The  Reduction of Scripture

Kevin Hart
The University of Virginia
The Australian Catholic University

If Scripture reveals anything, then what is revealed will belong by right to phenomenality. Immediately, however, two problems confront us. The first is fundamental to all phenomenology: things manifest themselves as phenomena only when nudged to do so. That nudging is called “reduction,” and as any reader of Husserl knows, there are various ways in which it happens. Which one, or ones, that apply to Scripture will be my chief concern in this paper. The second problem is also basic to the discipline: not all phenomena manifest themselves in the same manner. A real number gives itself to me in cognition and, in doing so, exhausts its phenomenality; an armchair manifests itself to me by way of a synthesis of profiles, and, in principle, it gives itself completely to my perception; my next trip to Australia offers itself to me in anticipation; my father displays himself to me in memories of my childhood and early adulthood, as well as in photographs of him; and certain images that may well appear in a poem I will write this month or next give themselves to me in fantasy. Few manifestations come with a high level of Evidenz: outside of logic and pure mathematics, we make do with lower levels and with having to look more than once. What, though, is the mode or modes of self-givenness appropriate to Scripture? Do we have the right to say that Scripture manifests the divine, and that all is needed is to work out the best way of explicating that manifestation? Or must we say that Scripture reveals the divine, and that a border runs between revelation and manifestation that we should respect?

There is reason to answer this last question in the affirmative, for even the most devout Christian has no reason to think that God fully manifests himself in Scripture, either in fact or in principle. I shall restrict myself to the Christian Bible. It tells us that much has been made manifest to us: that God has appeared in the form of a human being he calls his son, that the acts and words of this son are essential to us enjoying a filial relationship with God, and that we should therefore orient our lives by those acts and words. This is an economic revelation; it concerns only what is needed for our salvation.

---

Little or nothing is indicated in Scripture about what falls outside or beyond soteriology: what sort of being God uniquely is; exactly what relation obtains between himself and his son; whether the plan for our redemption is limited to our species or holds for all beings, no matter what; and the best way of thinking about how we are to conduct our moral lives, whether by way of divine command, intuition, moral law, virtue, or whatever. All of this is theology and religious ethics, and both presume the institution of the Church, even if they keep any one church or all churches at a distance.

True, it is indicated here and there in Scripture that God thinks it right for us not to have everything revealed to us: his glory would consume us were it made fully manifest to us in our sinful state. Think of God’s warning to Moses on Mt Sinai: “[Y]ou cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live” (Ex. 33: 20, NSRV). Also, it should be kept in mind that revelation might not be for everyone. Remember Matthew’s disconcerting account of Jesus’s words to his disciples: “The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’ With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: ‘You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive’” (Matt. 13: 13-14, NSRV). So revelation means at once revealing and re-veiling, but it is by no means clear whether the re-veiling is complete or partial, provisional or absolute, whether it yields a little to the interpretive brilliance of an Origen or to the speculative reach of a Barth, or whether it leaves both to be condemned as fantasists. Indeed, it is nowhere made clear to us whether the line between manifestation and revelation falls within Scripture or at its edge, or even whether it is one straight, undivided line. The “Catholic stratum” of Scripture is read with care to help us track the long and troubled passage from Scripture to creed and, long before we reach comprehensive creeds, to the institutional structures that form themselves around the quest to articulate them.

Yet no amount of vigilant reading assures us of moving in the right direction, or even whether there is a right direction. The history of the early Church shows us competing versions of Christianity, compromises and interpretations, different groups lobbying for hermeneutic control and the ecclesial power to enforce it. We say that the Holy Spirit moves in mysterious ways, meaning in part that she moves in and through the cunning of men, but one cannot evoke the Holy Spirit simply on the basis of Scripture; it was not until the revised version of the Nicene Creed in 381 that we have the beginnings of a definite pneumatology. In the early Church, dogma tended to settle slowly, often lagging behind liturgy, and it came long after theological insights of different sorts by those we now calmly divide into Fathers and heresiarchs. We live in a tradition because our roots are very far away from us, and in a tradition, we think in a hermeneutical spiral if not a hermeneutical circle. Faith turns a fragile beginning into an overflowing origin

---

that never was a mere beginning, while biblical criticism presses us to peel away talk of origins and find there, once again, a frangible beginning.

Once these two initial problems have been identified, others just as formidable spring up and demand our attention. Do all of the biblical authors make the same reduction or reductions, or must we distinguish between the reduction of prophecy, the reduction of wisdom, and so on? And do modern readers make the same reductions, in part or whole, as those who wrote the Scriptures they have before them?

***

In his own way, Husserl tacitly acknowledged a distinction between manifestation and revelation, for he knew that his idea of God belonged to a natural theology that could never be complemented by him with a theology of revelation. To talk of God would be to speak solely in terms of manifestation, but even that would be extremely difficult, since he knew that while ontology would always fall subject to reduction, the same was not true of God. Even though Husserl’s God is not supernatural, his mode of transcendence is wholly different from that of both absolute consciousness and the world. In a revealed theology, no one—phenomenologist, prophet or mystic—can prompt God to reveal himself, yet in a natural theology such as Husserl’s, in which no claim is made about God being a person, it might be otherwise. If God is already immanent in consciousness, Husserl suggests, it is in a manner entirely distinct from the pure immanence that is the goal of the phenomenological reduction. (Among other things, there would be noesis and noema in transcendental consciousness, but no ὅλη.) Hence, there is a choice: either one finds a mode of reduction (or reductions) that would make God manifest, or one deems God irreducible. Needless to say, the latter is not an alternative that appealed to Husserl.

We have to wait for Michel Henry to find someone trained in phenomenology who develops a case for the theoretical possibility of an immanent divinity. He insists on a mode of immanence prior to that for which Husserl argued in his transcendental phenomenology and, co-ordinate with it, a primal phenomenality in the subject that provides the essence of revelation, by which he means both manifestation and revelation

---


as I am using the words. The discernment of phenomena relies on this original phenomenality, he argues, just as representations depend on presence; consequently, ecstatic phenomenology derives from enstatic phenomenology, and the latter offers us the opportunity to explore both the divine life and our participation in it. For Henry, no reduction is necessary; we begin by conceding the primacy of phenomenality in our lived sense of the pathos and joy of life. Why we should not regard this pathos and joy as phenomena that have been constituted passively is not made clear in Henry’s trilogy about Christianity and, therefore, has the irreducible air of construction about it. Seen from the vantage point of C’est moi la vérité (1996), his master work L’Essence de la manifestation (1963) recapitulates what Henry takes to be the philosophical content of the Fourth Gospel, and it does so without reference to the Jesus who is historically encountered by men and women in the Holy Land and who becomes the subject of the testimonies in the Gospels and letters on which Christianity traditionally relies. Henry’s “philosophy of Christianity,” at least in C’est moi la vérité, ends up being closer to certain strains of Gnosticism than to the current that became orthodox Christianity.

I now put Henry to one side and return to Husserl. On his understanding, at least at the time of Ideas I (1913), God might manifest himself to us as a radical transcendence in immanence. It is a philosophical claim. What, though, if we cease speculating and consider the lived experience of the sacred? To be sure, Husserl thought that Rudolf Otto had made the first step towards a phenomenology of religious experience in his Das Heilige (1917). Precisely because Otto failed to make the reduction as outlined in Ideas I, it was merely a first step with no more to follow it directly. The Marburg theologian was stymied by proposing a particular sort of intuition appropriate to the sacred and by not placing himself on the firm ground of transcendental consciousness that reduction would have afforded him. Similar difficulties have beset Jean Héring and Max Scheler.

---


9 See, in particular, I am the Truth. In Words of Christ Henry finally discusses the synoptic Gospels.

Husserl thought, and will beleaguer Gerda Walther, as Heidegger found: all fail to bracket theological assumptions with sufficient rigor before engaging in a phenomenology of religious life. Positive Christianity, whether expressed doctrinally or experientially, would always bow before reduction and therefore become “free Christianity,” something that an exacting modern philosopher would not be embarrassed to confess. So Husserl never directly interested himself in the sacred, and his phenomenology of religion, if we can risk that expression, was always to be centered in God, not experience, and to be cashed out in teleology and ethics.

Not only did Husserl shy away from the work of younger contemporaries engaged in a phenomenology of religious experience, but he also stood apart from his great predecessor in reflective philosophy. He acknowledged that Descartes was the first to perform reduction, yet he makes no comment on the cogito’s internal dialogue with the God who precedes it in consciousness. Presumably, the Cartesian reduction is too precipitous for Husserl’s liking, and he has no wish to engage in any way with the ontological argument for the existence of God. All he allows with respect to Descartes’s discovery of the internal dialogue with the cogito is the insight that infinity is within me and, in a sense, precedes me. For Husserl, however, it forms a teleological and ethical horizon, not an ontological ground. To find a reduction that would uncover signs of this horizon in absolute consciousness would be the final task of phenomenology, and Husserl put it aside as too difficult to be considered at the time. Presumably, the task would fall to one of those generations of phenomenologists engaged in collaborative research about whom he fantasized, yet he lived to realize that this dream would never come about:

---

11 Husserl distances himself from Héring and Scheler, while Heidegger casts scorn on Walther’s Zur Phänomenologie der Mystik (1923) in his Ontology — The Hermeneutics of Facticity, trans. John van Buren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 58.


phenomenology had been hijacked by an unscientific concern with *Existenz* and had left transcendentual reduction behind.\(^{16}\)

What does “God” mean for Husserl? Certainly there is no indication that he ever thought of the deity of the Abrahamic religions. When he read the Gospels he did so as though reading a novel,\(^{17}\) and when he writes of God it is of an all-encompassing monad. He was in search, as he says, of “God without God,” of a deity who could be approached purely philosophically, much as one finds in Aristotle or Fichte, and so we do not find him treating revelation as a theme.\(^{18}\) Husserl’s God, unlike Descartes’s, is constrained to follow the eternal truths, so when we read of eidetic insight in *Ideas* I, we find that it extends to all possible subjects: “God is also bound to this absolute necessity given in insight, just as He is to discerning that 2+1 = 1+2. Even God can acquire cognition of His consciousness and consciousness-content by reflection.”\(^{19}\) Moreover, even God must gain his “whole being-sense for me” from my effective intentionality” [my emphasis],\(^{20}\) for “the subjective Apriori precedes the being of God and the world, the being of everything, individually and collectively, for me, the thinking subject. Even God is for me what he is, in consequence of my own productivity of consciousness.”\(^{21}\)

In Husserl’s view God is also subject, as everything is, to a process of idealization in eidetic history: “God is logicized, so to speak; indeed he becomes the bearer of the absolute logos.”\(^{22}\) Elsewhere in the *Crisis* he says, “The problem of God clearly contains the problem of ‘absolute’ reason as the teleological source of all reason in the world.”\(^{23}\) It is a constant refrain in the essays that appeared in *Kaizo* (1923-24), in the *Erste

---


\(^{19}\) Husserl, *Ideas* I, 187.


\(^{21}\) Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, 251; [my emphasis].

\(^{22}\) Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences*, 288.

\(^{23}\) Husserl, *Crisis*, 9.
Philosophie (1923-24), and in the Crisis (1936). This eidetic history is the passage from polytheism to monotheism, from belief in a personal God whose miraculous acts are testified in scripture to recognition of an ethical principle that takes the place of the deity and has no personal attributes. None of this talk about God’s “being-sense” being for me, or any of the tracing of eidetic history, presupposes that Husserl is creating an idol, but it underlines that what “God” means for me derives from my intentional consciousness, even if an inter-subjective community informs the meaning of the word and concept “God.” To find this God, this absolute monad, and to discern the teleological structure that eidetic history implies would require a reduction other than those that Husserl has already ventured. It would doubtless require various reductions, none of which would be complete.

For lack of an appropriate reduction, Husserl’s God remains abstract; he is more regulative than concrete, and so he sits awkwardly in classical phenomenology as a little piece of speculation in a world of pure description. And yet, Husserl saw phenomenology itself as a philosophical counterpart to Christianity; it was, in its own way, a continuation of the Enlightenment project of demythologizing Christianity as started by Kant and Fichte in their critiques of revelation. When Husserl spoke of the “conversion of the gaze,” he thought that there was indeed a μετάνοια that took place. See, for example, his letter to Roman Ingarden on August 31, 1923 where the Polish phenomenologist is told that he has received a “call” and has a spiritual mission: to help to establish a super-national humanity through philosophical work: “Sie sind berufen, bleiben Sie in der Liebe u. verlieren Sie sich nicht an die Welt.” One truly enters the Kingdom of God through the narrow gate of the reduction, it seems. Eugen Fink seems to have caught something of the same religious passion for the reduction, as he reformulates it in the Sixth Cartesian Meditation. He speaks of the “awful tremor” of passing through it and seeing an infinite world open up before his gaze. Husserl’s writings were, in a

24 As is well known, Husserl multiplied modes of reduction: apodictic, eidetic, inter-subjective, phenomenological, transcendental, universal, and so on. See, in particular, Erste Philosophie (1923-1924), II: Theorie der phänomenologischen Reduktion (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1959). As early as Ideas I § 33 Husserl speaks of reductions, yet only as late as the Crisis §41 does he distinguish the ἐποχή and the transcendental reduction.


28 Eugen Fink, Sixth Cartesian Meditation, 144.
sense, the scriptures of a new secular religion, one devoted to God without God and committed unconditionally to reason.

***

Of course, Husserl was never concerned as a philosopher with Scripture, or with any form of textual study. The idea that phenomenology could be pressed into the service of reading Scripture or other forms of writing comes only with Heidegger, and it is picked up and dropped very quickly. It happens in the winter semester of 1920-21, specifically when Heidegger is engaged in a “phenomenological explication” of 1 Thessalonians. Heidegger marks there a difference between a dogmatic and a phenomenological reading of Scripture: we must pass from asking the question “What?” to asking the question “How?” The manner of explication, Heidegger maintains, is determined by the phenomenon itself. This is the difference between an inquiry led by formalization rather than one guided by generalization, yet Heidegger does not follow Husserl in speaking of reduction; he will appeal to that process only later, in 1927 when he speaks of the development of philosophical method, and he characterizes reduction as a passage from beings to being. He has no wish to focus on acts of consciousness. His analysis of Dasein is a bold attempt to surpass that understanding of the self, yet he stresses the role of Befindlichkeit in attending to phenomena: certain basic moods lead us back to the way things really are.

Heidegger’s reading of Paul’s letters occurs before he achieves anything like a settled understanding and application of this vocabulary. At the time, he still orbits Dilthey and Schleiermacher, and he does so in preference to Husserl who takes little interest in factical life. Heidegger says, “The enactment of life is decisive. The complex of enactment is co-experienced in life.” Experience means both the event and the content, and no concrete separation between the two is possible. Each phenomenon consists of content, relation, and enactment: the first two appearing by way of the question “What?” and the last one coming only with the question “How?” The last question is decisive because, as he says, “Out of this it is to be made understandable that the How of the enactment has basic meaning. We are thus asking after the How of the


32 Heidegger, The Phenomenology of Religious Life, 56.
proclamation of Paul” (56). Only in following the way in which a phenomenon gives itself can we see how it is concretely experienced or lived. “We are relatively conveniently situated for answering this question,” Heidegger goes on, “for after all we have the How of proclamation before us in Paul’s letters. Within the formulation of the question of the How of proclamation, the epistolary character appears, all of a sudden, as a phenomenon” (56). No determinate content of the proclamation is assumed; there are no ascending steps of generalization and no descending steps of specification to follow, for one is concerned solely with the concrete instance or moment in which the phenomenon is meaningful. Paul and the Thessalonians live historically in a special way, before God; they do not live in peace and security but rather fully live the insecurity of life, in expectation of the παρουσία, and so they live temporality as such. This “enactment of life” foreshadows the formulation of Befindlichkeit and the leading back of beings to being—that is, of time as the horizon of being.

The phenomenology of Scripture, as practiced by Heidegger, was part of an overarching phenomenology of religious life rather than a phenomenology of God as undertaken by Husserl, yet this new turn in phenomenology was put aside when Heidegger became increasingly convinced, through his reading of Aristotle, that the philosopher must focus on finitude and follow an atheistic methodology. One might see that he was already on the way to that conclusion, for he does not distinguish between manifestation and revelation in his lectures on Paul. So, for the biblical scholar, a thread still hangs out of the Gesamtausgabe. Should it be picked up and tied to contemporary concerns, to a phenomenology that has now made the “theological turn” and to a biblical exegesis that has perhaps exhausted itself in following the historical-critical method? If it is picked up, care must be taken to look at what comes before and after it and to know what one is handling. To be sure, Heidegger moves away from the mentalist conception of reduction favored by Husserl as well as from a fussy way of formulating endless modes of reduction, and one cannot say that Befindlichkeit is a simple movement inwards; moods do not arise in us and then cue reduction, but rather they come over us and disclose the world in its fundamental structures. Not all phenomenologists practice reduction; Emmanuel Lévinas and Claude Romano are two notable exceptions. Nonetheless, for those who do affirm the need for reduction—Eugen Fink, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, above all—there is a general tendency for it to lead inward—if not to a transcendental aspect of consciousness (Husserl), then to a distinct transcendental consciousness (Fink), a subjectless transcendental field (Derrida) or a void at the heart of the self, l’adonné (Marion).

***

Phenomenology has had two main limitations in its dealings with religion in general and with Christian Scripture in particular. The first of these is the direction of reduction, and the second is the range of prompts for it. Reduction seems mostly to have taken place under the aegis of Augustine’s directive in De vere religione that truth dwells
in the “inner man.” It is well known that Husserl quotes it at the end of the *Cartesian Meditations* (1931); it is one of his signs of how phenomenology releases us from the God of dogma to find the God of reason, and, of course, Augustine writes of the inner man under the influence of Paul and Plotinus. This is not the only way in which reduction might be figured in the Christian tradition. One can find hints in the Middle Ages. Bonaventure’s *De reductione artium ad theologiam* argues that all disputes in the arts may be led back to questions that are fundamentally theological. He draws inspiration from Hugh of St Victor, chiefly in his commentary on the *Celestial Hierarchy* of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite who speaks in his own way of *reductio* and *conversio*. A little later one finds Richard of St Victor brooding on a conversion of the gaze that is appropriate to *contemplatio*. Nothing in these writings is phenomenology or even an adumbration of it in any technical sense of the word, yet these indices serve perhaps to dislodge the assumption that reduction must always pass inwards. In what other direction might it proceed?

Before considering that question, there is another about the range of prompts for reduction to pose and ponder. For Husserl, reduction is mental ἄσκησις; we convert the gaze from the natural attitude to the transcendental attitude. Marked by Heidegger’s early lectures, Fink will develop this notion and suggest that, in performing reduction, we free ourselves from captivation by the world. He also rightly notes that the one engaging in reduction must have a clue in that pre-philosophical state as to where he or she will be led back. It is Heidegger, however, who notes the importance of a *Stimmung* in passing from beings to being. Fundamental attunements such as dread (*Angst*) and deep boredom (*Langeweile*) lead us to see things as they are, stripped of conventional associations and consolations, and to these Heidegger adds others, including fright (*Erschrecken*), restraint (*Verhaltenheit*), foreboding (*Ahnung*) and timidity (*Scheu*). To be sure, all of these attunements can pull the veil from the world we encounter and give us a sense of its


34 See 2 Cor. 4: 16 and Rom. 7: 22-23, and Plotinus, *Enneads* 3. 2. 15.


38 See Fink, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, 139.
fragility. We see this clearly when we read the poets (George and Trakl, for instance), yet this list of attunement is not exhaustive and is doubtless skewed, for we may point also to the jolting change in how we see things when taken over by wonder or joy, by falling in love or simply by being thankful for life itself, even if it always comes crisscrossed with shadows. We see this if we read other poets (Jaccottet and Lorca, for example). These affirmative moods do not hide being but allow the world to manifest itself most fully. Nor is the fragility of mortal existence covered over; it too is allowed to stand forth, made all the more precious because of its finitude. Not that all reduction is precipitated by the grim or the delightful; sometimes it is a detachment that leads to seeing things in a neutral manner. The aesthetic gaze, Husserl admitted, is kin to the phenomenological gaze.\textsuperscript{39} Proust captures this shift of consciousness in Swann’s mind when he arrives at the Saint-Euverte house: “It was society as a whole, now that he was detached from it, which presented itself to him as a series of pictures.”\textsuperscript{40} Blanchot will take this style of reduction in a philosophical direction in his novels and \textit{récits} such that reality passes into image, and image is construed as being presenting itself as nothingness.

We see reduction happening in a new way in the figure of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels: it is detachment from the world but not in the manner we find in Proust and still less in Blanchot. In his short public ministry, Jesus preaches the Kingdom of God \(\betaασιλεία\ \tauοῦ\ \θεοῦ\), insisting that it is breaking into the world here and now and demands our immediate and absolute attention. Doubtless his notion of the Kingdom derives from Hebrew Scripture and its liturgical use in synagogue, certainly from the targum on Isaiah and perhaps also from the enthronement Psalms and from Wisdom. What does Jesus mean by “Kingdom of God”? Just this: to live the unity of the first two commandments: loving God first and foremost, and loving one’s neighbor as oneself. But Jesus does not think abstractly; he is the most concrete of all thinkers. When he preaches the Kingdom, he does so by way of an intense interlacing of metaphor and narrative that we call parable. Biblical scholars classify the parables in varying ways, usually designating only a few of them as parables of the Kingdom. However, all of them indicate one or more aspects of the new relationship to be had with the one Jesus calls “Father,” and if they are parables of wisdom or judgment, they are also parables of the Kingdom.\textsuperscript{41} In a parable, the Kingdom is momentarily able to be grasped: not an abbreviation of Torah, not a new set of rules to do with purity, not even a new way of praying, but an indirect indication of a rich relationship with God and one’s fellow humans that can be had and developed.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{40} Marcel Proust, \textit{Swann’s Way}, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Viking, 2002), 335.
\textsuperscript{41} See, for example, Arland J. Hultgren, \textit{The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary} (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002).
\end{flushright}
As recorded in the synoptic Gospels, Jesus’s parables bracket everyday life for a moment in order to nudge something else into focus. In an oral culture, a story sets labor and commerce aside for a little while. More, after this bracketing has been performed, these parables cue us to pass from “world” to “Kingdom,” precisely by putting scenes from the world (the prodigal son) or at a tangent to it (the lost coin) into play in the story. It is a difficult passage because Jesus’s audience is enthralled by the world: the world of daily farming that is needed to put food on the table, the religious world of the priesthood, the *imperium mundi* of the occupying Roman forces, and so on. Jesus wishes to alert us to the priority of his Father’s claim upon us; the demand to live by answering first and foremost to God, and to live in a compassionate way with regard to those around us, is something that predates our very existence. Notice that Jesus does not nudge us simply to pass within ourselves, to encounter God as hidden inside ourselves (as the *imago dei*, as conscience, the moral law, *verbum internum*); instead, he asks us to look to a call that unconditionally precedes us in life. The Kingdom has been hidden since before the foundation of the world yet inaugurated here and now, and if it is within us it is also outside us. If it has come it is also still to come in force; it abides in forging relationships with one another that will be possible not because relations with our neighbors are desirable in and of themselves, but because we know of the depth and extent of God’s love for us, which motivates us to respond to the neighbor’s call for compassionate aid and to hear that call as though it comes directly from the Father. Christianity treats indirection as direction.

When we read the Gospels, and even the letters that follow them and that refract the good news through fledgling Christian communities, we find that a reduction has indeed taken place: we are led back to the God who has always preceded us and who can be found in that network of relationships we call the Kingdom. The Bible consistently teaches us that we cannot reduce God, for to attempt to do so is idolatry. It teaches, rather, that we are reduced before God when we hear his word, led back to his prior claim on us. We do not bring God into the presence of consciousness, whether empirical or transcendental; instead, Scripture can be a means of conveying us to an appropriate distance before or within God’s presence. This acceptance that we stand before God who is present to us in ways we cannot discern is what the New Testament calls “faith.” It is not a pallid form of knowledge, as we are sometimes told, for it proceeds in the exact opposite direction that knowledge takes.

So far, I have been thinking about the power of Jesus’s parables to lead us back to the one he calls “Father,” but there is more to this passage than the parables, important though they surely are. Other words and acts of Jesus, as testified by the evangelists, can do the same, as can Christian rituals including prayer. It is the testified Jesus that counts for Christian faith far more so than the historical Jesus, for the evangelists consistently witness to the power of Jesus to break our enthrallment with the world and lead people back to the Kingdom, just as they have already been led there themselves. Of the fact that
the world can continue to enthrall us there can be no doubt: the “basilaic reduction,” as I call it, must be performed time and again, for the Kingdom falls between our thoughts, our words, and our actions and is easily forgotten. If the reduction is centered in the Gospels, the best way to describe it is given to us outside them in the letters of Paul. It does not come directly nor even philologically, but it is in the neighborhood of Paul’s theology that we find the words κένωσις and ἐπέκτασις. Basilaic reduction presumes an act of contraction, of withdrawal from the allure of “the world” before one can stand before God and before one can stretch out into the Kingdom, with all the risks that this movement involves. To be compassionate is to be vulnerable. It is after all the cross where we see κένωσις and ἐπέκτασις converge completely.

When Jesus tells the parables to people in the Holy Land they are enabled to pass from enthrallment with “the world” to the joy and anguish of “the Kingdom,” but they are only enabled; they must have already grasped in an inchoate way what “Kingdom” means. For we moderns, this passage is if anything more difficult, since we often have also to pass not just from the natural attitude but also from a highly elaborated and deeply inculcated form of the supernatural attitude: the naïve belief that there is a supernatural world much like the natural one but that contrasts with it. We are reduced, brought before God in faith, when we live the Kingdom—acknowledging divine rule and seeking to transform the place where we live. This involves a shift from theory to the pre-theoretical, from Creed to concrete life with God. Moreover, there is always, for those of us who have passed through the Enlightenment, a reduction of Scripture from the supernatural attitude to the phenomenological attitude. This is not a quest for “God without God,” as Husserl puts it, but rather a pilgrimage to God as God—that is, God who is Creator and Savior, God for us.

For the Christian, only Jesus is able to point us to God as God. This is because the Nicene Christian holds that Jesus is not simply the datum of revelation but is also the genitive of revelation. He is, as Origen put it so brilliantly, αὐτοβασιλεία, the Kingdom in person. The revelation of the Father is given to Jesus of Nazareth, for the Father remains invisible; in his preaching, other words, and actions, Jesus manifests this revelation to those around him, some of whom later testify to it. The New Testament gives us the manifestation of a revelation. Accordingly, it does not yield secret truths about the deity through our deep hermeneutics, but it tells us all that we need to know for our salvation. This is why we need historical criticism to keep us on the side of manifestation, and this is why we need phenomenology to let us see that at least some Scripture performs reduction on us.

For discussions of the basilaic reduction, see the central chapters of my Kingdoms of God (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

See Origen, Commentarium in Evangelium Matthei, 14. 7. 10. And not just Origen: see, for example, Albert the Great, On Cleaving to God, n. trans. (Blacksburg, VA: Wilder Pub., 2011), 6.
I have attended exclusively to the synoptic Gospels, and only barely so, for it is here that the basilica reduction is seen most clearly. A Christian who reads the gospels may well read the rest of the Bible in the light of the reduction they elicit, even if it is only partially made, and chances are that it will be a very inadequate reading of the whole. Yet we should be plain that basilica reduction is not the only mode of reduction in play when reading Scripture, for Scripture is varied and is also read with many ends in view: consolation, beauty, cultural interest, styles of redaction, messianic anticipation, and so on. A Christological orientation can be avoided or suspended when reading what Christians call the Old Testament. Anyone who reads the Psalms, Proverbs or Wisdom will not remain for long in the natural attitude, even if the text is read “as literature,” yet modern readers of the historical books in the Old Testament may well stay in the natural attitude for decent stretches of time, bringing its claims into line with what the historical criticism has established. Only if one is prompted to read certain biblical books in a spiritual manner (as Origen reads Leviticus, for example) might one pass to the transcendental attitude, although it is perfectly possible that one merely passes to the supernatural attitude instead. Modalization occurs when reading the Bible more than when reading many other texts, and not only for the believer. The reader passes from faith to doubt to renewed faith and so on, sometimes even in one reading. To be reduced before God is not to gain Evidenz of his presence. Were God to make himself fully evident to us in this life, we would doubtless be paralyzed with awe.

There are no general rubrics for reading Scripture, no one reduction that works throughout the Bible. Yet for the Christian, testimony about Jesus is decisive for reading those Scriptures consequent on him and those from which he drew, which of course is not the whole canon of the Hebrew Bible. The Christian always has in mind a canon within the canon (parts of Luke or John or Romans, for example) when reading Scripture, and the reduction in question for that inner canon is the one that counts the most in living a Christian life. If one opts for John or Romans as regulative, basilica reduction is probably presumed; if it is not, one is in danger of treating the Kingdom as a religious construction rather than as a revelation that has been made manifest.

*The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning,* Volume 13, Number 1 (June 2014)