

A Lucan Kenosis?
Luke's Concept of Truth as an Ethics of Service
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Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but poured out and emptied himself (ΕΑΥΤΟΝ ΕΚΕΝΩΣΕΝ-eauton ekenōsen) becoming a servant and, being born in the image of a human being, appeared in human form.

Paul - *Philippians 2: 5-8*¹

...many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and who became servants of the word...so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

Luke 1: 1-4

...Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are these words that you are throwing back and forth at each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him. "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days? He asked them, "What things?" They replied "The things about Jesus of Nazareth who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel...Then he said to them, "O how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"...So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and served it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he disappeared from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us...?"

Luke 24:13-35

Is this not, through the face of others, the very significance of the word of God, the unheard-of significance of the Transcendent that immediately concerns and awakens me?...[This is] kenosis—in which the "abstract" truth of monotheism is thought concretely, without the imagery of representation, the place into which the Infinite descends from the heavenly heights.

Emmanuel Levinas - "From Ethics to Exegesis"

In earlier issues of this journal we find fragments of a dialogue between Continental thinkers Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou in which the apostle Paul appears as a third conversation partner. Within Žižek's interview, "On Divine Self-Limitation and Revolutionary Love," we find kenosis, a

¹ All biblical quotes from NSRV with some modifications based on the Greek original in A. Marshall, ed., *The Interlinear NSRV – NIV Parallel New Testament in Greek and English* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993).

theological concept developed from Paul's use of the verb *kenoo*, which means to pour out and empty oneself, and refers to the incarnate God's divine self-limitation in order to fully assume the human condition. Zizek tells us about Paul in I Corinthians 13:

[his] first [point] is a kind of radical affirmation of love's priority, in the sense of "even if I got to know everything, and have all the power, without love I would be nothing, etc." But then two paragraphs later, he says—as if since now we don't know everything—all that we have is love. And I think that the two are to be read together. This is the paradox of Christianity, for me, that it's not God sitting up there and was a good enough guy to come to us. . . what we have to think, in a way, is the self-limitation of divinity itself.²

Zizek discusses Paul in relation to Badiou, who the journal interviews later in "Universal Truths & the Question of Religion." There Badiou suggests Paul offers us an alternative to modern philosophical approaches to the concept of truth:

I read Paul as a text about a new and provocative conception of truth and, more profoundly, about the general conditions for a new truth...[where] you are no longer confined to the strictly empirical or ontological field. You cannot reduce truth to grammatical correctness or to an experimental correlation between language and facts.³

Here I want to contribute to the conversation and suggest that the evangelist Luke has much to offer to contemporary discussions on these philosophical and theological topics, especially when read side-by-side with the Continental thinker Emmanuel Levinas. I will argue that a distinctively Lucan kenosis foreshadows many of the ideas present in Levinas' "ethics as first philosophy" and its critique of ontological understandings of truth. In his gospel Luke deploys kenotic language to show that the divine power of truth in Christ's kerygma is not what we could call a philosophical understanding of truth as correspondence to reality, but a kerygmatic truth found in servanthood. When imitating divine self-limitation in servanthood, we empty ourselves of the lust for the illusory power of an eternally "true" interpretation and realize, as Levinas does, that only in service to the concrete human other can we find the abstract face of the divinity.

I.

Kenosis, not a New Testament term, emerges as a theological concept only after post-Reformation theologians derive it from the hymn in *Philippians* 2: 5-11. The hymn praises Jesus Christ for emptying, stripping, releasing, and/or freeing himself from divine power in order to become a servant. Nevertheless, Paul's theology does not restrict the metaphorical use of kenosis to those few verses. In verses 16 and 17 he insists that the process is not one of running in the direction of an empty (*κενὸν*) destination, but indeed one of self-emptying. It is a process of being poured out (*σπένδομαι*) so as to achieve the goal he introduced in 1:23: to be filled by being dissolved and/or released (*αναλυσαι*) into Christ. We also find this kenotic vocabulary elsewhere in the Pauline corpus. For example, we find the same imagery and vocabulary of releasing and moving towards Christ in 2 Timothy 4: 5-7, immediately after he urged his listeners not to "turn away from listening to truth...[but] carry out your ministry fully." He tells us: "[A]void wrangling over words" (2:14) and "stupid and senseless controversies, you know they breed quarrels. And the lord's servant must not

² S. Zizek interview by Joshua Delpech-Ramey, "On Divine Self-Limitation and Revolutionary Love," *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture* 1, iss. 2 (2004): http://www.philosophyandscripture.org/Issue1-2/Slavoj_Zizek/slavoj_zizek.html. For a conspectus of classical and contemporary views on kenosis, including ministerial ones, see S. Coakley, "From *Kenosis* and *Subversion*" in *Powers and Submissions* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 3-40.

³ A. Badiou interview by Adam S. Miller, "Universal Truths & the Question of Religion: An Interview," *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture* 3, iss. 1 (2005): <http://www.philosophyandscripture.org/Issue3-1/Badiou/Badiou.html>.

be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone...” (2:23-24). Kenosis there requires servants to become empty and “cleanse themselves of these things so as to become a vessel of honor” (2:21). Kenotic imagery is definitely not just/merely/only an addendum to Philippians, but an essential preaching technique that conveys a crucial aspect of Paul’s message (cf. 1 Cor. 1 and/or Gal.5).

It has been suggested that in its original context the kenosis hymn involves a movement likened to a parabola—the curve of divine self-humbling from heaven to earth reaching its lowest point in death, the death of the cross, and then sweeping heavenwards again in Christ’s exaltation to divine lordship over all.⁴ Since the first centuries of Christianity we also find in Paul that we also have a parallel human parabolic movement. Athanasius in his *On the Incarnation* reads Paul as saying that it is only by approaching the “saints themselves by imitating their works,” and “emptying ourselves of thoughts [and] purifying the mind” by “washing and cleansing the soul,” that we can understand what has been revealed by God in Christ.⁵ This too is how Gregory of Nyssa understands Paul’s desire for dissolution since, being at first incomprehensible to human thoughts, “divinity empties itself (κενούται) so as to be graspable by human nature. Human nature, in its turn, rejuvenated, divinized by its mingling (αναλυσαι) with the Divine.”⁶ This mingling of dissolution into the other follows Christ’s original kenosis as described by Paul. Gregory poetically describes Christ as someone

who perceives a weak person carried away by a raging current. He knows that he himself will be sucked up by the whirlpool, wounded and lacerated by the rocks swept away by the water. But pity for this man in danger stimulates him. He does not hesitate to throw himself into the current.⁷

Since the patristic period many have understood such a pouring out, or dissolution, in kenosis as involving a releasing or relinquishing of divine powers. Christ empties himself of those characteristics that would impede his movement towards us in order to make space for our human condition. Others have characterized it as not involving divinity, but as an ethical event in the human life of Christ. Among the latter we find Thomas Aquinas, who saw kenosis not as a relinquishing of divine attributes but as a moral act. If Christ “poured out like water (Ps. xxi. 15),” this “emptying of Himself whereby the Invisible made Himself visible, was a bending down of mercy, not a fall from power.”⁸ Against Aquinas here, Jurgen Moltmann challenges assumptions about divine immutability and impassibility. In its powerlessness, “the kenosis of the Son to the point of death upon the cross is the ‘revelation of the entire Trinity.’”⁹ In our own powerlessness, we can participate in the parabolic movement through the Spirit because “the cross and its liberating effect make possible the movement of the Spirit from the Father to us.”¹⁰ My goal here is not to interpret Pauline kenosis, but to show that a distinctive integration of all these extra-temporal and time-bound aspects occur in Luke. Since lack of space does not allow me to reveal the kenotic complex at work in the entire gospel, I will discuss the introduction of the kenotic frame in the first chapter use of κενόν, which

⁴ J. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 114.

⁵ E. Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954).

⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *From Glory to Glory* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979), 178.

⁷ Ibid., 136.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers* Vol 1 S5b, Leo Sct. 1 Pt 2, <http://www.nlx.com/pstm/index.htm>.

⁹ J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 206.

Luke then brings to a peak in the last chapter with Christ's embodiment of servanthood at Emmaus.

II.

Luke opens his gospel announcing that he wrote it so “that you may know the truth concerning these things about which you have been instructed.” (1: 4). Yet only by the gospel's closing will the audience learn of the true meaning of “these things.” Both the opening and closing frame a kenotic program that from the very first chapter links divine kenosis with human servanthood, and not only that of the human Christ.

At the beginning of the gospel it is the very human Mary who embodies kenosis. An angel reveals that she will conceive a child, followed immediately by announcing that the fruit of her womb will have immense divine power. “He will be great, and called son of the Most Highest, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David” (1:28). So far, Luke presents the same understanding of messianic power that the disciples of Emmaus will later reiterate. Yet the angel's prophecy to Mary: “the power of the most High will overshadow you” (1:35) will be fulfilled not at the moment of conception but when she undergoes kenosis herself and answers: “Here am I the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.” (1:38).

Luke frames this kenosis within Mary's own kenotic hymn, where the Lord who “has cast down his eyes to the low estate of his servant girl” (1:48) initiates the parabolic movement in descent that will then propel her ascent. Mary then foreshadows Jesus' reading of Isaiah's scroll in Luke 4:18, where the self-casting down of divine power is revealed in ministry to the outcast and downtrodden. There Christ begins proclaiming his kerygma by announcing the good news to the poor. He has been sent to “proclaim recovery of sight to the blind, and release to the captive and oppressed” (4:18). In Luke, Mary is the first to announce this when she reveals that the Mighty One

has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart (διάηοια καρδια). He has unseated and brought down (καθειλεν) rulers from their thrones and has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich (πλουτουντας) away empty (κενον). He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy... (1:49-54).

How do we know Luke's use of *κενον* introduces a kenotic complex of metaphors in this last verse? Mary here perceives the thoughts, of many hearts, just as Jesus will often perceive the thoughts and questions of the Pharisees' hearts (i.e. 5:20). In both, the antagonism is not towards specific Jewish leaders, or even the rich in general, but towards the haughty and “rich,” the latter literally meaning those who are full, meaning in colloquial English: “full of themselves.” Luke presents Mary's ability to reveal the kenotic complex at work as the fulfillment of Simeon's prophecy in the next chapter, where he prophesies Mary's participation in both Christ's passion and prophetic spirit: “through your soul also will pass the sword, so that the thoughts (διαλογισμοί- *dialogismoi*) of many hearts may be revealed” (2:35). In her exemplification too of Isaiah's suffering servant she will reveal the thoughts of many hearts, igniting the disciples' own at Emmaus.

In Mary's words above we have the first instance of Lucan kenosis functioning as a critique of those who believe they have the truth. In 1:1 Luke writes about how he investigated the “truth,” (ασφάλεια – *asphaleia*) of these things. Instead of using *ἀληθεία*, the word for truth used in John's gospel, Luke uses *asphaleia*, which can serve to introduce the concept of truth's more philosophical meaning (as a cognitive state of certainty), but also introduce its more literal meaning (a perceived state of bodily equilibrium, feeling assured that one will not fall down). I suggest that the more literary meaning is at play when Mary's hymn introduces Luke's subversion of the first understandings of truth through his linguistic interplay and skillful puns, beginning with truth as *asphaleia*. Throughout his gospel, Luke will warn us about the dangers of confusing the certainty of truth with the idea of truth as certainty. He sees the latter as a state of immovability, overconfidence,

pride in the truth of one's convictions, that is, the pride before the fall when in the Marian hymn God's power scatters away the proud as they fall from their throne. The angel's prophecy to Mary about Christ's enthronement would then involve a reversal of the roles between the mighty and the meek, that in the hymn serve as basis for the linguistic interplay between emptiness and fullness. Those who are arrogant are brought down from their thrones and the humility of the downtrodden exalted. Those emptied of everything are filled. Those who are haughty, rich, and "full of themselves" are sent away empty. This will include the disciples at Emmaus who Jesus will unseat by reclining them at table (*κατακλιθῆναι*) and serving from the lowest seat—the servant's seat.

When Mary announces that the Lord unseats the haughty, she foretells Christ's doing so by sitting at table with them. As the bridegroom lord of the parable says: "I tell you the truth, [the lord] will dress up for service and recline with them to dine and serve them" (12:37). We know kenosis permeates the parable since Paul's release/dissolution/union (*αναλυσαι*) is applied to Christ here with kenotic connotations. The lord attending the marriage ritual will later (*αναλυσαι*) return and/or release himself from his ritual duties in order to come to them. Within a kenotic paradigm, one could read this as involving Christ's divine form. The master will be first attending to the duties pertaining to his divinity, yet when he moves towards us he will leave behind those constraints in order to become one with the servant; indeed, he will become a servant to the servants.

As in Luke 12, quasi-Pauline kenotic imagery accompanies those times Jesus reclines as a servant at table. We have the last supper where Christ serves his disciples "this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (22:20). We also have Luke 1,1 where at a table a Pharisee rebukes him for not washing before dinner. Jesus responds: "you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness" (22:39). In the former, Luke recalls that if Christ is to pour out himself, his recipient must be empty, for "no one pours new wine into old wineskins" (5:37) already full of old wine. Already in 6:43 Jesus advised his listeners to empty themselves from pride and not judge so that "a good measure running over will be poured in your lap." When the Pharisee rebukes Christ by insisting on the words of scriptural laws, the counter response is that one ought to instead "give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you" (41). It is a Pharisaic neglect of justice that Christ criticizes, and he does so by unseating those who "love to have the seat of honor (11:43). Thus Mary foresees the fall of pride from its seat just as Jesus did when he saw "Satan fall from heaven like lightning" (10:22). When the bridegroom lord reveals the truth as service, he takes the lowest seat, just as Jesus unseats the Pharisee's pride—his certainty on holding the "truth" of scriptural words—thus revealing the shakiness of the Pharisee's foundation, his illusory *asphaleia*.

Christ's pouring out unseats the haughty just as the overflowing river washes away both the evil person who speaks out of the overflow of his [full] heart (6:45) and the one who "built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell (6:49)." He opposes to the former, and to those full of themselves who give alms "out of their overflow," the poor widow, one of Mary's downtrodden, who "out of her poverty has poured in all" (21:20). To the latter, he contrasts the example of the wise king who recognizes his weak military foundation and seeks reconciliation with his enemies (15). The example recalls Paul's message of becoming a servant and avoiding empty quarrels, the one Jesus introduces immediately after the bridegroom parable in Luke 12. Jesus prophesies that his name will be the cause of quarrel, bringing not peace on earth, but division. He cautions his listeners not to settle disputes with the power of the law at the magistrate, but "on the way there, seek reconciliation with your opponent" (12:58). We should note that on the road to Emmaus we will encounter the verb *antiballō* (*ἀντιβάλλω*) in the disciples throwing words at each other. This is the same verb Paul uses for "disputing." We should also keep in mind the widow's pouring out (vb. *βάλλω*- *ballō*). Hers is the answer to what, imitating Luke's kenotic linguistic play, we might translate the verb in a more violent way: as the disciples' "pouring words down each other's throats."

III.

Recalling this allows us to see why Luke also appropriates what Badiou proposed in this journal as Paul's "new and provocative new concept of truth."¹¹ Luke's Christ event sets a chain reaction of events that portray him as a "sign of dispute." Following Paul, Luke sees Christ's message as insisting on reconciliation and overcoming differences in the sharing of bread. He emphasizes Christ's appearance to the disciples as a reaction to their dispute with each other about "these things" through his use of the rare, distinctive Pauline verb for dispute.¹² Disputes where rivals defend their claim to possess theological truth by pouring words down each other's throats become in the Pauline Luke an *anti*-kenosis. I thus conclude by proposing to join Luke with Levinas in the latter's concepts of kenosis, where the eternal event of infinite, *abstract* truth can only happen in the temporal, finite, *concrete* event: the encounter with a human other. We will see that both share a concept of an ethics of service as first philosophy-theology.

For Levinas, an ethics of service is first philosophy because, unlike what philosophy has attempted to do in its misguided quest for objective truth, we cannot attempt to first establish a foundation in a purportedly "true," objective, account of reality and then derive from it a guide for inter-subjective ethical behavior. The truth of our interpretations can emerge only after the interaction with another, at least to compare perspectives in order to be assured of the "objective truth" of our own views and the falsity of that other. Yet Levinas goes further and radically suggests that if after these comparative disputes we consider ourselves vindicated at another's expense, we have failed to encounter that other which is the foundational prerequisite for any truth. Even then this is not the only place where his critique of philosophical foundationalism resonates with Luke's own overthrowing of *asphaleia*'s foundationalism.

For Levinas, ethics frustrates any attempt to systematize truth in a rigid schema. The appearance of the other's face announces what is incommensurable with our ideas about truth, just as the appearance of the stranger at Emmaus announces Christ's incommensurable divinity. Only when the disciples offer hospitality do they recognize this, only, appropriating Levinas elsewhere, in the "welcome of the face, in *hospitality* and not thematization."¹³ As a Jewish talmudist, Levinas often preached on the biblical commandment to welcome "the stranger for you were also strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:20). Explicitly reading Pauline kenosis in its original Jewish scriptural context, he identifies true divinization with the imitation of God who suffers with his people:

...man is the soul of all "the worlds," of all beings, all life, like the Creator himself. And this, not in the name of any pride or diabolical pretention, but by the will of God himself, who did not recoil from that equality with the human, or even from a certain kind of subordination to the human.¹⁴

Following Christ's example in *Philippians*, one should not grasp after divine truth in order to know and possess it. Extending Levinas' Biblical exegesis, we could add that in seeking to grasp and possess truth, we would be but re-enacting primordial sin: lusting to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, seeking to fulfill the serpent's promise that if we do so we would attain equality with God. Yet even in the failure of the pride before the fall can truth arise out of what elsewhere

¹¹A. Badiou, "Universal Truths & the Question of Religion," www.philosophyandscripture.org/Issue3-1/Badiou/Badiou.html.

¹² I thank Michael Anthony Fowler for our discussions on this issue and others, all of which helped to improve this paper.

¹³ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, Pa: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 299.

¹⁴ E. Levinas, "From *Judaism and Kenosis*," in *The Time of the Nations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 124.

Levinas calls the “erotic” aspect of truth:

Can this relationship with the other through Eros be characterized as a failure? Once again, the answer is yes, if one adopts the terminology of current descriptions, if one wants to characterize the erotic by “grasping,” “possessing,” or “knowing”...If one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be the other. Possessing, knowing and grasping are synonyms of power.¹⁵

It is not surprising then that Levinas counsels us to consider here ethics as first philosophy using “kenotic” language. Following the example of the Christ we met in Paul's *Philippians*, we should not grasp after a divine truth in order to know and possess it, but humanize truth by subordinating it to ethics in our self-limitation in service to others. This may require suffering, or a kenotic power-in-vulnerability.¹⁶ Levinas tells us that this subordination requires: “vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution.” This violence done to us can involve undergoing the same physical persecutions that many human beings suffer, victims today of what Levinas calls “the same anti-Semitism” that has plagued history. Or it can be a “philosophical” violence we must endure in order not to be guilty of what Badiou calls “anti-Semitism,” which presents the views of others as “bad” and ours as “good.”¹⁷ In either case anti-Semitism reflects nothing but self-inflicted blindness.

We can realize now why Christ appears as a stranger not only as a result of the disciples' blindness. Levinas' kenosis is a variant of his concept of *proximity* which illuminates why for Luke, as for Levinas, Christ's kenosis occurs concretely, “without the imagery of representation,” and why it requires Christ to appear as a stranger and then disappear from the disciples' sight. It also illustrates and extends what Zizek says above when he refers to John 10, where Jesus who tells his disciples he has to disappear so that the Holy Spirit may come. Proximity involves a relationship with the abstract through the concrete:

Proximity is a relationship with what cannot be resolved into “images” and exposed. It is a relationship not with what is inordinate with respect to a theme but with what is incommensurable with it; with what cannot be identified in the kerygmatic logos.¹⁸

Christ's kenosis occurs in the encounter with the human other, not in a kerygma purportedly representing a factual truth. Christ's kenosis requires his disappearance so that the disciples do not reduce the kerygma to his image, confuse the logos with the *dialogismoi*, or confuse the Word with words—with those thoughts and reasonings Mary and Christ perceive in the hearts of the proud. The message is to search for him instead in the “image of a human being,” which he took in kenosis. At Emmaus he reveals why he, and others, “had to suffer these things.” It is for the same reason that he prophesied his suffering before serving his disciples, saying “this cup that is poured out for you [which] is the new covenant in my blood” (22:20). At Emmaus (24:15) a new sense of might, (Gk. *dynamis*), is involved, paralleling not the immobility of *asphaleia*, but the might of God's arm in Mary's hymn and the dynamic power that Christ felt flowing out from him when healing a woman who had been suffering a flow of blood for years (8:34). Christ suffered and poured out his blood so that he would be found in the image of those already empty, those like her whose blood

¹⁵ E. Levinas, “Time and the Other,” *The Levinas Reader* ed. Sean Hand (Cambridge, MA : Blackwell, 1989), 51.

¹⁶ See S. Coakley above for further discussion.

¹⁷ A. Badiou. “Universal Truths & the Question of Religion,” www.philosophyandscripture.org/Issue3-1/Badiou/Badiou.html

¹⁸ ‘Substitution’ *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 80.

pours out. She, who poured herself in trembling humility and fell down before him, Christ exalts as a model of kenosis which, along with the poor widow, we can contrast with the Emmaus disciples' pouring out words down each others' throats. As Levinas claims is the basic commandment of kenosis, the kerygma involves emptying ourselves of pride and becoming the servant we meet in Deuteronomy who "executes justice for the orphan and widow, and who loves the stranger, providing them food" (Deuteronomy 10:18). Kenotic love is not about universal truth but about leaving behind disputes and meeting the other where he or she is, share bread with him or her, so that then and only then can the truth of the gospel as good news be actualized.