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The goal of this review is to elucidate the following provocative passage, which will require doing so both on the terms of its author and in relation to the interests and purposes of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning:

Thus, the question (which asks the meaning of the given) receives this meaning, which will provoke the apparition of the given, only as the answer not of the interpreter, but of what is interpreted, the text. It will be, in this sense, the meaning of the *given, of the answer*. Thus, hermeneutics depends on the question and answer structure, that is to say the call and response structure, hence of the structure of the given articulated on the visible: hermeneutics itself is a special case of the play between what is given and what is shown, between the call of the given and the response (through the meaning) of what shows up in it.

The author of this passage is Jean-Luc Marion. Marion’s voice, in this printed and published version of the Père Marquette Lecture in Theology (2013) hosted by Marquette University, is that of the most important contemporary philosopher in the tradition of phenomenology. The primary question that drives Marion’s investigations in this little book is this: how does the category of “the given” within phenomenology relate to the hermeneutical task?

This special issue on phenomenology and Scripture has addressed this same question, along with related ones, with an intense amount of care and nuance. How does Marion’s recent book relate to the accomplishments and investigations of this special issue published by the *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning*? The obvious answer is the shared philosophical language, which represents a community of inquiry continuing their tradition of reasoning. Some may call this community of enquiry “Continental Philosophers,” while others may label it as “the theological turn” within 20th century

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1 I am grateful to the following colleagues and friends for increasing the quality of my elucidations in this book review: Carole Baker, Bill Elkins, Christopher Hackett, Stanley Hauerwas, Phil Kuehnert, Claire Partlow, and Ashley Tate.

phenomenological philosophy. Marion, himself, shows great skill as a contributor to this theologically-based phenomenology, but he also contributes to the mid-20th century debates found in American Philosophy on the category of “the given.” He presents the theories of W. V. O. Quine and Wilfred Sellars with clarity and precision but, ultimately, stops short of applying their theories to the hermeneutical task.

If we borrow from Friedrich Schleiermacher’s distinction between “General Hermeneutics” and “Special Hermeneutics,” then we can discern a difference between Marion’s book and the essays published in this special issue of The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning. By “General Hermeneutics,” I simply mean a theory of interpretation that applies to any and all texts; by “Special Hermeneutics,” I mean a theory of interpretation that applies exclusively to traditionally sacred texts. The contributors in this issue concern themselves with “Special Hermeneutics,” with the particular question of Scripture as revelation. Marion does not write as a “Catholic” theologian, and he does not raise the question of biblical or theological hermeneutics. Instead, he offers a theory of hermeneutics related to any text that, phenomenologically, presents itself to its readers.

What is Marion’s phenomenological theory of interpretation? We can outline an answer to this question with five points, the third and fourth of which are Marion’s own thesis statements. First, according to Marion, the reader does not “give” meaning to a text but becomes a “servant” to the text: “The meaning given by hermeneutics does not come…from the decision of the hermeneutical actor, as from that which the phenomenon itself is…waiting for and of which the hermeneutic actor remains a mere discoverer and therefore the servant” (41, 43). Marion’s logic here can be summarized in this way: because the interpreter discovers what is “given” within a text, even though the “given”

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3 The language of “the theological turn” seems to be the preference of the contributors gathered in this special issue on Phenomenology and Scripture.


5 I am aware that this is a gross oversimplification of Schleiermacher’s position and his hermeneutical reasoning; however, it remains a helpful heuristic device for getting into Marion’s argument.

6 Marion’s words are these: “[W]e should not, we cannot, take the instance of hermeneutics as the universal solution to the determination of the meaning of the given, as if it were self-evident and falling from the intelligible sky upon a given, which would remain obscure and problematic; for the act of interpretation looks no more obvious than the reception of the given, with which it share its enigmatic character. For hermeneutics does not operate on objects nor on sense data, of which it would modify at will, by arbitrary authority, the meaning…Hermeneutic practices a givenness of meaning on the given, from an appropriate meaning to the given, by securing and deciding it, but each time, it gives its meaning, that is to say the meaning that shows that given as itself, as a phenomenon which is shown in itself and by itself” (41).
remains mediated, the discovery leads to the conclusion that the role of the interpreter is
primarily that of “servant” in relation to the text being read and studied. How does an
interpreter serve a text? Marion answers, “The phenomenon is shown to the extent the
hermeneutical actor gives to the given the most appropriate meaning of that given
itself” (43). The “givenness” of the text remains primary in the act of interpretation. The
interpreter “gives” back to the text what the text “gives” to the interpreter. This first
aspect of Marion’s phenomenological theory of interpretation resembles what others call
“a hermeneutic of charity,” which is usually contrasted with “a hermeneutic of
suspicion.” If we employ terms from Anglo-American moral philosophy, then we can
make another connection with Marion’s phenomenological theory of interpretation: the
text is the primary agent within the act of interpretation, whereas the interpreter is the
secondary agent in the act of interpretation. Marion names this as a “structure of
reciprocal interpretation” (43), but the reciprocity does not require a shift in agency; the
“givenness” of the text maintains priority throughout the process of interpretation.

Lest we conclude, from the first point, that the reader remains an individual reader
in an immediate relationship with the text being interpreted, Marion’s argument—which
becomes the second point in terms of the outline in this review—is that texts never
address readers as individual interpreters: “[A] text does not speak to us as a ‘you’. It is
always to ‘us’, who understand, and of us, to make it talk” (45). Texts speak to readers in
the plural, not to a reader in the singular. This makes a difference for theories of
interpretation: any hermeneutical theory that argues for or assumes the authority of the
individual interpreter (interpretive autonomy, Romanticist theories of interpretation, or
“soul competency”) already violates the “givenness” of texts. Furthermore, this is the
place within Marion’s argument where concentrating on biblical or theological
hermeneutics would strengthen his phenomenological theory of interpretation in the sense
that the phenomenal features of the biblical narratives consistently seem to speak to their
readers in a necessarily plural sense: they speak to the people of God, rather than to
individual persons addressed by God.

7 For the clearest account of this distinction, see the collection of essays gathered by James K. A.
Smith & Henry Isaac Venema: The Hermeneutics of Charity: Interpretation, Selfhood, and
Postmodern Faith, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004).

8 Marion borrows two arguments from Gadamer’s theory of interpretation in order to explain
what he means by a “structure of reciprocal interpretation”: first, the notion of “the fusion of
horizons” because “hermeneutics becomes only correct if the two horizons meet and…merge” (43); second, Marion finds convincing Gadamer’s argument concerning how the “fusion
itself…involves a reciprocal process between the given (the past horizon here) and the
phenomenon (the present horizon, in this case); how to define this reciprocity, which will
reduplicate the interpretation of the hermeneutic person with the interpretation of the hermeneutic
person itself” (43, 45).

9 For the sake of clarification, the “givenness” of a text includes what texts “give” and “show” to
their readers and how readers receive what is given and shown.
In my judgment, this is the aspect of Marion’s hermeneutical theory that contributes the most to the practice of Scriptural Reasoning (SR). As a particular kind of practice, SR works on the assumption that the traditionally sacred texts of the Abrahamic traditions address a plurality of readers—not only multiple readers within a singular tradition but also multiple readers in the various traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. (The Tanakh—or, in Marion’s words, the phenomenal features of the Tanakh—not only addresses Jews in all times and in all places but also addresses Christians and Muslims who come to the SR table of study; the New Testament—the phenomenal features of the New Testament—not only addresses Christians in all times and in all places but also addresses Jews and Muslims who come to the SR table of study; the Quran—the phenomenal features of the Quran—not only addresses Muslims in all times and in all places but also address Jews and Christians.) SR teaches us that the narratives and passages of these traditionally sacred texts, called Scripture(s), are not speaking to “you,” in the singular, but to “us,” in the plural. SR is, therefore, a practice that mirrors Marion’s phenomenological theory of interpretation.10

Marion defends two thesis statements: (1) “hermeneutics must be understood according to the understanding of the given, through the call and answer figures” (47); (2) “if hermeneutics is rooted in understanding, if that understanding always means the pre-understanding, hence the opening of Dasein to its possibility, but if, in addition, the possibility opens to the call and response play, then we can have a glimpse of how hermeneutics can be articulated on the issue of givenness” (51).11 In terms of the outline of this review, these two thesis statements become the third and fourth points respectively. When Marion argues that “hermeneutics must be understood according to the understanding of the given, through the call and answer figures,” he means that the process of interpretation involves being attentive to what the text “gives” of itself and what the text “shows” of itself (see 47). Interpretation must come before “understanding” occurs; understanding is not prior to the act of interpretation. Our understanding is dependent upon and formed by what the text “gives” and “shows” to us. Additionally, when he argues that “we can have a glimpse of how hermeneutics can be articulated on the issue of givenness,” he means that the process of hermeneutics comes down to how the “given” gives itself and is received by interpreters as a particular kind of phenomenon. “Hence the last step,” Marion writes, “not any more to know how to

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11 For Marion’s explanation of Martin Heidegger’s use of Dasein, see pages 47-51.
understand (interpret) hermeneutics itself, but how to understand it so that it understands itself in it regarding the given” (51).12

This, however, is not “the last step”; there is one more important point that Marion makes within his phenomenological theory of interpretation. Marion argues that the domain and purpose of hermeneutics is this: “[H]ermeneutics manages the gap between what gives itself and what shows itself by interpreting the call (or intuition) by the response (concept or meaning)” (55). Readers interpret “the call” by responding to the “givenness” of the text. What does Marion mean by managing “the gap between what gives itself and what shows itself”? His own answer is the following: “The gap, in fact, never filled, between saturated intuition and the scarcity of meanings or concepts, must be lived, failing to be filled, by the invention of many, if not of all the possible interpretations of intuition” (59). Returning to the former quotation, we now understand the significance of the verb “manages”: hermeneutics never fills the gap between reader and text; hermeneutics only “manages” this gap. The hermeneutical task does not and should not confuse the relationship between caller and responder; it never replaces the caller with the responder, never substitutes the reader’s interpretation of the text with the text itself. However, the text still needs the reader to some degree because a “call” deserves a “response.” Marion claims that the “call,” on its own, is “blind” (see 55) because it needs to be recognized—a re-cognition, which is accomplished through readers responding to what the text gives and shows to us.13

What has Marion accomplished in his phenomenological theory of interpretation? In relation to Stanley Fish’s very popular “reader-response” theory of interpretation,14 Marion has employed some of the same categories and terms as Fish does, but he allows the text to “give” and “show” its own meaning. Fish’s theory tends to replace the text, itself, with the interpretation(s) of the text. For Marion, our “response” stands in a necessary relationship with the “call” from the text, and this “call” is how we hear and receive the “givenness” of the text. Both Fish’s and Marion’s theories of interpretation demand a “response” from readers; for Fish, the “response” replaces the text, whereas for Marion, the “response” occurs on the terms of the text’s own “call.”

Does Marion’s theory of interpretation make a contribution to the particular interests and purposes of the Society of Scriptural Reasoning? Yes, I think so. I

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12 The original quotation contains a few words in brackets, because of the difficulty with translation; however, I have removed the brackets to make the quotation easier to read.

13 Marion’s words are these: “Intuition [the call], given and received, stays blind—still shows nothing—as long as the ‘adonné’ does not recognize in it the meaning or meanings (or concepts) which will allow a phenomenon to show legitimately itself” (55).

14 See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
previously noted Marion’s emphasis on how texts address an “us” instead of a singular
“you,” and this matches up with the interests and purposes of SR. Additionally, Marion’s
emphasis on the “call” of the text relates to one of the academic concerns raised by
members within the Society of Scriptural Reasoning: the traditionally sacred texts of the
Abrahamic traditions continue to “call” upon professors and scholars to respond to what
these narratives and passages “give” and “show” to us. Although Marion does not
consider the particularity of these traditionally sacred texts as “Scripture,” those within
SR can and should borrow from Marion’s theory of interpretation to describe and explain
how biblical narratives and scriptural passages continue to “call” out to those of us whose
lives are spent teaching and writing. Certainly, Marion’s theory of interpretation is not
the only theory that offers such description and explanation, but it can be included in the
repertoire of theories from which SR theorists draw to clarify why we continually “return
to Scripture” as part of our academic responsibilities.  

15 See Peter Ochs (editor), *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in