promise to the prophet Nathan, who, in turn, communicates it to David.

²⁹ Whether or not God's omnipotence or omniscience are *genuinely* limited in this scene is a matter of interpretation. At minimum, however, it should be observed that God is submitting to a kenotic self-revelation in the narrative.

Third is the Non-Kenotic Event. A theophany that reveals the ongoing nature of God but does not feature a relinquishment of any attribute is a Non-Kenotic Event. One of the earliest examples is when the Angel of the LORD appears to Hagar in Genesis 16. While there is no consensus about the identity of the Angel of the LORD, Hagar identifies the Angel as “the God who Sees Me” (El-roi), suggesting that this is a true theophany. However, it is not Kenotic, because no properties of God are relinquished, and no new aspect of God is realized.

Fourth is the Non-Kenotic Vision. Dreams, visions, and auditory messages which come (most often to the prophets) and do not feature a relinquishment or new aspect of God, cannot be classified either as Events or as Kenotic. There are countless instances of Non-Kenotic Visions, but one noteworthy example is God’s midnight message to the young Samuel. This call narrative marks a shift in the story of Samuel (and by extension, that of Eli) but not in the story of God *per se*.

Lastly, we return to the Kenotic Event. Although every type of revelatory scene is rich with meaning, it is the Kenotic Event which signals a paradigm shift in the story of God, and sets a precedent for the Kenosis of Christ, in the condescension of his birth and the humiliation of his death. As I explore each instance of the Kenosis of God before Christ, my desire is to further affirm the Father’s submission to this path of suffering, which is by definition the Way of Love. As Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, than to lay down his life for his friends.”³⁰ This truth applies as fully before Jesus’ time on earth, as it does during and after. Thus, in the

³⁰ John 15:13

paragraphs that follow I will show how the “life” of God the Father³¹ is laid down again and again, out of love for us, the creatures who bear God’s image.

When rehearsing the Kenotic Events in Scripture, there is no more natural place to begin than “in the beginning”. While Theists³² may generally agree that God “entered in” to the universe upon its creation, there are as many perspectives on the nature of this occurrence as there are theologians. Heschel’s view emphasizes the extreme immanence of God in this action when he quotes Rabbi Simeon. “When the Holy and Blessed One created the world, he desired a dwelling below just as one existed above.” Heschel characterizes this Kenosis as temporary—at least in part—when he adds that “the sins of humanity caused the Shekinah to depart from the world.” God’s dwelling in fullness (or “Shekinah”, a common rabbinic term for divine presence, which is Aramaic for “dwelling”) was predicated initially on the obedience of humankind.³³

Jürgen Moltmann writes more specifically about the Kenosis of Creation and establishes it as prerequisite to the work of the Son, when he proposes that the Father, “withdraws his omnipotence in order to set his image, men and women, free. The divine Kenosis which begins with the creation of the world reaches its perfected and completed form in the incarnation of the Son.”³⁴ Others take an even bolder view. Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig speaks of the divine

³¹ While some early theologians—most notably the Patristic Fathers—interpreted Old Testament theophanies as pre-figurations of Christ, others like Augustine considered them revelations of the person of the Father. I am taking the Augustinian position.

³² The view that God did not enter into the created universe would be rightly identified as Deism, instead of Theism.

³³ Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, p. 80

³⁴ Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 59?

condescension at Creation as a type of “divorce” within the person of God.³⁵ And lay theologian Scott Adams suggests that the only motivation for a Supreme Being to act in any way at all, was for it to destroy itself, and that the resulting universe is in fact, “God’s Debris”.³⁶ Regardless of how imaginative or traditional one’s interpretation of the Creation narrative, it fits well within Christian theology to identify Creation as a Kenotic Event.

Based on the category definitions laid out earlier, the next Kenotic Event (or series of Events) in the chronology of Scripture is found in the story of Abraham. This is not simple, because the Abrahamic narrative is a motley collection of divine encounters, most of which serve either to initiate or confirm God’s covenant with the patriarch. Two of these encounters stand out as Kenotic Events: when God appears as a smoking fire pot and flaming torch to seal the covenant (Genesis 15), and when God appears as one of three men to confirm the promise of a son, and subsequently haggles with Abraham over the fate Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18).

The smoking fire pot represents a Kenotic moment because the story frames it as a covenantal act of God, rather than a sign or a vision. Whereas the cultural notion of covenant required both parties to physically step into the blood of the divided animals, God appeared in physical (though not bodily) form to pass through the blood. In addition to limiting God’s omnipresence in the moment of the event, God’s future freedom is also bound up by the promise to unilaterally accept the consequences of the inevitable faithlessness of Abraham and his

³⁵ Ibid, p. 29

³⁶ Scott Adams, (yes, the creator of the Dilbert comic), *God’s Debris*.

children. This has powerful implications later, in Exodus 33, when God is “bound” to bring the People into the Promised Land, despite their decision to betray God in the most brazen manner imaginable. A being who has a course of action closed off is no longer, in effect, omnipotent. Thus, in the smoking fire pot scene, God relinquishes a degree of both omnipresence (temporally) and omnipotence (permanently).

God’s appearance to Abraham as one of three male visitors³⁷ may be better categorized as a Kairo-Kenotic Event. In this pair of scenes found in the first and second halves of Genesis 18, God’s omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence are apparently both limited. If God is indeed appearing in bodily form, then God cannot exist everywhere else to the same extent. And if God’s negotiation with Abraham over the destruction of Sodom is to be taken at face value, it is suggested that God is not aware of the exact number of righteous people in the city. Or, at minimum, God is allowing Abraham to wield human influence over the coming judgment, thereby limiting the freedom of God’s omnipotence. Despite the fullness of God’s Kenosis, however, it cannot qualify as a Kenotic Event for our purposes since the relinquishment of attributes does not extend beyond the theophany itself. All statements true of God before this scene will also be true of God afterward.

Hagar deserves a brief mention here, though her theophany in Genesis 16 must be categorized as Kairo-Kenotic. In this detailed examination of God’s revelation to the people of

³⁷ It is a matter of debate whether the visitor is, in fact, God, or a messenger from God. Though both conclusions are reasonable, I am operating from the perspective of Asher Intrater as he writes in *Who Ate Lunch with Abraham*. (esp. pp. 1-8)

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it is important to recognize that God did not wait until the Incarnation, or Pentecost, to reach out in divine love to other people groups. Hagar, as a slave and an outsider to the narrative, feels “unseen” until she encounters *El-roi*, “the God who sees me.” God’s corporeal appearance to Hagar in her moment of despair, combined with the promises to her son Ishmael, amount to a minor (albeit important) divine covenant.

A popular saying, attributed to a wide array of sources, goes like this: “Be kind. Everyone is fighting a battle you know nothing about.” The battles of the people of Israel are known to us. Or, at least, they are better known to us than the battles of their contemporaries. Although we would like to know more about the stories of other ancient peoples, there are certain hints in Scripture which remind us to widen our historical gaze. There is the love of God for Hagar and Ishmael mentioned above. There are also the Cushites, the Philistines and the Arameans, mentioned in Amos 9:7 as peoples rescued and redeemed through the love of their Creator. We can read of the Kenosis of God to Abraham, to Jacob, to Moses—even to Hagar—but we can only imagine the miraculous works of God revealed to the people of Philistia as they were rescued from Captor, or the people of Aram as they came out of the land of Kir. As children of a global God, we must remain open-hearted to these people, seeing God in their own way, and fighting battles we know nothing about.

Next in the chronology of the patriarchs is Jacob, and in particular the remarkable scene in Genesis 32, wherein Jacob wrestles with God in the form of an angel. As discussed above, this moment is best categorized as Kairo-Kenotic. Though it is not fully Kenotic, the event is

noteworthy because it represents a rare instance of a human seeing God “face to face.” Though this claim likely functions in a metaphorical sense in the narrative, the reality of seeing God’s face is so clear to Jacob that he names the place *Peniel*, “face of God.”³⁸ Furthermore, though God’s relinquishment of omnipresence is temporary, the physical evidence of Jacob’s limp is apparently permanent, as well as his name-change from Jacob to Israel.

Notably, Jacob is the only other person apart from Moses who is described in Scripture as encountering God “face to face”. Though this may seem to contradict Deuteronomy 34:10, it is important to recognize that it says, “since then, no prophet has arisen whom the LORD knew face to face.” The three emphasized phrases highlight the distinction between Moses’ relationship with God, and that of Jacob—a patriarch (not a prophet), before Moses (not after) who saw God (and did not necessarily know God) face to face.

The long series of intimate encounters between God and Moses begins in Exodus 3 with the theophany at the burning bush. Though nothing occurs here that is explicitly Kenotic, the exchange functions as an exposition for the Kenotic Events ahead. God’s appearance in the phenomena of fire and smoke, God’s expression of pathos for an oppressed covenant people, God’s “trial and error” approach to persuasion, God’s frustration and anger with Moses, and

³⁸ As with every physical manifestation of God attested in Scripture, this one is a matter of debate. At first, the wrestler is identified as “a man” (Gen 32:24), then he obliquely identifies himself as God (“you have wrestled with God...” v. 28) and finally Jacob identifies him explicitly as God. (v. 30) This work accepts Jacob’s perspective on the encounter at face value. (No pun intended)

God's promises to commit to Moses all prefigure the climactic relinquishment of divine attributes which occur later on that same mountain.

A subsequent act which moves the story closer to our climax is the tenth plague in Exodus 11. In reading of the death of the firstborn, believers in a God of peace embrace the apparent subordinate identity of the Angel of Death, concluding that God is allowing the massacre, but not committing it. This consolation is refuted by Exodus 13:15, wherein Moses reminds the people that "the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt." Just as much debate occurs within Christian scholarship as to the identity of the Angel of the LORD, there is a similar uncertainty regarding the Angel of Death. If, however, the unsettling appearance of the Angel of Death in Exodus 11 is a true theophany, it represents a key moment in the Scriptural narrative—the moment from which God's manifest presence is continuously realized among humanity. This is observed in the shifting, but never ceasing, presence of God in the guiding pillar of cloud/fire, in the Tent of Meeting, on the summit of Mt. Sinai, and finally, in the Ark of the Covenant, and the Holy of Holies first in the Tabernacle, and then in the Temple. From the moment of the tenth plague, there is no break in the divine presence between the Exodus and the Incarnation, with the possible exception of the Babylonian Exile.

This leads us to the top of Mt. Sinai, to what is not only the clearest example of a Kenotic Event, but perhaps the central Kenotic Event in the entirety of Hebrew Scripture. Since it is also the central focus of the work at hand, much more attention will be paid to this scene, found in Exodus 33 (and, to a lesser extent, Exodus 34), in the next section. Heschel describes the Mt.

Sinai theophany as "the decisive event in the spiritual history of our people," because "it had a twofold significance. One in opening up a new relationship of God to man, in engaging him intimately to the people of Israel; and second in Israel's accepting that relationship, that engagement to God. It was an event in which both God and Israel were partners. God gave his word to the people, and the people gave its word of honor to God."³⁹

Richard Rohr echoes the centrality of this encounter. "This is the first account of the divine unveiling in the biblical tradition, and it is done precisely through a process of personal interface, or mirroring. The image is effectively transferred to Moses, and then he spends the rest of his life trying to pass on the mirroring to the wandering Israelites—with scant success. People prefer laws and reassuring repetitive rituals to intimate mirroring."⁴⁰ Moses' experience is the centerpiece of the Kenosis of God before Christ because it represents the greatest vulnerability of God with humanity, and the initiation of the most significant covenant to occur between the time of Adam and the time of Christ.

The personal encounter would be meaningful enough on its own, but the ramifications are greater still. Among the results of the Mt. Sinai theophany are the initiation (or possibly the complete inscription) of the Torah, the Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle, the Sacrificial System, the Festival Calendar, and in the process, Judaism itself. Each of these elements on its own requires a certain relinquishment of the transcendent properties of God, but taken together

³⁹ Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 15

⁴⁰ Rohr, p. 53

they are nearly overwhelming. To understand the Event in context of the Golden Calf incident, and Near-Eastern spirituality, one cannot escape the conclusion that God's overtures to Moses amount to a scandalous self-abasement—a preposterous gambit—a suicide mission. This divine pathos is echoed resoundingly by King David, dancing shamefully in his undergarments (2 Sam 6:22 “I will become even more undignified than this!”) and ultimately, of course, in the birth, life and death of Jesus.

Following this mountaintop experience is an extended series of encounters, leading up to the consecration of the Ark and the Tabernacle at the end of the book of Exodus. While the “glory of the LORD” continued to function as a guiding pillar of cloud/fire, it also served to distinguish the brand-new Tabernacle as the singular home for God's manifest presence. Indeed, if the theophany to Moses on the peak of Sinai was the grandest Kenotic moment in Hebrew Scripture, the Ark and the Tabernacle represent the most significant ongoing Kenosis of God apart from the work of Creation.

As such, God (the Father) has localized the divine presence—the Shekinah glory—to the mercy seat. The presence is so concentrated as to be deadly to those who enter unauthorized, and the sacrificial system is conducted as if God were physically present within the Holy of Holies, which in one sense, is true.⁴¹ Furthermore, it would appear that this presence of God is truly

⁴¹ I acknowledge that this idea of God “physically present” in the inner sanctum is specifically the theology of the Zadokites (Ezekiel). However, it would not be the theology of Deuteronomy. (Stephen Cook)

If an argument is being made by some party that God is exclusively confined within the Ark, in a way that exalts Israel to the detriment of other peoples (or even in a way that exalts Jerusalem to the detriment of other cities) then this would probably be contrary to the covenantal message of God. I would prefer the word “concentrated” to

localized, since no further Kenotic Events (according to my criteria) occur as long as the Ark of the Covenant is present in the Holy of Holies.

A brief mention of the establishment of the monarchy is in order here, despite its lack of strictly Kenotic significance. Though God reluctantly permitted the coronation of Saul as a concession to the people's disenchantment with the priesthood (which was itself established as a concession)⁴² just one generation later God chose to affirm the throne of David with a covenant of his own. According to the taxonomy laid out earlier, the establishment of the Davidic covenant qualifies as a Kenotic Vision. It is Kenotic, because God is choosing to bind God's self to David and his lineage, relinquishing the freedom (or future omnipotence) to one day choose an eternal king from another line. However, unlike the establishment of the covenant with Abraham or Moses, God does not appear to David in the process, but instead communicates the promise to the prophet Nathan, who, in turn, communicates it to David.

"confined". I believe the Ark is presented to the reader as a locus of concentration, rather than a container for confinement.

By way of a metaphor: Oxygen is essentially everywhere, but it is certainly absent from some places, and concentrated in others. We put oxygen in tanks for patients, or scuba divers, or astronauts, or even at "oxygen bars" where people want to experience a concentration of oxygen. This may be roughly analogous to the concentration of God in a particular location, in a way that is not true of all locations, but does not automatically deprive other locations of the generalized presence of God.

⁴² Numerous scholars interpret Moses' theophany at the burning bush as God's invitation to Moses to serve as both judge and priest, with no distinct priestly institution in mind. It was only Moses' resistance to this call that required God to appoint Aaron as priest, thus formally separating the two roles for the duration of Israel's nationhood. Later, the people's demand for a king is often interpreted solely as a desire to be like other nations, overlooking their disappointment with the priestly office in general, and with Samuel's own sons in particular (all in 1 Samuel 8:5). Thus, both the priesthood and the monarchy were established outside of God's ideal will, as concessions to the faithlessness of the (leaders of the) people.

Throughout his reign, David continues to interact (via the priests) with God in the context of the Mosaic Tabernacle. Though he desires to replace the portable tent with a more permanent Temple, God makes it clear to David (through the prophet Nathan, in the lead-up to the declaration of the aforementioned covenant) that God never asked for a “house of cedar” (2 Samuel 7:7). And yet, it is stated that David’s son Solomon will be the one to build God such a house. Despite Solomon’s subsequent insistence that it was God’s will for him to build the Temple, there is no explicit reason to presume, from the text, that God wanted it built. As further evidence, one need only compare the detailed instructions given to Moses for the design and construction of the Tabernacle to the total lack of instructions regarding the Temple. Details are provided in Scripture as to how Solomon built it, but nothing which is divinely ordained.

Nevertheless, 1 Kings 8 makes it clear that, when Solomon dedicates the Temple, God’s divine presence—that ongoing Kenosis which characterized the Tabernacle—is indeed transferred to Solomon’s Temple. This remains true at least until the Babylonian Exile, after which the reality of the divine presence is less clear.

The period of the Exile is characterized not only by the absence of the people of Israel from the Land of Israel, but also by an apparent “divine absence”. If God is present with the Land, or with the People, there is no explicit Scriptural evidence for it. Even the exilic story of Esther fails to mention God in any way, much less God’s explicit presence or activity. The one exception to God’s apparent absence occurs in the story of Daniel, and it is a *major* exception.

During the Babylonian captivity, the Temple is destroyed, and the Ark is displaced (and perhaps misplaced, or destroyed). If God's manifest presence, or Shekinah glory, is no longer in effect at the Ark, this opens up the possibility of a Kenotic Event in another place—like Babylon in the time of Daniel. Throughout his narrative there is no doubt that God is with Daniel in a powerful and miraculous way, but the scene that bears the most Kenotic significance (found in Daniel 3:16-28) does not involve the person of Daniel at all—but rather his compatriots Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

When King Nebuchadnezzar threw the three men into the fiery furnace, he then famously witnesses a fourth figure, which he describes as “like the Son of God”, or, “like one of the gods”. He then later blesses their God for having “sent his angel” to deliver them. Thus, based on the language of the scene, the fourth figure is either (a) God, (b) the Son of God, (c) *like* the Son of God, (d) one of the gods, (e) *like* one of the gods, (f) an angel, or (g) some combination of the above. This is a disheartening array of options. Nevertheless, the message of Daniel is clear that the figure is indeed a salvific appearance of the one true God of Israel, regardless of the precise identity of the persona. And for the announcement of such an appearance to come from the lips of a pagan emperor⁴³ like Nebuchadnezzar is more astonishing still.

Seventy years after the Babylonian conquest, the exile comes to an end, and the people of Israel begin returning to the Land. As the effort gets underway to rebuild Jerusalem and the

⁴³ This is a further reflection of the universalism theme also found in Rahab's declaration in Joshua 2. (Victor Matthews)

Temple, the obvious question arises: *What of the Ark?* It is presumed that the Ark was never restored to its place after the Babylonian invasion, thus the Holy of Holies in the Second Temple was an empty room. And yet, it would appear that God honored the rebuilding of the Temple in Ezra chapter 6, with a restoration of the divine presence. For evidence of this, the twelve-year old Jesus refers to the Temple as his “Father’s house.” Furthermore, the tearing of the veil (Matt 27:51) in the Holy Place at the moment of Jesus’ death signals an end-point to the Father’s localized presence in the Jerusalem Temple. The presence could not have “left” in that moment if it had not been there to begin with.

This arrangement leaves Israel with a diminished—though not necessarily abolished—divine presence in its midst, during the Intertestamental period, marked by the silence of God and the absence of prophets, until John the Baptist appears. Though the Ark is likely missing from the Holy of Holies, as mentioned above, the presence of God there is important enough to precipitate the curtain-rending at the moment of the death of Christ. Consequently, the reader is forced to grapple with a Kenotic presence of God in the Holy of Holies, which, for 33 years, has been concurrent with the Kenotic presence of God in the person of Christ. This paradoxical reality is one of the major drivers of subsequent Trinitarian theology, addressed in the final section of this work.

Now let us turn to that central Kenotic Event mentioned earlier: the theophany of Moses on Mt. Sinai, especially as described in Exodus 33.

SUMMIT

Standing confidently at the peak of this study is the unveiling of God’s glory to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Three times, Scripture mentions that Moses was the only one who knew God “face to face.”⁴⁴ God took risks with Moses that were unthinkable with any other prophet, priest, or king, and at the least (or perhaps most) opportune time: the aftermath of Israel’s most shameful rebellion.

As Moses and his followers coped with the weight of their guilt, God seized the moment to show them just how deep this covenant would cut. If God would stick with Israel now, and commit to walk the path of suffering through this dark valley, what could ever pull them apart? Is there anything God would not do for the people who bear God’s image? The answer—as it turns out—is no. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. This lesson would not need to wait for the Virgin to bring forth a Son. Long before even Mary was born, the Kenosis of the Father was already bleeding all over the words of her own Scriptures.

Cynthia Bourgeault affirms this sacrificial journey of God, by describing it not as an ascent to the summit, but as a “route to the center”—a “reckless and extravagant path, which is attained not through storing up that energy or concentrating the life force, but through throwing it all away—or giving it all away. The unitive point is reached not through the concentration of being

⁴⁴ Ex 33:11, Nu 12:8, Deut 34:10 - Rohr, p. 53

but through the free squandering of it; not through acquisition or attainment but through self-emptying; not through ‘up’ but through ‘down.’ This is the way of Kenosis.”⁴⁵

Thus, it is evident, even necessary perhaps, that God’s most powerful Kenosis—that seismic shift in pre-christological divine presence—occurs in the context of deep relational trauma. It does not arise in an enchanted moment of bliss, but instead at the moment when the relationship hits rock-bottom, bordering on utter disaster. As Rabbi Eliezer is known to have said, “God descended with Israel to the lowliest places.”⁴⁶ The irony of the Exalted One descending to the lowliest places is only intensified by its occurrence at the top of a mountain.

In our attempt to make sense of this encounter, it may help to imagine a marriage coping with abject betrayal. First, the betrayed party may say “I’ll make sure you’re taken care of, but I never want to see you again.” Subsequently, that party is somehow persuaded to preserve the marriage (for the sake of the kids) even though the relationship itself is dead. Then he or she is reminded of their marital vows, their promises to each other, and the love they once had. Suddenly it is apparent that the only answer is to swing hard in the opposite direction: instead of closing themselves off, to open up in unprecedented ways, and become more vulnerable than ever.

This allegory aligns with the conversation between Moses and God on the top of the mountain and may shed some light on God’s counterintuitive overtures. Indeed, multiple

⁴⁵ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, p. 66

⁴⁶ Rabbi Eliezer quoted by Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, p. 106

prophets invite their readers to imagine God and Israel as husband and wife.⁴⁷ And the marriage is a rocky one. Rabbi Ishmael expounds on this parallel, describing the “Holy and Blessed One” as a bridegroom who did, “love Israel, bring them to Mt Sinai, give them the Torah, and call them royalty. After forty days they made a calf. At that moment, the Gentiles said: ‘the Holy and Blessed One will never take them back.’ But when Moses stood and prayed on their behalf, the Holy and Blessed One said to him: ‘I pardon, as you have asked. Moreover, My presence will dwell with them, in their midst, so that all will know that I have pardoned.’”⁴⁸

If we can be permitted to read the passage empathically, we can imagine that at the top of the mountain Moses and God both felt betrayed and alone. They had both entered into this arrangement with Israel with some sense of hope. God had agreed to take this sapling of a nation on and guide it into something to be proud of. And Moses had agreed (against absolutely every objection) to leave his actual sheep behind and go on what was essentially a suicide mission.

I believe we are not only *permitted* to read these emotions into the text; we are also in good company. Because Heschel recounts a “remarkable utterance of Rabbi Eleazar Ha-Kappar, a contemporary of Judah the Patriarch: ‘My Torah is in your possession; the end of days is in Mine. *We therefore need each other.* Just as you need Me to bring about the end of days, I need you to fulfill the Torah, and thus to bring near the rebuilding of My House and of Jerusalem.’”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Most notably: Ezekiel 16 and the entire book of Hosea.

⁴⁸ Rabbi Ishmael quoted by Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, p. 77 (YS Pekudei 414; Tanhuma Terumah 8; TB Pekudei 2; Midrash on Psalm 3:6)

⁴⁹ Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, p. 112 (emphasis added)

Did God *need* Israel? Does God *need* us? It is a shocking question to which the easy answer is no. But there is nothing easy about Exodus 33 and 34.

Scriptural Context

As I have detailed above, the moment of God's unveiling on the mountain is prefaced by a period of consistent divine presence among the people of Israel. This period arguably began with the Angel of Death in Egypt but is more clearly demonstrated by the pillar of cloud/fire. Before this series of events, God's presence was incidental or *ad hoc*. Beginning here, however, that presence was consistently locative, in one form or another, at least until the Babylonian Conquest. The Kenotic nature of this presence may be supported by the notion of a certain "law of conservation of presence," which maintains that God had become self-bound to remaining manifestly and uniquely present among the people of Israel, neither departing from the people nor descending to any other people in a similar manner. Though it is impossible to prove this notion in any meaningful way, it appears to align with the internal logic of the Torah.

This brings us to a survey of the rapid-fire sequence of events atop Mt. Sinai. First it is important to note the number and occasion of Moses' ascents to the summit. The initial summit took place immediately upon the Israelites' arrival at the mountain, in 19:3, when Moses was called by God to ascend. God uses the occasion to introduce the forthcoming covenant, calling the nation to obedience, so that they can be made a "priestly kingdom and a holy nation". God continued speaking instructions to Moses, even after he descended to communicate this to the

elders. These instructions included an invitation to all the people to ascend the mountain, but not until the proper time. (The descriptions of Moses' ascending and descending gets muddled from time to time here, suggesting perhaps that the elders are dwelling in a type of basecamp, below the summit but above the rest of the people.) Then, on the third day after their arrival at the mountain, Moses ascends again (19:20) at God's invitation, and descends again in verse 25. In this series Moses is functioning purely as a liaison, communicating God's instructions to the people, and the people's responses to God. It is presumed that Moses goes up again prior to God's announcement of the Decalogue. Although he was instructed to bring Aaron with him, there is no evidence that Aaron comes. Moses' subsequent conversation with the people likewise implies another descent, but it is not clear whether the laws recorded in chapters 21-23 were communicated to Moses in the same sitting as the Decalogue, or after an additional descent/ascent. He is called up again in 24:9, and this time with Aaron, his sons and the seventy elders. However, only Moses (accompanied by Joshua) continued on to the summit.

Regardless of this uncertainty, it is clear that the final ascent prior to chapter 32 lasted for forty days, wherein God communicates to Moses the particulars of the forthcoming Tabernacle and its rituals in chapters 25-31. It is also clear that Aaron and the elders did not stay put as they were told, but instead descended again to the people, who complained to Aaron in 32:1 that Moses had apparently abandoned them or died. This, of course, is the pretext for what is arguably the "original sin of Israel"—the golden calf. Kendall Soulen expounds on the root of this error:

“Forgetfulness of God and God’s name is the starting point of the story [of the golden calf]. Wearing by Moses’ delay in coming down from the mountain, the people complain, ‘As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him’ (32:1). Failing to remember who really led them to freedom, the people proceed to orchestrate a theophany in caricature.”⁵⁰

Whereas God desired to orchestrate a mass-theophany, to be revealed in person to them on the mountain (19:13), the fear and faithlessness of the people led them to fabricate their own theophany.

A detailed analysis of the Golden Calf incident is better suited for another project.

Nevertheless, the reality of this monumental failure on the part of Aaron and the people should be front of mind to anyone who reading Exodus 33 and 34. Moses’ encounter with God on the summit is, at its most basic level, the aftermath. The morning after, so to speak. As Stephen Cook writes, “Abusing God’s patience, Israel violates God’s veritable prime directive. God is hard pressed! To clear Israel of offense would broadcast a lack of divine passion, an indifference to idolatry. To destroy the covenant people would be equally humiliating—a global scandal (32:12).”⁵¹ This dilemma motivates the impassioned exchange between God and Moses in 32:7-14, wherein God appears to ask Moses’ permission to destroy the Israelites and begin again with Moses. Whereas God first approached an isolated Moses to reintegrate with his own people to rescue them, God is now re-isolating Moses to replace his own people in the wake of their

⁵⁰ R. Kendall Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity*, Volume One, chapter 8 (electronic resource)

⁵¹ Stephen Cook, *Merciful and Wrathful? Innerbiblical Interpretation of Exodus 34:6-7* (electronic resource)
Used by permission of the author.

destruction. Instead, Moses averts this disaster by “reminding” God of the covenant promise, not just to him, but to Israel. This alone is an astonishing moment in the Kenosis of God, as God seems to act in a very flawed human fashion—in an unrestrained fit of rage—until a human being manages to restore calm. Notions of Moses as the “God-whisperer” would not be far-fetched at this point.⁵² But it only becomes more intense as the scene progresses.

Moses then descends the mountain again, to rebuke Aaron and the people. The next day he ascends yet again, in hopes that he “can make atonement for [their] sin.” In his role as liaison, Moses is hopelessly triangulated, required to show God how deeply sorry the people are, and plead for mercy, and also to show the people how deeply angry God is, and visit his wrath upon them. Nevertheless, he comes through. When Moses speaks to God, he reveals just how far he has come from the days of the Burning Bush. In contrast to his extreme reluctance in that early scene (“please choose someone else”) Moses is now so convinced of God’s steadfast commitment to him that he ties his own fate to that of his people. He issues the ultimatum—now God must reject or accept *all* of Israel, including Moses himself.

Such a gambit by a mere mortal in the presence of the Almighty would be preposterous, had the Almighty not already willfully entered a Kenotic state by way of the covenants. God’s promises to Adam & Eve, to Abraham, to Moses and to the people Israel have brought us to this

⁵² Lest the “God-whisperer” idea border on the blasphemous, let Ex 32:10 (“Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them”) stand as an invitation on God’s part for Moses to assume this role.

divine dilemma, as described by Cook above. Backed into a corner, God subsequently punishes the people with (the eleventh?) plague and turns to face Moses again on the mountaintop.

This word—“face”—“*panim*”—is ubiquitous in the ensuing encounter. Though it is clearly idiomatic in much of Hebrew usage (just as in English—“face the music”, “two-faced”, etc.) its repeated emphasis appears to affirm the claim found both inside the passage (33:11) and outside it (Deut 34:10) that Moses knew, and spoke with, God “face to face”. As William H.C. Propp writes in his Exodus commentary, “The theme word of this section [chaps. 25-40] is *panim*, ‘face, front, presence’, sometimes referring to Israel, sometimes referring to Moses, and most often referring to Yahweh. Worship is conducted in the Tabernacle *lipne yahweh* ‘before Yahweh’, literally ‘to Yahweh's face.’ Although God denies that a human can survive a vision of his Face, Yahweh and Moses converse ‘face to face’. Most important, Moses insists and Yahweh grants that the divine *countenance* will lead Israel.”⁵³

It is obvious that Moses had a physical human face. At least for present purposes, did God have one as well? Regardless of the answer, the reader does well to note the brazenly human characterization of God’s interactions with Moses.

Moses’ Appeals and the Kenosis of God

⁵³ Propp, *The Anchor Bible Commentary, Exodus 19-40*, p. 619

We the reader can watch as God responds to Moses' appeals and, in human fashion, comes out of the initial state of rage by degrees. In 32:14, God "changes his mind" about destroying the people. Then, in 32:34 God agrees to delay punishment, and let them go to the promised land, but with God's angel in the lead (reiterated in 33:2). However, some punishment is apparently still needed in the present moment, because in verse 35, the LORD "sent a plague on the people". At this point God refuses to go with the people, ostensibly because God would "consume [them] on the way." (33:3,5) In verse 6 God then reveals a shadow of turning, confessing uncertainty about "what to do with [them]." After this, God makes a further concession, saying "My presence will go with you," Though there is some debate regarding this exact nature of this promise, it is nevertheless a step in the direction of reconciliation. Still, Moses is not satisfied that God will actually be present among them as they go forward, and when he requests this in verse 16, God agrees in verse 17.

The exchange in verses 12-17 feels disarranged, and does not proceed in what seems to be the most logical sequence. The Oxford Biblical Commentary notes that "This conversation is full of non sequiturs, very likely because the author has taken on the very risky task of claiming to record a closer personal encounter between a human being and God than we can find anywhere else."⁵⁴ Propp allows for this but proposes a different explanation for the difficult nature of the dialogue: "One could regard vv12-17 as a realistic depiction of the circuitous paths of genuine speech, as Moses tries desperately to wheedle, even bully Yahweh into a reconciliation with

⁵⁴ <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t467/e224&p=emailAybEMQZiW271I&d=/opr/t467/e224>

Israel. Closer inspection, however, reveals a structure more esthetic than logical. The discourse uses chiasm to focus our attention on the divine Face.”⁵⁵

If the chiastic structure is to be embraced, verses 14-15 are pushed into the center, each with a reference to God’s *face*. This demands a closer look at the use of *panim* in these two verses. In verse 14, God says “My Face, it will go, and I will make rest for you.” Questions arise immediately as to whether God’s use of “face” is a manner of distancing, as in the English idiom, “I will be there in spirit.” The translation above is Propp’s, based on the Samaritan Pentateuch, in contrast to the Syriac which tends to shy away from embodied references to God in favor of God’s transcendence. Similarly, in 33:20, (“you cannot see *me*”) LXX supplies “*my face*”. In verse 23, the Syriac text again reduces the anthropomorphism, with “I will make my Glory pass” instead of “I will remove my hand”. Even in the manuscripts a difference of sensibility arises as to the (real or perceived) corporeality of God.⁵⁶

Next comes Moses’ response, in verse 15: “If your Face is not going, do not make us go up from here.” In one sense or another, Moses is not convinced that God will be fully present as they move ahead. He knows God must keep the promise to bring them into the Land, and even takes it a step further in verse 16, according to the Bava Batra: “Moses requested that the Divine Presence [Shekinah] not rest again on the nations of the world, and his request was granted to

⁵⁵ Propp, *The Anchor Bible Commentary, Exodus 19-40*, p. 605

⁵⁶ Propp, p. 589 (C. McCarthy, 1981: 70-76)

him, as it is stated: ‘That we shall be differentiated, I and Your people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth’, and it is stated there that God acceded to his request.”⁵⁷

Rashbam expounds on this appeal to particularity: “Moses asks that he personally will be perceived as enjoying G’d’s special regard, by being distinguished in some visible manner. He argues that if he were to be thus recognisable as G’d’s intimate, this would reflect also on the people he is leading and would show the nations of the world the uniqueness of Israel and its relationship to its G’d.”⁵⁸ After all, as Rabbeinu Bahya explains, “Whereas all the other nations have been placed under the guidance of intermediaries, angels, etc., not so the Jewish people.”⁵⁹ Moses has come a long way in his understanding of God’s chosenness, and his willingness to claim it for his people. And God appears to reward this confidence, in verse 17: “Even this thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my eyes, and I have known you by name.” (Propp’s translation) Still, the response is perfunctory and wooden, repeating Moses’ argument word-for-word—as if God is persuaded, but not excited about it.

If Moses indeed detects this disinterested tone in God, he may believe that God is hedging, and that God’s concessions will not get Moses what he longs for, for himself or for his people. A tectonic shift in the relationship is required. This would bring us the next pericope, according to Rachel M. Billings, “since v. 18 raises the subject of a theophany and v. 23 concludes the description of the Lord’s response, including his statement of what will take place and the

⁵⁷ Bava Batra 15b:8

⁵⁸ Rashbam, Exodus 33:16 Commentary

⁵⁹ Rabbeinu Bahya, Devarim 33:26:1 (includes an oblique reference to the table of nations scene in Genesis 10)

conditions under which it will occur.”⁶⁰ This section opens with Moses’ climactic appeal: “Show me your glory!” This is perhaps the most audacious request in all of Scripture. As Propp notes, “The man who could not look straight at the Burning Bush now requests a full vision of Yahweh’s Glory,”⁶¹

Here, Moses is asking God to risk something big, to relinquish something big—to come closer to humanity than ever. In return, Moses is risking his life. God agrees, but only insofar as Moses’ life can be preserved. In the face of utter disaster, humiliation, and the dissolution of a covenant not yet two months old, God must do something drastic. Since complete destruction is off the table, what is left but to swing hard in the opposite direction?

Asher Intrater writes, “Moses spent 40 days and nights on Mt Sinai. The Angel [of the LORD] wrote the 10 commandments and explained to him all the other laws. Yet Moses had still not attained the intimacy and glory with his Creator that he so desired ... Moses returns ... ‘I want to see your face. I want to know you. I want your intimacy and your glory. If you do not give me both, then find someone else.’ Moses spent more time with Angel [of the LORD] than any other human being ... but all that time he was covered with fire or a cloud. So [the LORD] spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Billings, Rachel M., “The problem of the divine presence: source-critical suggestions for the analysis of Exodus xxxiii 12-23,” *Vetus testamentum* 54/4 (2004), 435.

⁶¹ Propp, p. 606

⁶² Asher Intrater, *Who Ate Lunch with Abraham?* pp. 37-38

The ensuing divine response is perhaps the densest cluster of verses (19-23) in all Hebrew Scripture, when it comes to the number of corporeal references to God. The face of God, the hand of God, and the “backside” of God are all involved. Using the original embodied language as provided by the SP or LXX, we see, in verse 19, “I shall make all my splendor pass before your *face*.” Although, in verse 20, “You may not see my Face,” then, equating *face* with *self*, “for Man may not see *me* and live.” So, according to Propp, God apparently “picks Moses up in his hand and moves him” in verse 22, before using that hand to shelter him during God’s passing. Once that hand is removed, in verse 23, Moses will be able to see God’s “backside”.

Since it is clear that the divine Face may not be experienced, “The fullest vision flesh and blood can sustain is of the divine back, still part of God's essence but a side less fraught with his dangerous aura than his Face or front side. The context suggests that God's Face is constituted by God’s attributes of mercy and punishment, through which God interacts with humanity (34:6-7). Behkor Shor compares the sun: while one cannot look it in the face, once may comfortably admire its afterglow.’⁶³

So, what did Moses actually see when God passed by? The word is highly disputed, and some Rabbinical sources do not even bother to translate the word: “dibbera”. But Pseudo-Jonathan translates it very uniquely: “you will see the *knot of the phylacteries of the Glory of my Shekinah*” or “*the knot on the hand of the tephillin*.” Perhaps the creativity involved in this translation is a sign of intentional ambiguity. Just as God’s name given to Moses at the Burning Bush is not

⁶³ Propp, p. 606

designed to be easily understand, neither is the exact nature of God's visceral presence among humanity.

None of this analysis requires the reader to accept a conception of a physical God with literal body parts. However, the densely corporeal description alone should amount to blasphemy for those who insist on a transcended God who is wholly distinct and distant from humanity. But, as many rabbis have said (and I paraphrase), "If the Torah had not contained it, we could not have said it." Whether or not we, the reader, are meant to imagine God in physical form, we are most certainly meant to see God in Kenotic form, as "Yahweh condescends to be inspected by Moses, like a flock before a shepherd or an army before a commander."⁶⁴ Given the choice between breaking a covenant promise, and sacrificing transcendence, God chooses the latter, and comes to be with us. In the process, God reassures Moses (and by extension Israel, and us) of the everlasting covenant with repeated "I will" statements that are a hallmark of the book of Exodus. I will make my splendor pass. I will proclaim my name. I will show mercy and compassion. These confirmations prefigure the divine manifesto found in verses six and seven of the following chapter.

This manifesto deserves its own lengthy analysis, and indeed it has received many. But let the reader note that it occurs after yet another ascension to the summit by Moses, (34:4) and

⁶⁴ Propp, p. 606

another passing of God's presence before Moses' face (34:6). God's face is referenced again in that verse, in the idiomatic adjective *long-faced*, typically translated "slow to anger."⁶⁵

What follows is another list of covenant commands including another noteworthy reference to God's face (idiomatically equated with God's self) in verse 20b: "my Face must not be seen empty" more commonly translated "no one shall appear before me empty-handed." At the end of chapter 34 Moses descends again for the final time, with one more astonishing facial reference: "Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God." It shone so brightly that Aaron and all the Israelites were afraid to come near him, just as they had been afraid to come near the presence of God on the mountain.

Something cataclysmic happened on the top of Mt. Sinai between these two parties—something that changed them both forever. God's glory was no longer distant. As evidenced by God's self-declaration in 34:6-7, it was now immanent, present, particular, accessible, vulnerable. And Moses' face was shining, glowing. As Propp writes, "One's first impression is that Moses' countenance is a mirror for Yahweh's own." And the reader receives a glimpse into why God, in Numbers chapter 6, instructs Aaron and the priests to bless the people with the following words: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make *his face to shine* upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD *lift up his countenance* upon you, and give you peace."

The glory of God had encountered the face of Moses, and both were changed forever.

⁶⁵ Propp reveals a deeper level of analysis when he reveals the Hebrew *'appayim* as a reference to the two nostrils of the face. Nostrils are regularly implicated in Hebrew references to anger, as when Moses comes down the mountain to find the golden calf (32:22)

Ark & Tabernacle: Instructions and Construction

In order to understand in what sense God's glory, or presence, or Shekinah, was changed forever, one must consider the reality of the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle. These two are introduced to the narrative at almost the same moment, as God commands Moses in Exodus 25:8 to "have them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them" and in 25:10, "They shall make an ark of acacia wood." Though the sanctuary, or Tabernacle is immediately identified as the place where God will "dwell", an important distinction arises in 26:31 as God supplies instructions for a curtain to "separate the holy place from the most holy," where the mercy seat of the Ark is to be located. The result is a hierarchical series of concentric circles, increasing in holiness from the outer to the inner. Inside the Tabernacle is the Holy Place. Inside the Holy Place is the Most Holy Place (or Holy of Holies). Inside the Most Holy Place is the Ark. And above the Ark is the Mercy Seat (between the *faces* of the cherubim – 25:20), where God is most fully present to meet with Moses face to face. (25:22)

In all the many details of the Ark and the Tabernacle, the central purpose statement in 25:8 must not be overlooked, that God desires a place to "dwell" among the people of Israel. As Rabbi Joshua ben Levi taught, "The Holy and Blessed One stipulated to the Israelites in Egypt that they would be taken out from there [and into the Promised Land] only on condition that they build God a Tabernacle so that the Shekinah could dwell among them."⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, p. 79 (reference PR 18b, Friedmann's note ad loc., Tanhuma Naso 22; Numbers Rabbah 12:6; Midrash on Psalms 114:5)

In chapter 40, the Ark and the Tabernacle are constructed, and in 40:34, the “glory of the LORD filled the Tabernacle.” It is clear in the narrative that this is the context for God’s continuous Kenotic (or Shekinah) presence among the Israelites. As the Song of Songs Rabbah asks, “When did the Shekinah take up residence in the world? On the day that the Tabernacle was set up.”⁶⁷ Or, as Rabbi Simeon ben Azzai taught, “See the consequences of God’s love for Israel: this immense glory, which fills heaven and earth, was forced to appear to speak over the curtain between the two Cherubim!”⁶⁸

More recently, Jurgen Moltmann cites the work of Jewish theologian Isaac Luria in tying the presence in the Tabernacle/Temple to the Kenosis of Creation. Luria, Moltmann claims, “transformed the ancient doctrine of *zimzum*, about God’s concentration at the single point of his Shekinah in the Temple, into the doctrine of God’s concentrated inversion for the purpose of creating the world. The ‘existence of the universe was made possible through a shrinkage process in God’.”

The notion is nothing short of absurd, of course. But perhaps the absurdity itself is the point. So long as God agreed to such a laughable self-limitation, there was hope that God would keep the covenant promise to Abraham and to Moses, to establish the people in the Land and make them into a great nation after all.

⁶⁷ Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, p. 97 (footnote 13)

⁶⁸ Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, p. 99 (reference Sifra Vayyikra 4:4)

DESCENT

“Stories in general, and certainly the biblical story,” according to N.T. Wright, “have a shape and a goal that must be observed and to which appropriate response must be made.”⁶⁹ It is an occupational hazard of studying the Hebrew Scriptures that the vast majority of the material comes to us in narrative form. Story, as an art form, is not prescriptive by its nature. However, in the Scriptures we have not just stories, but *authoritative* stories. What is the appropriate response to an authoritative story, particularly when it involves the words and acts of God? In particular, what is the appropriate Christian response to the story of God and Moses on Mt. Sinai?

Regardless of our theological school of thought, most readers can agree that this covenantal scene is designed to depict a God who draws near to humanity, at a moment when God had every reason to withdraw. Implicit within that condescension is an invitation for humanity to draw near to God in return, through obedience, through worship, and through trust in God’s promises. This is the Call of God, so what is our response?

On our way to answering that question, we will take a closer look at what it means for God to draw near. In the next section I will examine further the concept of divine presence, as it arises from the exploration of Moses’ encounter with God on Mt. Sinai.

⁶⁹ McGrath, p. 145

Presence of God

Upon encountering God in a powerful and personal way, human beings are prone to say that we have seen God “face to face”. The centrality of this poetic, but inescapably corporeal, expression is the reason I have chosen it for the title of this work.

When the Hebrew *panim* appears in the construction: *panim el-panim*, or “face to face” the clear indication is that of a physical, spatial encounter. This is affirmed by the simile which follows the construction in Exodus 33:11—“as a man speaks with a friend”. At minimum, it may serve as a non-corporeal indicator of intimacy and vulnerability, but even this would involve a certain Kenosis of God, condescending to encounter humanity on its own level.

Still, some evidence exists for a corporeal sense of the phrase. Though Deuteronomy 34:10 identifies Moses as the only prophet who ever spoke to God “*panim el-panim*” there was in fact a patriarch for whom this was true. Jacob (a.k.a. Israel), the morning after his all-night struggle with the “Angel” named the place of that struggle *Peniel*, because he had seen God “*panim el-panim*”. There is no doubting the corporeality of Jacob’s experience whatsoever. In case we were tempted to interpret his encounter as a dream, his limp provides evidence to the contrary. At least in this case, *panim el-panim* means a literal face-to-face encounter with a manifestation of God.

When *panim* appears outside this construction, however, the interpretive picture becomes less clear. Even in the early manuscripts there is some disagreement as to the function of *panim*, as either an anthropopathic device depicting God in human form, or a synecdoche using God’s

face to represent the whole of God’s identity or presence. (For example: “counting heads” or “many hands make light work”. One need not see any actual heads to use the former phrase or deploy any actual hands to use the latter. The body parts are shorthand references for whole persons.) Long before the Hebrew Scriptures are translated into English, certain scribes are already interpreting *panim* as just such a synecdoche—namely, the Syriac manuscript, which reduces the anthropomorphism in several instances. In Exodus 33:14, the Samaritan and Masoretic text of Moses’ exchange with God about the path forward includes multiple instances of the *panim* (or in the LXX, the *prosopon*) of God, either going, or not going, with Israel to the Promised Land. The Syriac, by contrast, deliberately avoids referring to God’s face, just as it does in Genesis 18:22 in describing Abraham’s theophany, and in Exodus 33:34 by replacing the original phrase “I will remove my hand” with the interpretive “I will make my Glory pass.”⁷⁰ In these cases, the Syriac seems to be editorializing the text in favor of God’s transcendence, in opposition to God’s embodied immanence.

As I will explore later, something powerful is lost when the word *panim* disappears from the narrative of Moses on Mt. Sinai. After all, the narrative goes to some length to bring both the face of God and the face of Moses to bear in the establishment of the Covenant and the giving of the Torah. Both faces are implicated in the encounter, and in some sense, altered forever.

This is all well and good for those who believe they are counted among the “chosen”. If God’s presence and glory is revealed to Moses, and not to his enemies, therein lies a great

⁷⁰ Propp, *Anchor Bible Commentary, Exodus 19-40*, p. 605

advantage. But even a favored party such as Moses must demonstrate in some way that his God is also the Creator and Ruler of all the world. Otherwise, there is no distinction from their pagan neighbors. (After all, Jewish blessings nearly all begin with the declaration that the “LORD *our* God” is also the “King of the Universe”.) God is *particular* to us, but also *universal*.

Heschel identifies this dynamic as fundamental to God’s revelation—that the *particular* is the necessary gateway to the *universal*. Indeed, God blessed one man—Abraham—explicitly so that all humanity might be blessed in turn. Even in a time when “the glory is concealed,” Heschel writes, “in the time to come, ‘The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and *all flesh* shall see it together.’ It is in this messianic sense that the Psalmist prays, ‘Let the whole world be filled with his glory.’”⁷¹

Even as we celebrate the mode of God’s particularity with Israel, we must maintain a certain agnosticism about the nature of God’s subsequent (and even concurrent) universality. Brief mentions occur in Scripture of the attention God pays to people besides Israel. One of the most notable examples is Hagar and Ishmael, in the theophany to the former, and the promise to the latter. (Gen 21:18) Another is found in Isaiah 19:18-25, where God declares “Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.” As Gregory MacDonald writes, “This passage follows a description of divine punishment on Egypt. The LORD strikes them *and then* heals them. This is the pattern for the nations as it was with Israel ... Indeed, it is perhaps the most

⁷¹ Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 80 (referencing Isaiah 40:5 – emphasis mine – and Psalm 72:19)

astonishing oracle in the Old Testament about the destiny of the nations.”⁷² MacDonald writes these words in favor of a biblical argument for universalism—that, when God is revealed in divine particularity to one “chosen” people, it is not tantamount to a rejection for all others. God’s Kenosis, therefore, with Moses, and with Israel, is a particular message designed explicitly to be conveyed to the universe of nations, that our Creator has indeed encountered humanity on the most intimate level imaginable.

As a consequence, we need not oppose the notion of God’s embodiment, on the grounds of fairness. The narrative of Scripture shows us that God indeed chooses particular individuals, particular nations, particular times⁷³ and particular spaces, to function as stage for the divine drama of redemption. But the stage does not resent the theatre, any more than the actors resent the audience. Quite the opposite. Without the theatre, and without the audience, the stage and the actors would have no purpose. Likewise, without the nations—and God’s promise to bless them—the particularity of God’s Kenosis with Israel would have no purpose.

This brings us to revisit the term that lies at the heart of this entire work: Kenosis, meaning literally “to make empty”. The key appearance of this word is found in Philippians 2:7, in the

⁷² MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, p. 70

⁷³ Heschel (*God in Search of Man*, p. 21) on the particularity of Time: “To the Biblical man, it is in *events*, not only in ideas, that ultimate reality comes to expression.” (then on p. 12-13 of *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*) “...the words of the Bible are not suspended; they do not dangle in an air of timelessness. Here time and thought, act and content, author and teaching are profoundly related to each other ... the word of God is in time and in eternity ... Biblical revelation must be understood as an event, not a process ... an event is extraordinary, irregular.”

Aorist Active Indicative Third-Person Singular: “kenoō”, or “[he] emptied [himself].” I will return to the word in this particular context after exploring its usage elsewhere in Scripture.

In the New Testament, the inflection *kenoō* is found nine times, referring to the emptying or voiding of respectively, the faith (Rom 4:14), the Cross (1Co 1:17), Paul’s boast (1Co 9:15, 2Co 9:3), and the appearance mentioned above, in the Christ Hymn in Philippians 2, referring to the self-emptying of Christ. The root word, “kenos”, simply meaning “empty”, is found much more frequently. Figuratively, *kenos* is used to refer to material lack, or starvation, or (often translated “in vain”) pointlessness, or fruitlessness.

In the process, it is also worth noting the role of the Greek term in the Septuagint. The verb *kenoō* is deployed to translate the Hebrew word *’āmal*, primarily meaning “languish”, and it is found in Jeremiah 14:2 and 15:9 in the context of the suffering brought about by divine judgment.⁷⁴

None of these instances, either in the Old Testament or the New, of the root word or its inflection, implicate God directly, besides the key appearance in Philippians 2 as it refers to Christ. Not only is it the only reference to the Kenosis of God, it is the only *reflexive* instance of the word. The Cross of Christ and the boast of Paul are not emptying *themselves*. They are at risk

⁷⁴ The word “languishing” has come back to the forefront in mental health. Sociologist Corey Keyes uses the word to describe the space between flourishing and depression. This issue has become widespread during the pandemic, as people have struggled to maintain focus, motivation and productivity. Keyes’ observation is that most of those who find themselves struggling with serious depression in the near future are “languishing” now. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/well/mind/covid-mental-health-languishing.html> This is a very important modern angle from which to view *Kenosis* and *Amal*.

of being emptied by some external threat. The people being judged in Jeremiah are not languishing *themselves*. Even the grammar prohibits this. They are, instead, being caused to languish by another. Thus, the self-emptying of Christ in Philippians 2 stands alone as *the* Kenosis—the supreme example of sacrificial love, flowing from the Source of love itself.

As a “gospel in miniature”, the Christ Hymn in the second chapter of Philippians represents the ideal synopsis of this descent. It establishes (v. 6) both the essential/eternal nature of Christ (depending on your translation, “being God”, “being in very nature God”, “existing in the form of God”, or, as the Amplified Bible expounds, “existing in the form and unchanging essence of God, as One with Him, possessing the fullness of all the divine attributes—the entire nature of deity”) and also his descent to the temporal manifestation as Jesus of Nazareth, since he did not consider equality with God as something to “exploit / grasp / rob / assert / cling to / take advantage of,” (depending again on your translation.)

Although this verse may boast the most colorful array of English renderings in the New Testament, the Kenotic significance is loud and clear. Christ, as the second person of the Trinity, was entitled to all the status of being the Creator and King of the Universe. Yet, he sacrificially chose to temporarily empty himself of this status (v. 7) and all its attendant properties (omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence to name a few) in order to take on flesh, and become the Incarnate One in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. But the Nativity was only beginning, as Jesus continued to empty himself of anything that might have conferred honor or advantage. He took the form of a lowly slave, and lower still, a convicted criminal (v. 8), a

humiliating spectacle, and lowest of all, a gruesome corpse. All the while, Christ maintains a connection to his own divinity. As Alex Dubilet describes it: “Insofar as the Word flows out of God, it produces differentiation; insofar as it remains within, that differentiation is immanent ... it is an externalization without externality.”⁷⁵ The externalization of Christ necessitates differentiation, but not so far as to create externality. After all, Christ maintained the divine ability to lay down his life, and to “take it up again.” (John 10:18)

As shocking as it may be, for centuries this Kenosis has been a foundational matter of Christian orthodoxy. As such, I do not intend to add anything to it, or take anything away. Instead, my goal is to build upon it, first by extending Paul’s “descending/ascending” vector beyond the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection, into an examination of Jesus’ earthly ministry, and beyond. What do his words and actions in human settings tell us about the “descending” way of love? Cynthia Bourgeault describes the counterintuitive nature of this downward-ness well: “For the vast majority of the world’s spiritual seekers, the way to God is ‘up.’ Deeply embedded in our religious and spiritual traditions—and most likely in the human collective unconscious itself—is a kind of compass that tells us that the spiritual journey is an ascent, not a descent.” However, “Jesus had only one ‘operational mode.’ In whatever life circumstance, Jesus always responded with the same motion of self-emptying—or to put it another way, of the same motion of descent: going lower, taking the lower place, not the higher.”

⁷⁵ Dubilet, p. 71

Many scenes from Jesus' ministry deploy the metaphor of ascending and descending. High places feature prominently in the gospels, when Jesus goes to a mountainside to pray, to preach, or to be transfigured. While these are generally positive, there is also the example of Christ's temptation in the wilderness, where Satan twice brings Jesus to a high pinnacle to tempt him to reclaim some measure of his exalted status. While the "ascent" can be metaphorically ambiguous—representative of either an encounter with God, or a display of hubris—it is rather the "descent" which best defines Jesus' ministry, according to Bourgeault. It is not until he descends from the mountaintop that God's love is made manifest in Jesus' actions. It is clearly seen as he lowers himself into the waters of baptism. It is clearly seen in his call to Zacchaeus—a short man living in low-lying Jericho—to "come down" from his high branch. It is clearly seen when he kneels to receive the little children, or to pray in the garden. It is clearly seen when he stoops lower still to wash his disciples' feet, instructing them to lower themselves as well.

Though the Christ Hymn indeed contains the lone instance of the *term* Kenosis as the self-emptying of God, it need not limit our perception of the Kenosis of God to a single instance. When we read of Jesus' downward movement—his Kenotic orientation—do we view them as merely representative of an innovative rescue mission, as outlined in the Christ Hymn? Or do they also comprise an intimate snapshot of the fundamental nature of God's Kenotic love for us, the image-bearers? Richard Rohr provides an apt response to these questions: "It is not just Jesus

who suffers [in his Kenosis] but the cross is the visible symbol of what is always going on inside of God!”⁷⁶

Ten thousand sermons could be preached (and likely have been preached) on this notion in relation to the person and work of Christ. Even without the help of Philippians 2, the Gospels paint the Kenosis of Christ for us in graphic detail—in the hay of the manger and the waters of the Jordan, in the upper room and the burial tomb. It might even be said that the Kenosis of Christ—as a category which contains both the Incarnation and the Crucifixion—is the most central work of God to all of Christian theology and worship.

If this is so, we cannot help but ask the questions introduced above: Is the Kenosis of Christ unique to Christ? Is it a disruptive work designed to supplant the old with the new? Or is it a climactic work designed to build upon and affirm the work that came before? My hunch is that 9,900 of those ten thousand sermons are based on a disruptive notion of the Kenosis of Christ. (“Everything was hopeless, until, all of a sudden, heaven broke through...”) I, on the other hand, believe I join the minority voice as I explore the Kenosis of God before Christ, and the precedent which the Kenotic Events in Scripture set for Jesus’ climactic life and work.

Heschel proposed that, “just as the Creator, whose glory fills the universe, contracted His Shekinah [presence] between the two staves of the Ark in order to reveal His words to Moses, so did God compress His Shekinah into the history of Israel so that He might be revealed to His

⁷⁶ Rohr, p. 53

chosen nation as they went into exile together.”⁷⁷ Heschel was impressed with the reality of God’s “contraction” and “compression” into the particulars of space and time, and yet—despite the apparent contradiction—refused to abandon the essential omnipotence of God. To solve the problem, he depicts the work of God in Israel as a type of Kenosis—a self-emptying which sets aside certain essential attributes for a season and a purpose but does not abandon them.

To fully consider this, one must also consider the role of the Holy Spirit, whose role is not to be interacted *with*, but *through*. The Spirit is not characterized by attributes, so much as by activities.⁷⁸ In other words, it is less about who the Holy Spirit is, and more about what the Holy Spirit does. This naturally recalls the idea of Peri-Kenosis, as we consider the Spirit’s role in self-emptying into the Father and the Son. It may strike the reader as a type of “wheel in the sky” that just “keeps on turning” but the Spirit’s true Kenotic sacrifice comes in when the Father and the Son each condescend. If we are to take Jesus’ Cry of Dereliction seriously, that the Son truly is forsaken by the Father, we must consider that the “Divine Dance” becomes much more challenging when two of the three dancers keep leaving the room. Yet, the Holy Spirit continues to empty into the Father and the Son, regardless of where their dispensations carry them.

In contrast to the Divine Dance, many Christians find themselves asking a decidedly less “perichoretic” question: Did the Father send the Son to do something which the Father had

⁷⁷ Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, p. 121 (Spelling of “Shekhinah” changed here to “Shekinah” for consistency within the essay.)

⁷⁸ This argument does not intend to characterize the Holy Spirit as somehow “less than” the Father and the Son, insofar as they each possess a type of essential “personhood”. Rather, it is the role (or manifestation) of the Holy Spirit in the affairs of humankind which is depicted here as impersonal.

somehow failed to do? And did the Son send the Spirit to accomplish a work which was completely novel and unprecedented? While it is true that the role of each person of the Trinity is unique within their respective dispensations, I believe the simplest answer to the above questions is no. The implications of getting this wrong, in my opinion, are staggering. At its extreme, this perspective is represented in those who see Jesus in opposition to the Father, succeeding against all odds to rescue humanity from the wrath of an angry Creator. In its more moderate forms, it depicts Jesus as the kindly emissary, sent on behalf of a cold and forbidding king.

These ubiquitous images of God the Father, as essentially angry, cold, or forbidding, bolster our presumptions about the supposed absolute transcendence of the Father, in contrast with the incarnational immanence of the Son. We must consider that the Father sent the Son, not to break new ground in divine-human relations, but to serve as the culmination of a long series of Kenotic Events. Jesus' proclamation in Matthew 5:17, that he had come "not to abolish the law and prophets,⁷⁹ but to fulfill (or accomplish) them," demands that we look back to the law and prophets, to understand how the Kenosis of Christ was founded upon the Kenosis of God before Christ.

A study of the Kenosis of God may function as a type of retrofit: Recognizing that our Christology may have wider implications to our understanding of God. Whatever theological

⁷⁹ Jesus' reference to the "law and the prophets" bears striking similarity to the modern conception of the Tanakh—the Hebrew Bible—which is an acronym for "Torah, Prophets, Writings". A case might almost be made for translating the verse this way: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Tanakh..."

models are appropriate for understanding the Incarnate God must not be dismissed outright when applied to the triune God (or perhaps, to God the Father.)⁸⁰

In other words, if Jesus is indeed fully God and fully man, it cannot be heretical to explore the idea that God took on human qualities outside of the specific Incarnation of Christ. And, just as with Christ, these human qualities need not have been merely “for show”, but quite possibly an actual metamorphosis in God’s essential manifestation to humanity. As Moltmann writes,

“If the significance of the Son’s incarnation is his true humanity, then the incarnation reveals the true humanity of God. That is not an anthropomorphic way of speaking, which is therefore not in accordance with God’s divinity; it is the quintessence of his divinity itself. The self-humiliation of God, which we already talked about in connection with the doctrine of the creation of the world, is fulfilled [not initiated] in the incarnation of the Son ... The divine kenosis which begins with the creation of the world reaches its perfected and completed form in the incarnation of the Son.”⁸¹

In case this strikes the reader as an imposition of the concept Incarnation onto the Hebrew Scriptures, Jewish theologian David R. Blumental writes,

“When I teach Introduction to Judaism, I include early Christian thinking, and I have always found that the doctrine of the incarnation is not hard to explain, once one acknowledges the anthropopathic nature of God. If we are created in God’s image, as Scripture says, then nothing human is alien to God. The idea that God might want to actually em-body God’s image is only a few steps beyond the idea that God revealed

⁸⁰ Augustine, *On the Trinity*

⁸¹ Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 118 (emphases added)

God’s will in some concrete way, or beyond the concept of God manifesting Godself in a vision or theophany.” [citation]

There is a Hebrew name for the God who is “with us” in this way: *Immanuel*. We see this word early in the Nativity story, as our minds attempt to transition between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New. We as Christians may wrestle to understand that the Father and the Son are not actually at odds, since the Father is (at the very minimum) the “mastermind” behind the Kenosis of Christ.

The two persons must be unified because they share a common goal—but of course Jesus is the one doing the dirty work, scrapping the old law, shedding literal blood, sweat and tears⁸² to invent a whole new paschal paradigm. But Moses—and Akiva—and Heschel—seem to be pointing us the other way entirely. Perhaps our Messiah was instead a culmination of the Way of Love that was always there. The Father has never “washed his hands” of us. Instead, we see the Holy One descending into the mud, long before there was any way to lift us out—just to keep us from being alone. The Father has knowingly and willfully embarked on that scandalous self-abasement—that preposterous gambit—that suicide mission—just to get close to us.

Call and Response

⁸² Regarding Jesus’ blood, sweat and tears: Jesus bled on the Cross, sweat (blood) in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, and wept over the death of Lazarus.

The daily decision, on our part as Christians, about whether to draw near to God or push God away, largely depends on whether we see God as actually having come near or not. If the exalted Father God (in popular conception, the God of the Old Testament) is moody and distant at best, and vengeful and capricious at worst, and the Son is a lovable figure who paid us a thirty-three-year visit twenty centuries ago, it can be difficult to embrace the nearness of God. If so, we are in good company.

After all, Moses himself began his “ministry” with similar reluctance. Sensing his unworthiness to be chosen by a transcendent God, he missed the opportunity to serve as both judge and priest, forcing God to appoint Aaron and institute the priestly office. Aaron, in turn, fails to trust God and Moses and bows to the demands of the people in building the golden calf. After Moses dies, certain individuals are provided privileged access to the divine presence (priests) and other individuals become known for their intimate relationships with God (Joshua, Samuel, David, Hezekiah, Josiah, etc.) but never both.⁸³ This division of labor is disastrous for the nation of Israel, and arguably results in corruption in the office of both priest and king. This corruption constitutes a major premise for the office of prophet, which arises in large part to hold priests and kings to account. Unfortunately, they refused to accept this critique, and in due time the Promised Land—along with the Temple and the Ark—is lost in the Babylonian Conquest.

⁸³ Of these, Samuel came the closest to having both: privileged access to God’s presence as a priest, and an intimate relationship with God as a judge and prophet. In his character we may indeed see a glimpse into God’s intention for Judaism, but this is tragically surrendered when Samuel fails (just like his predecessor Eli) to pass these qualities on to his sons.

Christian Worship and Devotion

As Christians, we have been invited by the message of the Gospel to do away with these separations in the camp. There is no longer any rationale for a dividing curtain between the “holy” and the “most holy” because we have been made a kingdom of priests, with the Word now written on our hearts. The question is, do we see this reality reflected in the nature of our corporate worship and private devotion? Do we depict God as exalted and distant, or as a Kenotic presence among us and within us? Recalling Rohr and Bourgeault, perhaps the answer is in the both-and, as they echo and expound on the love declaration of John 3:16—“Jesus’ entire life demonstrates how God loves unconditionally and selflessly. Why hasn’t Western Christianity emphasized what seems so obvious and clear? Cynthia [Bourgeault] explains: “What makes this mode so interesting is that it’s almost completely spiritually counterintuitive. For the vast majority of the world’s spiritual seekers, the way to God is ‘up.’ Deeply embedded in our religious and spiritual traditions—and most likely in the human collective unconscious itself—is a kind of compass that tells us that the spiritual journey is an ascent, not a descent.”

I received glimpses of this in my Pentecostal experience described at the outset. Many Pentecostal expressions of the divine are high and exalted—just as in any Christian tradition. However, in my most vulnerable encounters with God, I was not impressed with the bigness of God, but rather the smallness. In these moments I became convinced that God saw me, and desperately wanted in. There was no chasm so deep or dark that God would not rappel to rescue me, or—if I was not ready—to simply abide with me there. I did not have to muster the strength

to scale the heights, because I knew that God had already scaled the depths. I learned how to let go. And I would learn it again and again, hundreds of times. I am still learning it.

Perhaps we must accept that not only has God “come down” to find us; we must likewise “go down” to find God. Worship and devotion occur as we, too, empty ourselves, and take the form of a servant after the example of Christ. Sadly, we (and perhaps especially those of us in the mainline liturgical traditions) might identify best with the refusal of Peter, that the work of a servant is not befitting the dignity of the Messiah. That word—dignity—is a dangerous one. When we insist on the dignity of Christ, and of every manifestation of God, we may find ourselves twisting the message of God to comply with our biases. Rabbi Ishmael—known for his aversion to Kenotic depictions of God—had just such a problem, according to Heschel:

“Rabbi Ishmael, the rationalist, attempted to reinterpret, in a way that would be acceptable to the rational mind, those scriptural passages *not befitting to God’s dignity*. These passages featured references to God’s spatial location, sensory organs, or anything impugning God’s uniqueness or transcendence. In these instances, Ishmael—in contrast to Rabbi Akiva—“gave spiritual or metaphorical interpretations.”⁸⁴

James Kugel theorizes that this rejection of transcendence has been the common trend even since the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. After the time of the patriarchs, he writes, God seems to get bigger and farther away. “A number of factors are usually cited for this change. They include a reckoning with the consequences of true monotheism: if there is indeed only one God

⁸⁴ Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, p. 224

in the universe, then He must rule over the affairs of all peoples—not just Israel. Such a God must be truly immense.”⁸⁵ Does this also account for the bigness and exaltedness of the God of Christianity?

As my wife Christina once said to me, “Our reverence for power is so confining.” In their narrative, the Israelites consistently seek out some human to stand in power between them and God. Are we any different? What would happen if we opened ourselves up to the power of intimacy with God?

God emptied God’s self—from Creation to Mt Sinai to Calvary and beyond—to enter into human life, so that we could be filled up, and welcomed into the divine life. God was emptied so that we could be filled. God condescended so that we could be transcendent. God was humiliated so that we could be honored. God desired nothing less than full communion with humanity, both for God’s sake and for ours.

Perhaps God is far more interested in connecting with us than ruling over us, and this is the exact reason humanity was created in God’s image—to make this connection possible.

⁸⁵ Kugel, *The God of Old*, p. 62

DESTINATION

A Kenotic Life

In this work, I have endeavored to explore in what sense God's transcendent attributes are willfully relinquished (in a temporal period of *kenosis*, or self-emptying, especially in the encounter with Moses at the top of Mt. Sinai in Exodus 33) in order to achieve relational immanence with humankind. In the process I have become deeply impressed by the infinite effort God has made, not only to rescue me from death, but to breathe into me abundant life. The only questions that remain in my mind and heart are whether I am willing to empty myself in response. Will I adopt the mind of Christ on a daily basis, considering my status something "not to be grasped" and my knowledge and experience as no more than rubbish, to take on the form of a servant?

The inescapable conclusion is this: as a follower of Christ, and a child of God, I am called to live a Kenotic life.

The (Chief) End

Still one might ask, what is the point of it all? The Westminster Shorter Catechism offers a famous phrasing of the question: "What is the chief end of man?" This is followed by a famous

answer: “to glorify God, and enjoy him forever.”⁸⁶ In this work, I have touch on *glory*, or *kavod*, as the “weightiness” of God pressing down upon us. Not floating away, but drawing near. Still, the effect of God’s glory can be rightly intimidating. God is truly glorious. Truly weighty. And this separates God from us, no matter how close our quarters. This feels like worship to many of us.

It is, instead, that second charge that seems designed to perplex us. *Enjoy God forever?* Are we sure God actually wants that—to be enjoyed? Our experience of Christianity might say *no*, but I have endeavored throughout this work to demonstrate that our Scriptures say *yes*. Our God has gone to tremendous, unthinkable, even humiliating lengths to be known by us, and *enjoyed* by us. But the choice is still ours.

I think of myself as a father. I think of my natural desires for relationship with my son and daughter, both five years old. Since I am not God, I do not want glory, but as a human being I do want respect. I want them to recognize how much wiser and stronger I am—wise enough to teach them, strong enough to protect them. But even more than that, I want them to enjoy me. Sometimes, in order to command respect, I will stand tall over them, and speak with a firm, deep voice. But I always try to keep these moments brief, so that I can quickly move to the floor to sit with them, hug them, and speak to them with warmth and imagination and humor. To make this

⁸⁶ Thanks to the Rev. Rick Miles for reminding me of the Westminster Shorter Catechism at the perfect time. Of course, many modern theologians would prefer to render this more inclusively: “What is the chief purpose of humanity? To glorify and enjoy God forever.”

happen, I empty myself of my height, my strength, and my seniority, to meet them in that place where they can receive my love, return their own, and hopefully, enjoy me forever.

Acknowledgments

I want to extend my deepest thanks to those who have helped make this work possible. First, to my wife Christina, to whom this Thesis is dedicated, for her love, her unwavering support, and her interest in deep conversation. Also, to my parents, Lon and Fran Wiksell, for encouraging me in theological exploration, sometimes with their assent and at other times with their constructive critique.

Finally I want to thank the professors who have supported me along the way. My thanks to The Very Rev. Ian Markham, Dean and President of Virginia Theological Seminary, whose Systematic Theology course introduced me to the Classical and Process-based approaches to God. Dean Markham first heard me out on this concept for a Thesis long before the time came to begin research. More than once, in our conversation on the topic, he told me that the idea “has legs”. My thanks to The Rev. Dr. Katherine Sonderegger, who talked through many complicated questions, directed me to excellent scholarship, and helped me decide to focus on “God before Christ” instead of trying to parse out the distinctions between persons of the Trinity. My thanks to Dr. Stephen Cook, who took on the role of advisor with energy and positivity, encouraging my mystical side but also reminding me to pay attention to all sides of the issues. And my thanks to external reader Dr. Victor Matthews, from my hometown of Springfield, MO, who has encouraged my writing in the past and quickly produced a wealth of feedback on this work when called upon.

This work would not exist without all of you.

Bibliography

- Adams, Scott, *God's Debris: A Thought Experiment*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel, 2001.
- Berkovits, Eliezer, *Faith After the Holocaust*. New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2019.
- Bourgeault, Cynthia, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind*. Boston: New Seeds Books, 2008.
- Browning, W. R. F., ed. "Shekhinah." *In A Dictionary of the Bible*. *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*. May 2, 2021. <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t94/e1747>.
- Comer, John Mark, *God Has a Name*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017.
- Dubilet, Alex, *The Self-Emptying Subject: Kenosis and Immanence, Medieval to Modern*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018.
- Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. *Christianity In Jewish Terms*. New York: Basic Books, 2008.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua, *God in Search of Man*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua, *Heavenly Torah*. New York: Continuum, 2005.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.
- Intrater, Asher, *Who Ate Lunch With Abraham?* Frederick, MD: Revive Israel Media, 2011.
- Kugel, James L., *The God of Old*. New York: Free Press, 2003.
- LaCugna, Catherine Mowry, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.
- MacDonald, Gregory, *The Evangelical Universalist*. London: SPCK, 2012.
- Markham, Ian S., *Understanding Christian Doctrine*. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2017.
- Matthews, Victor H., *A Brief History of Ancient Israel*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
- McGrath, Alister E., *The Christian Theology Reader*. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

- McNamara, Martin, *Targums Neofiti 1 and Pseudo-Jonathan: Exodus*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994.
- Moltmann, Jürgen, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Rahner, Karl, *Theological Investigations: Volume 16*. New York: Crossroad, 1992.
- Rohr, Richard, with Morrell, Mike, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*. New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2016.
- Rosenzweig, Franz, *The Star of Redemption*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1985.
- Sarna, Nahum, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel*. New York: Schocken Books, 1986.
- Soulen, R. Kendall, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

