

The Biblical Theology of Benedict XVI¹

Pope Benedict's publication in 2007 of *Jesus of Nazareth* is a significant contribution to biblical Christology. It is a profound expression of his theological vision. Our 80 year-old pontiff published this first volume with a sense of urgency and purpose. He wrote: "It struck me as the *most urgent priority* to present the figure and message of Jesus in his public ministry, and so *to help foster the growth of a living relationship with him.*"² May God give him the strength to finish it!

My purpose here is not to analyze *Jesus of Nazareth*, but to examine some of the important interpretative principles that underpin Benedict's biblical theology as exemplified in *Jesus of Nazareth*. One observation can be made right from the start. Benedict's thought is uniquely compatible to that of the great early Christian writers collectively called, the Fathers of the Church. He sees an essential continuity between the New Testament Church and the era of these great teachers of the faith. Their writings bring us close to the era of the Scriptures, "in which the waters of faith still flowed unpolluted and in all their freshness."³ This explains Benedict's decision to devote his first two series of catechesis as pope, first to the individual apostles and then to their successors, the great Christian Fathers.

One factor that shaped Benedict's theological career was his encounter with the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation, which by the late 1940s became the dominant theological model in the academy. He relates the amazing story of a leading Tübingen exegete who announced he would no longer entertain dissertation proposals because "everything in the New Testament had already been researched!"⁴ Benedict has emerged as a forceful critic of this method. He understands that how we read and interpret the Bible directly impacts what we believe about Christ, His Church, the sacraments, and the liturgy. He also understands that whenever Sacred Scripture is separated from the living Tradition of the Church, it falls prey to merely becoming the study of theories and disputes among experts.⁵

The Historical-Critical Method

Benedict begins his critique with an appreciation of the "historicity" of Christian revelation. He insists that we must study the Bible's historical contexts and literary forms if we are to grasp its meaning and take it into our hearts. Therefore, the historical-critical method "is an indispensable tool"⁶ for: 1) helping us understand how biblical

1 I am indebted to Scott Hahn's insightful analysis in *Covenant and Communion: The Biblical Theology of Pope Benedict XVI*. All the citations and most of the text are drawn from this insightful analysis.

2 *Jesus of Nazareth*, xxiv.

3 *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, p. 134.

4 *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, p. 27.

5 "Homily, Mass of Possession of the Chair of the Bishop of Rome" (May 7, 2005), in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition (May 11, 2005).

6 *Jesus of Nazareth*, xvi.

texts came to be written, and 2) what these texts might have meant to their original audiences.⁷ At the same time Benedict gives a penetrating analysis of the use of historical-criticism in order to purify the method from the clutter of false assumptions in philosophy, epistemology, and history that scholars have uncritically inherited from the Enlightenment. Because it is a tool, its usefulness depends on the way it is used, which is guided by the interpretative and philosophical presuppositions one adopts in applying it.

One such *false* assumption is the claim that the historical-critical method is a true “science” akin to the natural sciences, and, therefore, it can yield findings that are historical accurate and objective. As a young graduate student studying historiography, I learned that historical conclusions should be viewed as tentative because they are often improperly influenced by many factors including bias and prejudices that shape the historian’s examination of the data and the conclusions he draws from them.

Benedict highlights three major flaws in the use of the historical-critical method.

I. Flaws of the historical-critical method

1st Flaw: *The Evolutionary Model*

Many scholars bring with a kind of neo-evolutionary model of natural development that assumes that complex life forms evolve from earlier, simpler forms. When applied to the study of the sacred page, this leads interpreters to assume that (1) “the more theological considered and sophisticated a text is, the more recent it is, and (2) the simpler something is, the easier it is to reckon its original.”⁸

But where is the “scientific” *evidence* that justifies the assumption that religious texts and ideas develop as organisms in nature? So while evolution may be a legitimate theory in the natural sciences, there is no evidence that religious or spiritual ideas develop along the same evolutionary lines or according to the same evolutionary rules. As Pope Benedict XVI points out, “who would hold that Clement of Rome is more developed or complex than Paul? . . . Is the Didache more encompassing than the Pastoral Epistles?”⁹

Benedict points out that in the development of the early Creeds, we observe an *anti*-evolutionary process. The early Church was faced with a multiplicity of complex names and concepts to describe Jesus: prophet, high priest, Lord, new Moses, new Adam, Lord, Messiah, Lamb of God, Husband-Messiah, Suffering Servant, son of David, and Son of

7 “Homily, Mass of Possession of the Chair of the Bishop of Rome” (May 7, 2005), in *L’Osservatore Romano*, English edition (May 11, 2005).

8 “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis,” in *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches*, p. 249.

9 “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis,” in *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches*, p. 10.

Man. It simplified the process settling on three titles: *Christ, Lord, Son of God*.¹⁰ This shows that the earliest Christian witness was decidedly complex and theologically differentiated. It fell to the Church to articulate clearly who Jesus was.

2nd Flaw: *The Hermeneutic of Suspicion*

Many practitioners of the historical-critical method have as their starting point a very uncritical hermeneutic of suspicion. The term “hermeneutic” simply means the art of interpretation. As a result many attempt to study biblical texts as a scientist would dissect a cadaver in the lab. Therefore the texts are studied in isolation from their original ecclesial and liturgical context. This is analogous to studying the Bill of Rights and the Constitution apart from the historical circumstances, writings and ideas of the men who framed these documents.

The evil fruit of the hermeneutic of suspicion is that *mysteries* are transformed into *things*, dead things at that, which scholars can assemble or disassemble at their pleasure. This flawed approach is comparable to a natural scientist studying a plant or animal without any reference to its habitat or its natural environment.

As a result the historical-critical method is often used to deconstruct dogma, setting up a purely human, historical Jesus in opposition to the Jesus of faith. The Church’s faith that produced the Scriptures is no longer the way to find Jesus. It is viewed as a mythical smokescreen that concealed the historical reality.¹¹ The Church’s traditional use of texts in its dogmas, moral teachings, and liturgical rituals are discarded as an impediment, rather than an aid, to understanding the texts’ original meanings. This leads interpreters to presume, without any supporting evidence, that we cannot trust the plain sense of the biblical texts, because the original source traditions have somehow been overlaid with a veneer of Church dogmas and institutional concerns.

In contrast, Benedict affirms the historical reliability of the Gospels as factually correct and as an accurate reflection of Jesus’ teaching. He shows that on simply historical grounds, the testimony of the New Testament is far more trustworthy than the constantly shifting hypotheses of historical-critical scholarship.¹²

3rd Flaw: Faith versus Reason

At the root of this misuse of the historical-critical method is the separation of faith and reason. Benedict traces this to the “self-limitation of reason” in the philosophy of the German Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant. Kant concluded that it was impossible for human reason to know the truth and reality of “things in themselves,” especially God. The result is an “amputated reason” that needlessly limits our rational thought

¹⁰ *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*, pp.15-17.

¹¹ *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*, p. 43; *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, 92.

¹² *Dogma and Preaching*, pp. 9-10.

processes to simple reflection on how things work or what we can do with them.¹³ This mutation of reason leads to the false premise too frequently found in the application of the historical-critical method, namely, we can never know for certain about things that transcend our sense perception. This results in studying only the ‘human element’ of the Bible, meaning that study is limited to those things that conform to the evidence of our senses and our understanding of natural laws of causation.

Undergirding this is the false assumption that it is not possible for a man, Jesus Christ, really to be God and to perform deeds that require divine power – actions that would disrupt the general complex of causes. What is the result? Miracles are discarded as myths, and everything about Jesus that transcends his humanness is said to be unhistorical.¹⁴ This “self-limitation of reason” denies in principle that we can know with certainty anything about whether God acts or causes anything to happen in the world. Because our personal experience knows nothing, for example, about multiplying loaves of bread and fishes, walking on water, and rising from the dead, the biblical scholar can tell us nothing about passages that speak of such things. As a result the task of the exegete becomes one of explaining away biblical passages rather than interpreting them. These interpreters do not transit the Bible in a way that speaks to the human heart, but they do often bore the intellect. This denial of the supernatural and miraculous often confronts our unprepared children at the college level, including in many so-called Catholic colleges.

Another negative consequence of this approach is the loss of a unified perspective. The books of the Bible become a jumble of unconnected texts. This leads to moving away from the actual words on the page to the formulation of various unprovable hypotheses about the production of the texts: 1) who wrote it, 2) who it was originally intended for, and 3) what were the various stages in the writing and editing of the text.

The consequence is a distorted interpretation that resembles what the interpreter speculates the text ought to have said. The secularist’s dogma that nothing can really have happened except what has always happened, leads to the self-affirmation of the interpreter – it’s about him, but it tells us nothing about God’s action in the world, and it tells us very little about the Bible. Within this bogus framework questions about the existence of God or the meaning of human existence are discarded as “unscientific or pre-scientific.”

Benedict observes that a theology that “does not express human reason in its fullness... cannot be considered rational.”¹⁵ He asserts that reason can, and must, be purified from these distortions. Then scholars can embrace the entire range of questions that

13 *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, pp. 158, 186.

14 *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, pp. 61-62.

15 ‘Europe in the Crisis of Cultures,’ *Communio* 32, no. 2 (2005): 345-356.

men and women have and “remain open to the consideration of ultimate truths.”¹⁶ Benedict bases his purification of reason on the norm observed in primitive Christianity, when the biblical authors and first Christian teachers successfully met Greek philosophy with “the profound harmony of faith and reason.”¹⁷

The Hermeneutic of Faith

The historical-critical method, although a useful tool, is unable to adequately explain the religious meaning of biblical texts. It can never produce more than conjectures and hypothesis, all of which are constantly subject to being contradicted and replaced by later theories. Any interpretation that is detached from the life of the Church, which produced the Scriptures, and from her historical experiences can never rise above the literary genre of a hypothesis. Benedict points out that what is needed is a “hermeneutic of faith.”¹⁸

The Pope is not proposing a new interpretative system, but a spiritual disposition toward the study of the sacred page. He rejects the artificial limitations imposed on reason and insists that *faith* is a legitimate source of knowledge. Indeed, bringing the truths of faith to bear on biblical questions does not stifle reason but rather frees reason from the prison of its own self-imposed limitations. This cooperation of faith and reason opens the true meaning of the events and teachings found in Scripture. According to Benedict: “Faith itself is a way of knowing. If a purely materialistic explanation of reality is presumed as the only possible expression of reason, then reason itself is falsely understood.”¹⁹

The hermeneutic of faith arises organically from the historical process whereby the Scriptures were handed down and handed on in the Church. By studying this process by which the Scriptures originated and were shaped over long years by the Church’s preaching, teaching, and worship, scholars have discovered what Benedict describes as an “interwoven relationship between Church and Bible, between the people of God and the Word of God.”²⁰ So rather than start from modern scientific and philosophical principles that are arbitrarily imposed on the sacred texts, Benedict begins with what we know historically about how the Scriptures were composed, edited, and transmitted. Therefore his hermeneutic of faith begins in the *heart of the Church*. In this way he forcefully demonstrates the inseparable bond between: the original unity of Word, sacrament, Church authority, and tradition.

16 “Address to Meeting with Catholic Educators,” (April 17, 2008).

17 “Homily,” Washington Nationals Stadium, (April 17, 2008).

18 *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, p. 272.

19 “Relationship between Magisterium and Exegesis,” Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *L’Osservatore Romano*, weekly English edition, July 23, 2003.

20 *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, pp. 32-33

In particular, Benedict identifies three critical establishments that illuminate the historical continuity between the Church of Jesus Christ and Israel, and hence between the gospel of Christ and the Word spoken by God to Israel.

1. The first establishment is that of *apostolic succession*, the tradition of Church government and ministry that guarantees the faithful transmission of the apostles' witness and teaching to future generation. The twelve Apostles show the continuity of the Church with the twelve tribes of Israel.
2. Second, the establishment of the *canon*, the list of those texts deemed by Church authorities to be divinely inspired. The canon acknowledged the "sovereignty of the Word" and the Church as the servant of the Word. At the same time it established the New Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures as a *single* Scripture and "master text."
3. Finally, the "rule of faith" (*regula fidei*), guarantees the Church's authentic interpretations of the Word of God consistent with the witness of the apostles. The rule of faith becomes "a key for interpretation" and a witness of the Church's fidelity to truth.

Tradition: *Memoria Ecclesiae*

Benedict also speaks of the *memoria Ecclesiae*, the memory of the Church as the living voice (*viva vox*) of the Word, which bears the memory of God's saving acts in history, most decisively the event of Christ's descent from heaven and entrance into history. He says: "The whole of Scripture is nothing other than Tradition."²¹ It is the fulfillment of Christ's promise to be with His Church in the Spirit until the end of the age (Mt 28:20). Stated in another way, tradition is Christ's living, saving, and *interpretive* presence in the Church. In this context the Church understands the events of Christ's life as the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

Sacramental Liturgy

From Apostolic times the Word of God was inseparable from the Church's liturgy. Benedict points out that "a book [of the Bible] was recognized as 'canonical' if it was sanctioned by the Church for use in public worship."²² Scripture is always a summons to worship and adoration, to the encounter with Christ in the Eucharist as *sacrifice, presence, and sacrament*. Because God's word always seeks conversion it always leads us to the sacraments. From the very beginning the two pillars of the Church were: 1) the Word, and 2) our encounter with the Word in the sacraments.

Conclusion

Benedict shows that the original institutions of the Church – the canon of Scripture, the apostolic succession and tradition, and the rule of faith – were interrelated and ordered to the sacramental liturgy and mission of the Church. Contrary to the presumptions of historical criticism, the Church's structures of authority, doctrine, and liturgy are *not*

²¹ Ratzinger Repot: *An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, p. 160

²² *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, p. 148, also 150.

historical addenda overlaying or imposed on the Scriptures. In this way Benedict shows the fallacy of the modern exegesis's methodological *suspicion* of what they dub as the Church's "interference" with the presumably pure original Word of Scripture. After all, without these ecclesial structures there would be no Scripture!

II. The Spiritual Science of Theology

Benedict's theological and exegetical work is rooted in the historical retrieval of the original structure of God's revelation in the Church.²³ In the Scriptures one encounters the God who calls us to love in the world.

Because theology springs from this dialogue between the Church and the Word, it flows from the act of faith, and by its nature shares in the Church's mission of proclamation and witness to the Word. It is, then, a response to Peter's command: "Always be ready to make your defense (*apologian*) to anyone who demands from you an accounting (*logon*) for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet 3:15). However, before faith can be communicated, it must be *interiorized*. It is the love of God that springs from faith that creates the desire for the intimate knowledge of God. Therefore for Benedict, theology is "ecclesial" by nature, and never just a private affair. It flows from the Word that calls one to faith in the Church. Properly understood there must be a high degree of correspondence between theology and biblical interpretation.

Benedict also stresses that theology is a spiritual science. Theology is the scientific study of things of the Spirit, because ultimately it is about God, who is Spirit (Jn 4:24). God is its ultimate subject – the God who reveals himself in his Word to the Church. Theology is the rational reflection upon God's revelation. The specific content of theology is always the reflection on the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore, theology for Benedict is essentially Christology, and must be an expression of conversion and discipleship. Sound theology is the product of a living faith seeking to understand the contents of the faith, that is, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ to the people of God, the Church.

The Church, then, for Benedict is the living context in which the spiritual science of theology is performed. Against the limitations of the *hypothetical* historical reconstructions of modern critics, Benedict asserts the actual historical foundations of the Church. He demonstrates that Scripture and all the various facets of the Church's tradition – its teachings, prayers, sacraments, saints, and interpretative traditions – came to be in response to the Word of God.

Unity of the Old and New Testaments

Critical to understanding Benedict's theology of Scripture is his stress on the unity of the Old and the New Testaments. He roots this unity in Jesus' own teaching:

²³ *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, pp. 133-134.

“Jesus of Nazareth claimed to be the true heir to the Old Testament – “the Scriptures” – and to offer a true interpretation, which... came from the authority of the Author himself: ‘He taught them as one having authority, not as the scribes’ (Mk 1:22). The Emmaus narrative also expressed this claim: ‘Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures’ (Lk 24:27).”²⁴

Benedict emphasizes that the New Testament is a spiritual exegesis of the Old, and Christ is the meeting point that connects the two. By the resurrection God “proves,” so to speak, that Jesus *is* the fulfillment of the figures of the Old Testament – the suffering servant, the divine Son, and the Messiah from the line of David – as foretold by the prophets and the psalms. Of critical significance, in Benedict’s mind, is the portrayal of Jesus as ‘the true lamb of sacrifice, the sacrifice in which the deepest meaning of all Old Testament liturgies is fulfilled.’ This understanding also has “essential significance for the Christian liturgy.”²⁵

Benedict’s approach greatly enriches our understanding of the Bible. The journey through the Bible becomes an “ongoing reinterpretation, or rather, a new and better understanding of all that has been said previously. Step by step, light dawns and the Christian can grasp what the Lord said to the disciples at Emmaus, explaining to them that it was of him that all the Prophets had spoken. *The Lord unfolds to us the last* [and definitive] *re-reading*; Christ is the key to all things and only by walking with Christ, by reinterpreting all things in his light with him, crucified and risen, do we enter into the riches and beauty of sacred Scripture.”²⁶ In summary, Benedict points out that: “The New Testament itself wished to be no more than the complete and full understanding of the Old Testament, now made possible in Christ.”²⁷ Benedict’s affirmation that theology “must not and could not be anything else but interpretation of Scripture”²⁸ will have long-term ramifications for the training of theologians and in religious instruction.

The Transcendent Meaning of Biblical Words

Biblical texts have a meaning on two levels: one, the literal-historical, and the other, the spiritual. The spiritual meaning or sense can only be gained by faith. This twofold meaning of the literal and the spiritual is not imposed on the text as the result of some philosophical presupposition or methodological principle. Rather, it emerges from the structure of biblical revelation. The Bible documents historical events, first of the life of Israel and later events in the life of Christ and His Church. However, these events are more than the recounting of data in the lives of a people. The Bible claims that God

²⁴ “Preface,” in *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, p. 17.

²⁵ *Dogma and Preaching*, pp. 3-5.

²⁶ *Address to Lenten Meeting with the clergy of Rome* (February 22, 2007).

²⁷ *Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy*, p. 58; *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 56.

²⁸ “Sources and Transmission of the Faith,” *Communio* 10, no. 1 (1983), 27.

Himself was at work in the events it records, and that the words of various characters and their deeds represent the active intention of God.²⁹

There exists, then, a dynamic relationship between the Word of God and the people of God who receive this Word, interpret it, and hand it on. Thus, late Scriptures are always in dialogue with earlier ones, commenting on and reinterpreting them.

As a result, the literal words of Scripture contain greater depths of meaning than appears on the surface. Similarly, while the events recorded in the bible are factual, their meaning far transcends the data because the Holy Spirit gives them a “surplus meaning” that has “significance for all time and for all men.”³⁰ Therefore, unless we penetrate the literal meaning to the spiritual senses of Scripture, we will never really understand it, because we are merely analyzing words but never get to the inspiration imbedded within the words.

Arriving at the divine or spiritual meaning of scriptural events is not the product of some arbitrary rereading of the events after the fact – a kind of interpretative free for all. No, the spiritual sense is contained within the original events. In this way Benedict engages the four senses of Scripture: the literal-historical, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical, which he calls “the four degrees of exegesis.”³¹

The *allegorical sense* deepens our *faith* by giving us a more profound understanding of Christ. The *moral sense* deepens our *love* by leading us to act justly. The *anagogical sense* strengthens our *trust* as we see events in their eternal significance leading us to paradise.³²

Typology

One key to the spiritual sense of the sacred text lies in the *typological* reading of Scripture, a reading that sees the unity of God’s actions in history and understands the long unfolding of Israel’s history as pointing toward and culminating in Jesus Christ.

Typology is “the study of persons, places, events, and institutions in the Bible that foreshadow later and greater realities made known by God in history.”³³

Typology reveals the unity and coherence of history in light of that “central event” of history, the coming of the Word of God in the flesh. In the words of Augustine: “The New Testament lies hidden in the Old; the Old is made explicit in the New.”³⁴

²⁹ *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, pp. 147-148.

³⁰ *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, p. 148.

³¹ *Sources*, p. 29.

³² CCC 117.

³³ *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, p. 929

³⁴ *Many Religions, One Covenant: Israel, the Church, and the World*, p. 36.

Therefore, the true meaning of Scripture will be found only in reading behind the letters to the spiritual senses. However, spiritual interpretation is not a private or subject endeavor at the caprice of the individual interpreter. The grounding principle of spiritual exegesis is always found in the Church and rooted in the rule of faith, that is, divine revelation as lived, interpreted and guarded by the Church.³⁵

Conclusion

Hopefully, this brief presentation of Pope Benedict's Biblical Theology will give you additional insight into the marvelous way he is directing theological and biblical studies. In two subsequent essays I will apply Benedict's approach to interpreting two well-known passages: Jesus' Baptism by John (Lk 3:15-16, 21-22) and the Wedding Feast at Cana (Jn 2:1-11). It is my hope this exercise will assist your reading and praying the Scriptures.

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³⁵ See: *Dei Verbum*, 12 and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #'s 112-114.