

Paul T. Nimmo and Keith L. Johnson, editors. *Kenosis: The Self-Emptying of Christ in Scripture and Theology*. Eerdmans, 2022. xi+332 pp. \$65.00 (hbk).

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This collection of essays on kenotic Christology, which is dedicated to Bruce L. McCormack, offers a range of reflections on the theme of kenosis in Scripture and in the history of Christian theology. Perhaps about half of the essays directly engage McCormack's thought. This review mentions each of the essays in the volume, but focuses on those that seem likely to be of most interest to readers of this journal. Overall, this collection addresses many important issues regarding kenotic Christology, but without providing an overall argument or analysis that would help to clarify the main questions or issues.

The Christ hymn in Philippians 2:5-11 serves as the *locus classicus* of the kenotic theme in Christian theology. As John A. McGuckin observes, this passage is "one of those deep ocean trenches of Scripture that no simple swimmer can hope to exhaust" (81).

John M. G. Barclay argues that the larger "soteriological frame" of the Philippians passage shows Christ's humility drawing all creation into the love of God (8). Christ's downward movement leads to God's action in which every knee and every tongue acknowledges Christ's lordship. As Barclay puts it, "the drama of the incarnation is oriented toward the incorporation of every being into the transformed cosmos under the power of Christ" (14). Barclay suggests that Christ's emptying at the heart of the incarnation is neither a loss nor a limiting of divine power, but instead a renouncing of "the capacity to exercise power as humanly understood" (17-18).

In keeping with the encouragement in Phil. 2:5-7 to have the mind of Jesus, who emptied himself, Barclay considers the ethical implications of Christ's emptying. He contends that Christ's humility in Philippians 2 is not an end in itself, but a means to the end of restoring the fallen cosmos. In a summative passage, Barclay ties together the main points of his essay:

this is a story of salvation, not of ethical heroism, and its *telos* is not kenosis itself, but the saving lordship of Christ. The kenosis of Christ is the necessary means for God's saving presence with creation, and it stands as the preeminent work and permanent sign of God's self-giving love. But to extract kenosis from the drama, and to turn self-humiliation into an ethical end, is not only morally dangerous but a failure to appreciate its place within the whole (23).

Barclay is surely correct that the main point of Christ's kenosis is salvific. Less clear is what it means for Jesus' followers to have the mind of one who humbled himself for the salvation of others.

Beverly Roberts Gaventa extends Barclay's focus on the concept of power by arguing that in Romans the power of God is exercised for the purpose of rescuing fallen humanity

from the powers of “Sin and Death” (27). As Gaventa puts it, “Romans constitutes one long exposition of the power of God as that power has been and is and will be at work for God’s own people” (30). In line with Karl Barth’s point that we should learn God’s attributes from God rather than from our own preconceptions, Gaventa notes that in Romans, power

looks very little like coercion or destruction or force. Instead, it looks like forbearance, steadfastness, lovingkindness, even weakness. Again, power—at least in the sense of sheer strength for its own sake—is emptied out (34).

Gaventa concludes by pointing out that the Christ who displayed weakness and is “handed over to death” is “declared to be the Son of God in power’ by his resurrection from the dead” (40). The interplay between power and weakness runs like a thread through Gaventa’s essay.

Grant Macaskill responds to elements of McCormack’s Christology in light of Colossians and Hebrews, arguing that Scripture does not speak of the Son “apart from Jesus” (57). His main point is that themes in McCormack’s Christology have roots in the New Testament and “should not be regarded as alien developments within speculative theologies” (58). Rinse H. Reeling Brouwer argues that the divine name in the Torah shows a humility in God that anticipates the kenosis of Christ in Philippians 2. In an essay on Origen of Alexandria, John A. McGuckin draws attention to Christ’s “divinely pedagogic approach, stooping down to the weakness of those he wishes to teach and save” and to the “paradox of emptying to demonstrate fullness” (89-90, 93).

Han-luen Kantzer Komline offers an extensive and helpful analysis of Augustine’s many references to kenosis. She argues that in each case Augustine holds that “kenosis happened, not by giving up the form of God, but by taking up the form of a servant,” or by “the addition of humanity rather than the subtraction of divinity” (100, 107). For Augustine, the kenosis of the Son is somehow compatible with divine attributes such as omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience, although questions remain about how to understand these attributes in the self-emptied Son (116-18). In contrast to the unreachable divine being of the Platonists and Manichees, the God who humbled himself in Jesus “was a God to which a Christian might cling, in both imitation and worship” (102). In the end, “Kenosis is the best proof we have of God’s love” (121).

In an essay that touches on Cyril of Alexandria, T. F. Torrance, Aquinas, and more, Katherine Sonderegger argues for the centrality of sacrifice for understanding Jesus Christ: “Christ in his person and work just is sacrifice” (136).

Thomas Joseph White, O.P., wrestles with some of the knotty questions that arise when saying that, because he is human, “self-emptying, obedience, suffering, and death are attributed to the subject of the Son, to his person,” while also affirming that “it does not change or alter his divine perfection” (137-38, 140). White notes that only if Christ is fully divine has God “united himself to our nature,” “died in solidarity with us in our suffering,” and achieved our redemption (141-43). Further, the kenosis of the fully divine Son reveals to us “intratrinitarian personal communion and the uncreated love of God as the fundamental ground of the world” (155).

In an essay on kenotic themes in Martin Luther, Matthew J. Aragon Bruce argues that for Luther only a Christ who has “chosen to serve others, loving them such that he is willing to give his own life for them—has the power to save” (173). In Christ, “the form of almighty God is veiled and hidden behind the form of a humble servant” (174-75).

Paul T. Nimmo draws from resources in Charles Hodge and Barth in responding to Friedrich Schleiermacher's dismissal of kenotic Christology. While Schleiermacher finds it problematic to attribute humiliation and exaltation to Jesus Christ, Hodge says that the lowliness of Jesus's human nature "can be predicated of the person of Jesus Christ, and the hypostasis of this person is the eternal Logos" (183-84). Nimmo finds Hodge's position "semantically strained, perhaps even to the point of endangering its intelligibility" (185). Barth holds that Jesus Christ's free self-humiliation "is grounded in the eternal obedience of the Son to the Father," but "does not represent any alteration in God" (187-88). In contrast to Hodge and Barth, who "seek to combine an affirmation of divine immutability with a meaningful kenosis of the Son of God," Nimmo proposes "a kenosis of the *human nature* of Jesus Christ" (192-93). On this view, "the human Jesus is rendered bereft of all assurance and consolation at the climax of his passion" (193).

The essay by David Fergusson considers an alternate view in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglican kenotic theology that describes "the divine being as itself possessing an essential kenotic aspect" (196). Without sorting out all of the Christological questions, Fergusson considers the value of "emphasizing kenosis in terms of divine humility" (203). Fergusson observes that "the kenotic theory, for all its deficiencies, sought to accentuate divine lowliness as essential to a christologically-shaped doctrine of God" (203). As Fergusson sees it, "The lowliness of God in identifying with the crucified figure is a revelation, not a concealment.... The incarnation reveals a love that indwells the creation and works in all things for good" (205). God's entering into weakness manifests "a strange new power" that restores the dispossessed, transforms Jesus' bedraggled followers into witnesses who change the world, and bends "the arc of history ... slowly toward God's justice" (210-11). For Fergusson, kenotic theology helps us understand "power that is displayed in weakness" and "victories that can be won from the underside of God's grace" (211).

Georg Pflieger argues that Barth's ethics have a kenotic character, which appears in "the progressive, dialectical character of the argumentation" (217). In an essay that focuses on Sarah Coakley, McCormack, and Barth, Cambria Kaltwasser proposes that, for Barth, "God reveals God's majesty in humility"—a humility that "rules out equally an instrumentalization of others and an annihilation of self" (247-48).

Keith L. Johnson argues that Athanasius, Barth, and James Cone all hold that "*what Christ does* must stand in continuity with *who Christ is*, such that Christ's saving work *pro nobis* corresponds to his divine being" (265). But unlike Barth, Cone focuses more on the revelation in Christ "that God not only hears the cries of the lowly, but he also fully identifies with them" (266).

The late Christoph Schwöbel offers the most extensive engagement with McCormack's thought of any essay in this volume. Among the points he raises is McCormack's rejection—following Barth—of a *Logos asarkos* (a pre-incarnate or unincarnate Logos). Largely agreeing with McCormack, Schwöbel sees this proposal as helping to resolve some complexities in the Chalcedonian Definition.

Hanna Reichel raises fascinating questions about the scope of the incarnation. If Christ was incarnate as human, can he save nonhuman creation? Should we see Christ's flesh as "more generally creaturely—with potential ramifications for all creatures?" (294). In the end, Reichel argues that the incarnation is not primarily about humanity or creatureliness, but "first and foremost an expression of who God is" (307).

In an Epilogue, Kevin W. Hector argues for the spiritual practice of “attention,” in which we attend to God and God’s beauty in the creation while “we empty ourselves before the reality of others in order to be filled with God’s glory and thereby be exalted” (322).

This volume is rich in many ways, but it lacks a clear theme other than the idea of “kenosis.” The richness can be seen in the many fascinating suggestions, noted above, about how to understand the idea of kenosis in Christian theology. But the organization and main themes of the volume are hard to discern, with essays on biblical material at the beginning and the end of the book, essays with substantial analysis of early church theologians appearing early and late, and essays analyzing McCormack’s thought scattered throughout.

One wishes for some kind of summation, division into sections, or internal responses among the essayists that would show how the essays fit together. For example, Barclay, Komline, White, and Nimmo see kenosis as not involving a limiting of God’s power, whereas Fergusson and Gaventa develop the idea of God’s power displayed in weakness. Are these two positions in tension or can they be reconciled in some way? Further, does the kenosis or emptying apply to the human nature of Jesus, the person of the incarnate Christ, God, or what? And what yield can be gained from the various early church theologians who are analyzed in the essays? Several of the essays consider Barth’s views; do they agree about what Barth says and about whether he is right? Since this book is dedicated to McCormack and functions like a *Festschrift*, what is his response to the various analyses of his work in these essays? Perhaps a substantive introductory or concluding essay, or sections with introductions that frame the issues in each section, or some means for the authors of the essays to respond to one another would provide coherence to the volume and show specific ways in which this volume advances the current state of kenotic Christology.