



PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND DIALOGIC THINKING IN SPIRITUAL READING: SPIRITUAL PARADIGMS OF SELECTED BIBLICAL FIGURES

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*The paper explores spiritual reading through the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Dialogue of Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas, as the transition from phenomenology to dialogic thinking. This is fundamentally anchored on Kees Waaijman's design for the discipline of spirituality in his book **Spirituality. Forms, Foundations and Methods**. The investigation centers on the movements, moments, and layers involved in the spiritual dynamic relationship. This is articulated more through the examination of selected biblical figures. As the paper draws to an end, it describes phenomenologically what spiritual reading is, including the layers involved both in the reality of God and the human person.*

Keywords: Spiritual Reading, Phenomenology, Dialogic Thinking, Biblical Figures

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INTRODUCTION

“What is Spiritual Reading?” is the key question of this paper. To explore this, we must first investigate the dynamics of spirituality - the movements, moments, and layers - involved in the Divine-human relationship. Then, we will investigate a suitable approach and paradigm that pays attention to and is oriented toward the dynamics of spiritual relation and its goal. Through selected biblical figures, the movements, moments, and layers of the Divine and Human relation are surfaced, described, and interpreted.

THE DYNAMICS AND MOVEMENTS IN SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is fundamentally the dynamic relationship between God and the human person. In the standard reference, *Spirituality, Forms, Foundations, and Methods* of Kees Waaijman, he investigated fifty-four forms (configurations, movements, and units) of spirituality. He surfaced the dynamic movements, moments, and layers in the relationship between God and the human person. In the investigation of Waaijman, the realities of God and the human person constitute an initial relational whole within which the two realities manifest themselves.

The Divine-human relatedness takes place in reciprocity. God gives Himself in the reciprocal relationship as He reveals, communicates, and donates Himself. In Self-Donation, God stirs holy fear, purifies, sanctifies, and perfects the human person. Also, the human faculties, intellect, memory, and will, including the passions are re-ordered to God. Lived spiritual experiences such as fear of the Lord, contemplation, devotion, piety, asceticism, inner

life, mysticism, and perfection, capture and articulate well the dynamics of reciprocity in the relation between God and the human person.²

With this understanding, we ask the question, “What method is suitable in the field of spirituality that is epistemologically situated within the cognitive domain that reflects on human experiences?” We must consider on one hand, the concreteness of experience while, on the other hand, remain directed toward the goal of relation that is perfection in contemplation, the inworking of God in the human person. Waaijman offers the combination of phenomenology and dialogic thinking, giving emphasis on experience, as well as its contemplative investigation and the primacy of difference (alterity); that which is other, the other, and the Other from within the Divine reason shape the logic of man, and this logic becomes recognizable in its transformation.³

Let us now briefly consider the phenomenology of Husserl, the dialogue of Buber, and the integration of phenomenology and dialogic thinking in Levinas, that give the paradigmatic form. Levinas’ way of thinking can be located roughly at the transition point between phenomenology and dialogic thinking.⁴

PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD

Phenomenology takes its point of departure from lived experience, and the everyday world in which we live (Lebenswelt), which is characterized by a polar structure. In the context of experience, an experiencing consciousness and an experience orientedness are related to each other. Both the things in the world and

¹ This paper is written in honor of Fr. Kees Waaijman, O. Carm., a scholar, teacher, and guide par excellence in spirituality.

² Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Methods*. Peeters: Leuven, 2002, 364-365.

³ *Ibid.*, 535.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 536.



the human consciousness define themselves in relation to each other within this intentionality.⁵

The phenomenological method starts and ends with experience because that is where the final accessible sources of experience are situated. Our experiences, as a rule, are limited to the praxis of everyday life. Experience is brought to the forefront of phenomenology, where it is investigated, viewed from a variety of perspectives, and an attempt is made to make the fundamental structure of experience explicit. The goal is to analyze a situation in such a way that one can distill it down to its fundamental components. To be successful at this, one needs to get past the “surface” level of it, which consists of things that are intuitive and not well thought out. This is accomplished through the utilization of phenomenological methods, which intend to “go back to the things themselves.”

The study of experience, along with all its implications, is what holds the phenomenologist’s interest. Having said that, an experience does not always readily reveal its truth. Because of the unpredictable nature of the world in which we live, we have a propensity to view things solely from a finite number of perspectives. Certain readings have their meanings predetermined in advance. The judgments that we have formed, such as “that’s the way it is,” are not something that we plan to reconsider. In addition to this, we have developed the ability to view things through the perspectives of significant others. As a direct consequence of this, prejudices, talk, and opinions continue to obscure the reality of experience.⁶

The intent is to arrive at a phenomenological description that is a precise articulation of a certain mode in which something manifests

itself as it unfolds from a particular point of view. When we describe something in a spontaneous manner, we are typically locked into certain reading tracks. To get closer to the thing itself, one needs to adopt a phenomenological attitude. This is a requirement. The most significant approaches that define a phenomenological way of working will be discussed in the following section.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL ATTITUDE

To arrive at a phenomenological description, one must first refrain (*epochè*) from this habit and look for an attitude from which a phenomenon can be seen in a different light. Writing allows persons to disassociate themselves from their typical attitude and develop an eye for a different nuance. Both goals can be accomplished through consistent practice. Writing helps to disentangle a certain way of perceiving and the reality structure that is associated with it from the prejudices and fixations that are associated with them. The writer (and, ultimately, the reader as well) are led to new perspectives and realizations using recognizable descriptions of experience (typically beginning with sensory experience or the performance of intentional acts). The primary goal of description is to provoke mental shifts that lead to new perspectives. The purpose of the writing process is to return to a familiar experience to look at it with fresh eyes by way of a detour created by physically separating oneself from the experience.⁷

There is always a component of interpretation involved in actual lived experience. It cannot be denied that we are constantly involved in the act of reading reality. The act of interpreting something as something else lies at the very heart of this process. This is the key distinction

⁵ Ibid., 536-537.

⁶ Ibid., 537.

⁷ Ibid., 539-540.



between describing something and interpreting what it means: The goal of description is to put into words what is already obvious, whereas the goal of interpretation is to understand something in terms of something else. We are constantly engaged in the process of interpretation: we understand the flow of our experience as “I,” we refer to the things around us as the “world,” and we interpret the other as our “alter ego.” As a result, we do not just interpret texts; we also interpret ourselves, the situation we are in, our history, and the other person.⁸

How do I process the phenomenon intended by my consciousness? Eidetic reduction is rooted in the human approach to reality as it is, and it is an essential component of all scientific investigation. In the process of eidetic reduction, there are two distinct moments that can be identified: the first is the act of distancing oneself from the natural attitude,⁹ and the second is the act of thinking in the direction of the thing itself, which is a component of the lifeworld.¹⁰ The lived experience loses its spontaneous claim that reality is “thus” and not otherwise at the very beginning of the experience. So-called facts are ignored, cast into doubt, and whittled down to nothingness (reduction). The making of a proclamation regarding what something is has been put on hold (epochè). This reduction and suspension of judgment is not intended to deny reality but rather to elucidate it from the bottom up and to induce it to speak for itself. In other words, the goal is not to deny reality but rather to elucidate it. Therefore, the second moment is an essential component of eidetic reduction. This moment involves the recognition of the essence, also known as ideation, and involves seeing the thing itself in and through the various nuances.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ E. Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy* (1st book), The Hague -Boston Lancaster: Springer, 1983, 57ff.

¹⁰ E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970, 143ff.

This intuition of essence (within phenomenology) absolutely needs to be always regarded as an intentional occurrence. The method that ultimately leads to the comprehension of essence is called variation.¹¹ The following three stages constitute this approach to the problem:

(1) The first step is to select a specific real-world instance to use as an example. As an example, this then starts to direct how the thought processes work. Every single concrete experience has the potential to serve as an example and become the basis for further variation.¹²

(2) The second step is called variation, and it consists of the following: beginning with the example, a wide variety of variants march past our attentive spirit in a free imagination. When one engages in variation, they continually test and push the boundaries of the concept that they have formed. In the same vein, there is always something that is suitable for inclusion in the picture too. The investigation into the myriad ways in which these two things are alike and different must not be hampered in any way. The fundamental character of “the act of seeing ideas” includes “the freedom of variation,” which is a part of “the act of seeing ideas.”¹³

(3) The third step is to have an intuitive understanding of the essence. To arrive at the essential seeing of an example, the searching mind needs to concentrate on all the variations, both the congruent and the incongruent. Congruence is when overlapping variants cover each other, and incongruence is when they do not (where the variants are in conflict and drive each other out of commonality). During the process of transitioning between the overlapping variants, the general emerges as the primary component

¹¹ Ibid., 543.

¹² E. Husserl, *Experience and Judgment. Investigation in the Genealogy of Logic*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973, 339-364.

¹³ Ibid.





of the things' fundamental structure (*eidos*). The congruent illuminates itself, revealing a synthetic unity within which the variants appear as variations of the essential. "The thing itself," an invariant is necessarily retained as the necessary general form, without which an object such as this thing, as an example of its kind, would not be thinkable at all. It then becomes apparent that a unity runs through this multiplicity of successive figures, that in such free variations of an original image, for example of a thing, an invariant is necessarily retained as the necessary general form. The essence, also known as the fundamental structure or *eidos*, is the "genre" that prescribes the rules that empirical special cases cannot exceed. It is an *a priori* that, in its validity, precedes all factuality; it is a "pure possibility" and an "open infinity" for the purpose of its self-presentation. For this fundamental structure to become visible, there must be a concentrated focus placed on the similarities that exist among the differences. The concept of *eidos*, or genre, is not "apprehended directly and in itself" until this point.¹⁴

In the trajectory of spirituality, we see phenomenology dealing with the lived experience, that is, the dynamics of relation between God and the human person. However, spirituality moves in a specific direction, into a goal that is God who comes in contemplation through which the human person is perfected.

DIALOGIC THINKING

Dialogic thinking is a paradigmatic approach to the Divine-human relationship. It pays attention to the moments and movements in the relationship which are necessary in the reading of spiritual dynamics. Let us now look at these

moments and movements as we consider the works of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas.

DESIRE

Buber's *Mysticism of I and Thou* describes a natural dialogical dimension in human beings that may have been envisaged before creation. He says the I separated the developing being from this innate connectedness. It separated itself to bind itself to the appearing you, even though this intention was solely lived. Buber calls this desire for connection the "drive to turn everything into a You." As the I detaches from its natural connectedness with the All, the desire for a new connectedness grows. "A priori of relation" describes this innate desire to gravitate toward You. It defines us. It is our inherent link.¹⁵

Detachment and desire make the god-relationship essential. "Aspires beyond all of them and yet not all the way toward his eternal You" is the infinite desire that arises from the fact that beings are separate from one another. "The I is separated from the infinite," Levinas repeats in the setting of their relationship. This connection is negative in a way that the infinity is within us. Even though we can think about it, the infinity is beyond our comprehension. It constantly contemplates its own. Only desire can measure the infinite. It is "unquenchable" because it does not need food. This unsatisfied urge makes the other's difference apparent. The Desire for the Other is not seeking what it lacks. Desire's cupped hand is infinitely open because it takes what cannot be contained and does not comprehend it. In this sense, desire is transcendence, "more interior than my interior."¹⁶

¹⁵ Waaijman, 549. See *M. Buber, I and Thou*. New York 1970 (First Touchstone Edition 1996), 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 550. See *Meaning and Sense in Emmanuel Levinas. Basic Philosophical Writings*, (Ed. A. Peperzak, S. Critchley, & R. Bernasconi), Bloomington-Indianapolis 1996, 51. Also, See *M. Buber, I and Thou*. New York 1970 (First Touchstone Edition 1996), 71-74.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*





RELATEDNESS, GRACED ENCOUNTERS, AND DIALOGUE

The I's liberation from its innate connectedness is now absorbed into the immediate relationship to the appearing You. The uniqueness of this "original relational event" comes from its singularity. I and You are opposing movements that reveal each other in an intimate face-to-face encounter. It is a unique "each other," not a freely chosen one. I-You relations, which differentiate later moments, stick out more than the general context of this initial relational event. Buber describes such encounter as grace, not sought. In this encounter, I define myself by my relationship to you. The I respond to you by touching you back. When I give back, I react to the other person when his difference does not make me indifferent. "Dialogue is the non-indifference of the you to the I; a disinterested sentiment certainly capable of degenerating into hatred, but a chance for what we must—perhaps with prudence—call love and resemblance in love." "Dialogue is the non-indifference of you to I." Considering all of this, the I gives back what the I has become because of you by alluding to you.¹⁷

PRESENCE

The I's response makes You exclusive. "As a being we confront and accept as exclusive..." "Exclusive" and "confront" are mutually suggestive: something that shows itself to me as exclusive is over against me. This space's "exclusive overagainstness" reveals You. Presence is the time of contact when You show yourself as "the present" and "that which remains over against." Overagainstness and presence reflect

¹⁷ See E. Levinas, *Freedom and Command in Collected Philosophical Papers*, (Trans. A. Lingis), Pittsburgh (PA) 1998, 19; E. Levinas, *Of God who comes to Mind*, Stanford 1998, 147; and E. Levinas, *Enigma and Phenomenon* in Emmanuel Levinas. *Basic Philosophical Writings*, (Ed. A Peperzak, S. Critchley, & R. Bernasconi), Bloomington-Indianapolis 1996, 77.

your temporal and spatial encounter.¹⁸ This paves way for reciprocity.

RECIPROCITY

The "I" wants "You" and "encounters" you. The I answers with being, and the You responds with presence and overagainstness. Counter-interiority — a two-way movement — is reciprocity of touch. Two opposing motions share the same contact area between these two movements. Space-between exchange reveals contact's interiority. This center of intersubjectivity, which sustains and generates life, is beyond mutual touch. Buber believes that true communities are formed when "all of them stand in a living reciprocal [counter-interior] relationship to a single living center (this is the transcendent side of the In-Between, the all-sustaining, all-uniting, and at the same time the all-surpassing center,) and that they stand in a living reciprocal relationship to one another (this is the tangible structure of the Between)." A community's living reciprocal [counter-interior] connection is its structure, but its builder is its life.¹⁹

The You is "seamless" and "neighborless," according to Buber. Levinas calls this You as the Other who is my interlocutor, who interacts with me and expresses himself through himself (expression). In *Totality and Infinity*,²⁰ Levinas says, "It expresses itself." Sign-character is suspended because there is no space between the sign and its signifier. To manifest oneself as a face is to "impose oneself above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form, to present oneself in a mode irreducible to

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 552. See E. Levinas, *Of God who comes to Mind*, Stanford 1998, 147; and M. Buber, *I and Thou*, New York 1970 (First Touchstone Edition 1996), 79.

¹⁹ Buber, 63, 79, 82, 94.

²⁰ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity, An Essay on Exteriority*, Pittsburg 1969, 51, 140, 142, 177-178, 182, 200, 261, 262, and 296.



manifestation, the very straightforwardness of the face to face, without the intermediary of any image, in one's nudity..." The face's meaning is its presence, even when a person is nude." The signification of the face is due to an essential coinciding of the existent and the signifier, meaning the face is what it denotes. The face's expressiveness is not limited to the face; it is an individual's presence that can show itself anywhere.²¹

RECEPTIVITY

In the relational process, reception shapes my relationship to the other. To "receive from the other beyond the capacity of the I,"²² the "I" must allow my idea to burst because the other person is beyond my comprehension. Only "the welcome of the face" is beyond my comprehension. Repetition and memory storage of instant relations dissolves "You." It is introduced regardless of its effect on others. Because of this, "You" expresses a fact independent of an "I". Over time, the "I" acquires a unique profile. In every outgoing action, it sees itself as independent. Despite shifting relationships, the "I" impulsively experiences itself as "the constant partner." This constant companion ultimately disconnects from "You." This separate self owns itself and orients itself to itself.²³

The I-you interactions are ambiguous, allowing two options. After an encounter, the "I" identifies with his negative traits because of his relationship to "You," or he does not. This identification separates the I-related facet from the encounter and posits it as the basic word: I-it. In this form, "I-you" and "I-it" are reconnected. If this is true, then the "I's" becoming through his relation to "You" may be relativized by its core, which is

²¹ Ibid., 51.

²² Buber, 80-81.

²³ Ibid.

two-way interaction. Thus, the "You" can reflect themselves in the "it" and bring it back to life, and the "I" can become "I" again through my relation to the "You," relativizing the "it's" egoism. The second choice can lead to the ideal relationship, the mysticism of "I and you."²⁴

PASSIVITY

Martin Buber speaks of not-doing as "[t]he activity of the human being who has become whole is called not-doing, for nothing particular, nothing partial is at work in man, and as a result, nothing of him intrudes into the world." As an active whole, the human being is active here, closed and at ease. Buber concludes that "the action of the whole being...comes to resemble passivity. The activity of the human being who has become whole" is not doing when what you say and what you are agree. Doing nothing may not be an action that follows completion. "Where the human being has become an active whole" is the process of becoming whole. This involves integrating two separate aspects. "Where nothing particular, nothing partial, is at work in man," and "the whole human being, closed in its wholeness, at rest in its wholeness...is active here." "An environment in which the human being has evolved into a dynamic whole." Doing nothing is essential to finding the eternal you. If doing nothing is to lead to the ideal romantic union, it must be stable.²⁵

DRAWN ETERNALLY TO THE OTHER

Being steady in passivity means going out and having the ideal experience. The "I" decides to "thirst for something spread out in space" and "go forth in not-doing" to meet with mystery and perfection. After wholeness, the going-forth is

²⁴ Ibid. 194-197.

²⁵ Ibid., 62, 80-81, and 92.



the self's action. The absolute relationship includes everything, leaving nothing out, leaving nothing behind, to comprehend all—all of the world—in comprehending the You." "At that point," Buber says, "the one thing necessary becomes visible, and that is the complete acceptance of the presence." It gazes at the immovable, unsayable, eternal You. The relationship includes everything and all rivers flow into it without running out of water. "I" to "You" is the one infinite flood of life. One infinite wave of life changes you. "Through each and every You, the fundamental word addresses the eternal You," brings mediation into the present. When the You practices "the mediatorship of the You of all beings," "the immediate relationship to the eternal You" begins.²⁶

BEHOLDING THE FACE OF GOD

When this Face becomes a "transparency" of Presence, the One we seek, the Present One, irradiates its mediating role, making it unnecessary. In the ideal connection, the world connects humans and the eternal You. Because of Your ideal presence, the world can only be fully experienced in the present. When a man stands before the countenance, the world becomes fully present to him for the first time, illuminated by infinity. Humans can now say "You" to all beings because truth has become the face of God. God and the earth no longer compete; there is one reality. The word of revelation is: "I am there as whoever I am there," says Moses's main revelation, which can happen at any time.²⁷

TRANSFORMING UNION

The Creating One "burns into us and changes us," touching people deeply. "The mystery

of the obvious" touches me on a level "closer to me than my own I" and shows me that the One, present in everything, permeates my very soul. The presence of the One in everything permeates the alert and receptive "I", changing it in the following ways: "Creation burns into us, transforms us, makes us tremble and swoon, and compels us to submit." Buber then says, "Creation is something in which we participate; we encounter the Creator; we offer ourselves to him as helpers and companions." People can use their incomprehensible freedom to guide their createdness toward its Source. This dynamic reaction of their dormant state shows their essence. I am and do everything because I have gotten."²⁸

The eternal You enters people's souls. "I" becomes "You": The insight then seizes the whole ready element in all its suchness, recasts it, and creates a new form of God in the world. Humans actively accept this transformation and connect it to the timeless You, God. The spirit responds by beholding, a beholding that lends form. Revelation "confers itself upon him, seizes his whole element in all its suchness and fuses with it." God transforms the responsive human. The "mouth" is only the mouth, not a mouthpiece, and "to sound" means "to modify sound." "Each person can only test the meaning we receive in the uniqueness of his being and life." Like a crystal that comes to life when struck by light and transmits the light according to its prism, humans pass on their experience of God: "Only others can test our meaning." It springs to life from within.²⁹

The movements and moments in the spiritual relation commence with the **fundamental desire** that brings forth **relatedness**. Such relatedness is a *graced encounter* as **the dialogue** goes on and on.

²⁶ Ibid., 127, 130, and 148.

²⁷ Ibid., 150, 157, and 160.

²⁸ Ibid., 149 and 159.

²⁹ Ibid., 161, 163-164, and 166-168.



As the realities engage in the dialogue, **presence** comes to the fore in the ongoing **reciprocity**. In such reciprocity, the person is shaped in one's **receptivity**. Such receptivity is possible because of the *passivity* of the inner life, through which the person becomes more and more **drawn to God**. The essential part of being drawn to God is **beholding** that leads to **transforming union**. Through these paradigms and together with phenomenological method, we read the movements, moments, and layers in the spiritual relation. Now, let us employ phenomenology and dialogic thinking, as we engage in the spiritual reading of selected biblical figures represented the Old and New Testament, namely Abraham, the disciple whom Jesus loved, and Mary Magdalene.³⁰

ABRAHAM

Toward the end of Genesis 11, Abraham was mentioned as a descendant of Terah. Chapter 12, opens with the lines, "Now the Lord said to Abram..." Here is the beginning of every spiritual journey: God's revelation and communication. God tells us something and those who receive the communication well obey God's command. God asked Abraham to leave his land and go the land that He would show him. Abraham followed.³¹ Abraham's departure was prompted by God's grace and blessing. Nonetheless, it entailed leaving his house without knowing where he was heading. God took Abraham from the outskirts of Eden in Mesopotamia to its heart. But when Abraham arrived in Canaan, the land was in a state of acute famine.³² During

this time, Abraham's life did not appear to be blessed. As seen in the succeeding chapters, His wife was kidnapped and taken into Pharaoh's harem, and Abraham was forced to lead his household into combat.³³ All of this occurred before God made a covenant with him.

Although at this point, there was no covenant made with God, God had made multiple promises and assurances of land and progeny to Abraham,³⁴ which God later verified at Abraham's request.³⁵ God promised Abraham Canaan, as well as an uncountable number of descendants. He would expand Abraham's reign throughout the world through those descendants.³⁶

These promises were never fulfilled during the lifetime of Abraham.³⁷ He lived and died as a foreigner (exiled) in the land God promised him, with only one son (Isaac) to whom God extended the covenant promise.³⁸ But neither Abraham nor anyone else in Scripture believed that God's promises had failed. Here we see the dynamics of trust. Trust is not about the promise. It is about who makes the promise. And since it was God, Abraham knew well that it would happen. Abraham did not need to see its fulfillment. There was certainty for it was God who made the promise. There was only one thing that Abraham had to do: Trust in Him, *emunah*. In Abraham's *emunah*, he saw the light, the fullness of God's promise. Trust is an undivided desire for God.

An important highlight in the *emunah* of Abraham was his offering of his son. It was a giving up of everything, including the most precious gift he received from God: Isaac.³⁹ It

³⁰ There can be more biblical figures that can be considered. On the part of the researcher, he has closely studied the biblical figures of Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Job, Mary the mother of Jesus, Peter, Nicodemus, Mary of Bethany, Martha, Lazarus, the disciple whom Jesus Loved, Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene, and Paul. According to his judgement, the selected figures make a sound representation of the paradigms of dialogic thinking.

³¹ Gen. 12: 1

³² Gen. 12:10

³³ Gen. 12-14

³⁴ Gen. 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17.

³⁵ Gen. 15:8.

³⁶ Gen. 15: 1-21; 17:1-14; Rom. 4:13.

³⁷ Heb. 11:13.

³⁸ Gen. 22:16-18.

³⁹ Gen. 22: 1-19.



was a story of total generosity, total giving of oneself to God, that makes one holy. At the level of human understanding, the request of God was absurd. God gave Isaac as a gift, and now He abruptly took it away. Yet Abraham, although his understanding was in obscurity and he was being tested to offer his son as a sacrifice to God, saw it as being drawn by and beholding God.

In the tradition of Israel, this Abrahamic covenant was a high point in terms of God's covenant with his people. The 'absurd' request of God was reciprocated with the willingness of Abraham to offer his son. The Angel of the Lord called his name twice: "Abraham, Abraham!"⁴⁰ This repetition was important. It signified that God was addressing him exteriorly, and, more importantly, stirring and touching his interior life. And Abraham received it with the words, "Here I am"⁴¹— total attention, orientation, and disposition to God. It was a receptivity that made Abraham addressable by God.

"Here I am"⁴² is a sacrifice that makes one holy. It is holy generosity. And it was not only Abraham who was made holy; his offering, his very own son, was made holy too. It was as if Abraham said, "If God wants my son, I will generously surrender to Him." Although the angel told him not to continue with the killing of his son, the sacrifice had already been made, for Abraham had agreed to offer his son to the Lord. The key to make our offerings holy is to be attentive, disposed, and receptive to God. We need also to pay attention to Isaac, who, like his father, could speak in the silence of his heart and mouth, "Here I am." Isaac also showed holy generosity. He did not protest upon knowing that he would be offered. He did not negotiate. He did not manipulate his father or the will

of God. Rather he surrendered himself, in a profound sort of passivity. In the silence of his heart, he spoke: "Here I am." Isaac was a gift from God to Abraham. Now, he became the gift of his father to God. That eternal movement of God as the beginning and end of all gifts sealed the covenant relation of Israel with God.

As mentioned, although the request of God made no sense, Abraham and Isaac remained devoted to God. Their devotion was fulfilled in their total willingness to offer all they had to God. And in turn, God blessed them, particularly Abraham, with "descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants will take possession of the gates of their enemies, and in your descendants, all the nations of the earth will find blessing, because you obeyed my command."⁴³ Why did Abraham and Isaac respond to such a request? Because it was God who was asking, and to God, they were willing to give everything. God gave Himself to them. They too, gave themselves to God. Here is the mutual self-donation and reciprocity in the spiritual relation.

THE DISCIPLE WHOM JESUS LOVED

The figure of the disciple whom Jesus loved first appears in Chapter 13 of the Gospel of John. The preceding chapters only spoke of disciples. We heard it first when the two disciples asked Jesus, "where are you staying?"⁴⁴ to which the Lord responded, "Come, and you will see."⁴⁵ Here, the disciple was unnamed and not yet called the disciple whom Jesus loved. But in John 13, the characterization of the disciple whom Jesus loved emerged and the disciple who was previously unknown was revealed to be the disciple whom Jesus loved. What led to such an identity?

⁴⁰ Gen. 22:11.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² In Hebrew, Hineni, הִנְנִי, which is also translated in English as beholding.

⁴³ Genesis 22:17-18.

⁴⁴ Jn. 1:38.

⁴⁵ Jn. 1:39.





Earlier in the chapter, we were told of Jesus washing the disciples' feet.⁴⁶ This showed the master-disciple relationship. The disciples were initiated into the Master's ways when He instructed them while they sat at his feet. As they sat at the feet of the Lord, they were invited to become attentive to the Master. This experience transformed them in accordance with the ways of the Master in all aspects of their senses – including hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, remembering, and desiring. Such is the meaning of “sitting at the feet of the Lord.”

During the Last Supper, Jesus had his disciples sit at His feet. The disciples were present for Jesus' final moment to teach them about the mystery of God's saving love. The Last Supper was not only about food; it was also the last instruction of God's love, not just to the disciples but even to all those who would participate in it. Jesus did not merely teach His disciples by speaking to them; He also taught them by offering Himself up as a sacrifice for the world's sins. Through the sacrifice of Jesus, the darkness of imminent betrayal at the Last Supper was illumined by the glory of God's saving love.

In the latter part of Chapter 13, the disciples did more than sit at the feet of the Lord. The Master Himself washed their feet. What was Jesus trying to point out when He washed the feet of the disciples? As Jesus washed their feet, He raised them, transforming their dignity into children of God as they came to believe in Him as the Messiah, the Son of God, and the One who is to come. Jesus, the Begotten Son of God washed the feet of the disciples to elevate them to the same status as He – to raise them to the dignity of a child of God.

Following the washing of the disciples' feet, Jesus announced that one of the disciples would betray Him. The disciples' reaction was to try to identify the person of whom Jesus had spoken. Being a follower, however, does not necessarily equate with having a close relationship with the Lord. Every follower, except for the disciple whom Jesus loved, behaved in the same manner. “The disciples looked at one another, at a loss as to whom he meant. One of his disciples, the one whom Jesus loved, was reclining at Jesus' side.”⁴⁷ The disciple whom Jesus loved responded to Jesus' announcement by laying his head on His bosom. He reclined and put his head on Jesus' chest, a gesture of passivity as the key in receiving the love of Jesus. Amid the foretelling of the betrayal, what was crucial was that the disciple whom Jesus loved stayed, remained intimate, and rested on the bosom of Jesus until the very end. Only one of the twelve disciples decided to recline on the bosom of the Lord while the others tried to figure out whom the traitor was.

The word “kolpos” can mean “bosom,” “breast,” or “chest,” and it is typically used to indicate intimacy. This also illustrates the bond that the Son has with the Father. “No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him.”⁴⁸ In the same way, as the Son rests comfortably in the bosom of the Father, the disciple whom Jesus loved also passively rested comfortably on the bosom of Jesus, and the disciple received and experienced this same love of God. Jesus was the one who did the loving, and now the disciple was not just a disciple—he was the disciple whom Jesus loved. Here, we see what discipleship is: reclining on Jesus. It is not about any other person's faithfulness but one's faithfulness to God. For each one of us, our life as a disciple is not about success; it is all about devotion to God.

⁴⁶ Jn. 13: 2-17.

⁴⁷ Jn. 13:22-23.

⁴⁸ Jn. 1:18.





In John 19:25-27, we hear of the mother of Jesus and the disciple whom Jesus loved standing at the foot of the Cross. A typological reading of Jesus' address to Mary as a "woman" is designed to portray Mary as the "new Eve, mother of the living."⁴⁹ Just as Eve was named "mother of all the living."⁵⁰ When Mary is referred to as a "woman," it refers to the redeemed character of Eve. "Jesus is Mary's only son, but her spiritual motherhood extends to all men whom indeed he came to save: "The Son whom she brought forth is he whom God placed as the first-born among many brethren, that is, the faithful in whose generation and formation she co-operates with a mother's love."⁵¹ "Mary is the symbol and the perfect realization of the Church: "the Church indeed. . . by receiving the word of God in faith becomes herself a mother. By preaching and Baptism she brings forth sons, who are conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of God, to a new and immortal life."⁵² Everyone who has faith in Jesus, exemplified by standing at the foot of the Cross, has Mary as their mother.

Mary is the Mother of all disciples who receive the love of Jesus. This is the transformed family, the church established at the foot of the cross. She was from that hour the mother of every Disciple Whom Jesus Loves. For the disciple whom Jesus loved was to become the first of many brothers and sisters, a representative figure of all who are welcomed into the spiritual family of the Church through the Paschal Mystery. All who choose to become a disciple of the Lord shall be initiated into this mystery, a mystagogy. Believing is not something we figure out. Mystery is not something we solve but something we enter and are initiated into. Initiation into this mystery is becoming the disciple whom Jesus loved. Here, we see the recurring dynamics of

the Gospel of John, "Come, and you will see."⁵³ It is an invitation to become the disciple whom Jesus loved, standing at the foot of the Cross, and entering into the mystery of the glory of God's love. It is for this that the evangelist said "And from that hour."⁵⁴ The 'hour' is the appointed time of God, that is, fullness of time. It was the fullness of time, for at the foot of the Cross, in the plan of God, His love was fully revealed as Jesus instituted a new family – the Church.

The next chapter in which the disciple whom Jesus loved appears is in John 20, the Resurrection event. There, the disciple whom Jesus loved ran ahead of Peter, demonstrating how eager the disciple was to find out what was in the tomb. That the disciple was drawn toward the tomb was captured in the account of "running." He went in the tomb with the zeal to see the resurrection of the Lord. He had this interior excitement for he had not abandoned Jesus and through this he came to know and receive who Jesus is: the son of God, the Messiah, and the One who is to come. As he stayed with the Lord until the end, the divine wisdom was infused in him that the love of God is immortal and triumphs over death. "Then, the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed."⁵⁵ As a result of receiving the love that Jesus had for the disciple, every aspect of who he was, was transformed according to love of God. He no longer believed that mortality was where life came to an end; rather, He believed that life is transformed with God in eternity. This is what is meant by receiving the love God. One sees everything through the lens of faith. This is the consequence of arriving, following, remaining, reclining, and standing close to Jesus – a one and ongoing desire for God.

⁴⁹ CCC, 511.

⁵⁰ Gen. 3:20.

⁵¹ CCC, 501.

⁵² CCC, 507.

⁵³ Jn. 1:39.

⁵⁴ Jn. 19:27.

⁵⁵ Jn. 20:8.





“Saw and believed” are the same words that are found at the beginning of John, when the disciples questioned Jesus where He was staying, and Jesus replied, “Come and see!” The gospel of John ends in Chapter 21 with the disciple whom Jesus loved telling Peter, “It is the Lord!” The eyes of the disciple whom Jesus loved were no longer those of a human being, but rather eyes that had been transformed by the love of the Lord, which is what enabled him to see Jesus. To receive that love of God is the key in beholding Him before us. It all starts with receptivity, and from there, everything is transformed, and we will see everything plainly.

MARY MAGDALENE

In the Gospel of Luke, we were told about “some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources.”⁵⁶ For these women, Scripture was specific in their description. We see that Luke did not hide the past of these women. Their possession and infirmities were not as important as their following the Lord. For Mary Magdalene, the Lord liberated her, and what was important now was that Mary Magdalene desired and chose to follow the Lord. For this reason, she, together with the other women, gave of their resources. They gave because they believed in Jesus.

Doubt cuts off our receptivity to God. Mary Magdalene was delivered of seven demons. In that experience of being possessed, Jesus did not come to condemn or accuse her but instead, He freed her from all that enslaved and

possessed her. Imagine the fear of the people around her, but Jesus healed Mary Magdalene. It was a graced encounter. He came with the full love of God expelling the evil spirits from Mary Magdalene. It was a dead end for Mary Magdalene but not for God. God’s action and wisdom were truly greater. Because of this, Mary Magdalene had a deep longing and desire for God. For this, wherever Jesus went, Mary Magdalene followed. If what control us are the world, flesh, or the devil, we cannot desire God. We cannot follow and long for God because our desire is divided and controlled by something or someone else. For this, the desire must be constantly examined, and we must ask ourselves, “What is my fundamental and greatest desire?” For later on, without our knowing, what we desire will control us to the point that we will no longer desire but instead be subject to that desire. Since Mary Magdalene was no longer controlled by the evil one, she could follow the Lord.

Mary Magdalene was almost in a dead-end situation, but God came and delivered her. For this, her fundamental desire became God, and she followed Him. She never left Jesus because she saw that when she was left by all, God did not leave her. He came and liberated her. If we realize that God has never abandoned or forsaken us, we will see God eternally and perpetually. For this reason, we have the story in Jn 19:25-27. The figures present here are : The Mother of God, Mary’s sister, the disciple whom Jesus loved, and Mary Magdalene. When the demons were expelled from Mary Magdalene, God reigned in her, and all she desired was Jesus. Most of the disciples abandoned Jesus, but Mary Magdalene was there. Her staying at the foot of the Cross meant that she received love from God.

What Mary Magdalene saw on the Cross was the glory of God and the fullness of the revelation of God’s love. Mary Magdalene, standing close,

⁵⁶ Lk. 8:2-3.





witnessed this revelation. Mary Magdalene stood at the foot of the Cross not as a bystander but as a faithful disciple. Standing at the foot of the Cross, Mary Magdalene was part of the first members of the Church, the family of God that Jesus instituted on the Cross. “Woman, behold, your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother.”⁵⁷ To stand at the foot of the Cross is to be part of the family of Jesus, as the fullness of God’s revelation is totally received.

At the resurrection of the Lord, Mary Magdalene entered the tomb at the beginning of the first day of the week, only to find it empty when she arrived there. At first, she was incapable of understanding it and believed that the body of Jesus had been stolen. However, after a while, the reality of the Lord’s resurrection would become apparent to her. Then, Jesus called Mary’s name. The calling of one’s name is relatedness, a graced encounter, and dialogue. When the name is called, the relationship that has been injured and broken because of indifference is renewed and restored. Calling a person’s name in the manner in which you used to call him or her would bring back memories. This was true in Mary’s experience. Mary was reported to have turned to Jesus when He called her name. But she was already facing him. The turning that occurred when Jesus uttered her name was not an exterior turning but an inward turning, a turning of the heart to Jesus. At this point it was not only the exterior that was drawn to Jesus but the very heart of Mary Magdalene. And the effect of such turning was a transformed way of seeing, a beholding of Jesus, “I have seen the Lord.”⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

With the consideration of the phenomenological method and dialogic thinking, and together with selected biblical figures, what then, is Spiritual Reading? Spiritual Reading is oriented to the dynamic of relationships in the spiritual text. The focus is not solely on the story’s plot, elements, climax, history, or context, among others, but also the movements, moments, and layers that are taking place. Discernment of the text is necessary to see the dynamics in the text. Attentiveness to the dynamics paves the way to reciprocity, which is the central paradigm in spiritual reading: God gives Himself and the human person strives to give himself too.

God in the reciprocal relationship takes the initiative to reveal Himself, and His interior life is made known to the human person. Revelation is fundamentally God’s desire for his creatures, specifically the human person. In God’s revelation, He becomes present. *אֵיךְ אֵיךְ*, “Eyeh asher Eyeh,” “I am, I am” as revealed to Moses in the desert and fulfilled in the Seven “I am” Statements in the Gospel of John. God’s presence comes through the lived experience of protection, security, sustenance, deliverance, surety, liberation, freedom, stability, restoration, peace, stillness, rest, courage, fortitude, strength, completion, satisfaction, fullness, light, life, and love, which are gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit. The reciprocity of the human person in the reciprocal relation comes in layers: receptivity, responsiveness, and responsibility. Receptivity is receiving what God intends to give the human person. To receive God is contemplation and for John of the Cross, pure contemplation consists in pure receptivity.⁵⁹ Without receptivity, the human person cannot be in the reciprocal

⁵⁷ Jn. 19:26-27.

⁵⁸ Jn. 20:18.

⁵⁹ John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza III, 37 in *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, (transl. K. Kavanaugh & O. Rodriguez), Washington D.C., 1979.





relation. Receptivity includes the various layers of openness, listening, and addressability.

How are we able to receive God? Receptivity entails opening oneself to God and listening to His revelation. This brings us back to the key in the covenant relation, "Listen, O Israel!" an invitation to receptivity, to make our inner life a space for God, to be addressable by God.

When there is receptivity, there is responsiveness. The first layer of responsiveness is availability to God. God addresses the person and the person makes himself available to God, "Here I am!" In that responsiveness, the giving of one's entire self to God ensues. God addresses the human person, the human person makes himself available to God, and the human person gives himself to God. Then, what comes after is the inworking of God, letting the divine light, life, and love overflow from the person to others. This is responsibility. The person becomes responsible as God's light, life, and love overflow as a result of the grace of one's receptivity to God. One does not become responsible for the other person's sake but because one has become so receptive that God's love fills him and God's indwelling overflows to others. Responsibility then is the action of God in us and through us in His mission.

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