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# **Benedict's Jesus Trilogy and Historical-Critical Theology**

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Dr. Bruce Barron.*

## Preliminary Remarks

These comments were written during Pope Benedict XVI's term in office, prior to his resignation. References that were current at the time have not been changed, e.g., to "Pope emeritus." However, an excursus at the end adds more recent information.

The page references to the three volumes of the Jesus Trilogy are not found in the footnotes. Rather, they are in brackets, where the Roman numeral indicates the volume (e.g., II, 7 means volume 2, page 7). As a general rule, I have added *italics* to indicate emphasis.

I would like to thank John L. Allen and Dr. Werner Neuer for engaging in valuable discussions with me about Benedict XVI.

## Introduction

Pope Benedict always understood theology as the interpretation of Scripture and as thinking that comes from Jesus Christ and is toward Jesus Christ. Thomas Söding has aptly written with respect to *Deus caritas est* and its author, "Papal theology has arguably left its mark on the genre of the encyclical: It begins programmatically with a quote from Scripture and in a qualified sense is an interpretation of Scripture."<sup>1</sup>

This "Bible-and-Jesus" Pope did not coincidentally write a trilogy on the Gospels and about Jesus. In the process, the Pope's exegesis has astonishing parallels to present-day Evangelical exegesis in scholarly commentaries, in particular to those who conduct intensive historical research but, at the same time, ascribe a high degree of historical credibility to the Scriptures. It is no wonder that Pope Benedict has received much approval, indeed even praise, from the Evangelical world.

Indeed, Paul Basse has written, "As a result, he does not see his late Magnum Opus as an epochal and ultimate Jesus book but rather only as the last contribution to an ongoing debate in which he almost in the form of a will and testament urges to trust the books and testimonies of the gospel and the writings of the fathers and saints in their sum total at least as much as all the efforts of generations of theologians who have struggled with this."<sup>2</sup>

However, the radical fashion in which the Pope then attacks the prevailing views of liberal theological scholarship – in everything which we have to differentiate and qualify below – is made clear by the following quotation, the context of which will be dealt with shortly: "And the anti-Christ, with an air of scholarly excellence, tells us that any exegesis that reads the Bible from the perspective of faith in the living God, in order to listen to what God has to say, is fundamentalism; he wants to convince us that only *his* kind of exegesis, the supposedly purely scientific kind, in which God says nothing and has nothing to say, is able to keep abreast of the times" (I, 36; emphasis in original).

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Söding. "Die Lebendigkeit des Wortes: Das Verständnis der Offenbarung bei Joseph Ratzinger," pp. 12–55 in: Frank Meier-Hamidi, Ferdinand Schumacher (eds.). *Die Theologie Joseph Ratzingers*. Herder: Freiburg, 2007. p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Badde. "Der Papst nennt die Juden unschuldig am Tod Jesu." *Die Welt*, March 11, 2011. <http://www.welt.de/kultur/history/article12765405/Der-Papst-nennt-die-Juden-unschuldig-am-Tod-Jesu.html>.

## The Pope as a Private Theologian

Whereas Pope John Paul II gave the impression that the office of the Pope somehow changes the essence of its holder and that the Pope for that reason no longer has a private life of his own but is always the Pope, Pope Benedict made it clear from the beginning that he was going to continue to privately write books and meet with his students. He took on an esteemed office, but he had not become another person. The Jesus Trilogy is a visible monument of this new attitude, as the Pope wrote not as the Pope but rather as Ratzinger the private individual and theologian.

Jürgen Erbacher noted in his book *A Radical Pope*, “During his pontificate, he always published his private books using his birth name Joseph Ratzinger as well as his papal name. And in one of these books, in the interview volume with Peter Seewald published in November 2010, Benedict XVI observed the following: ‘If a pope comes to the clear understanding that he can no longer physically, psychologically, and mentally cope with the mandate of his office, then he has a right and under certain circumstances the duty to resign.’ The formulation in the February 11, 2013 resignation letter sounds almost literally the same: ‘in order to govern the barque of Saint Peter and proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind and body are necessary, strength which in the last few months, has deteriorated in me to the extent that I have had to recognize my incapacity to adequately fulfill the ministry entrusted to me.’”<sup>3</sup>

One of those who best knows Ratzinger’s theology, Hansjürgen Verweyen, has written, “It appears to me that Benedict XVI, not only in resigning from his office but also with his work on Jesus of Nazareth, has gotten the ball rolling which his successors can only avoid with difficulty.”<sup>4</sup> If it were up to him, Pope Benedict would not want that. Jesus should be in the center, and the message of the man from Nazareth should draw all attention to itself. Benedict has never become accustomed to the life of a waving politician. That such a thing was almost impossible as Pope is obvious, but he attempted to live in a manner that Pope Francis is attempting in an even more radical manner to pursue.

## Historical-Critical Methods and the Antichrist

How strongly Pope Benedict doubts historical-critical methods is above all shown by his reference to Wladimir Soloviev’s *The Short Narrative of the Antichrist* (I, 35) and how the Pope describes the Antichrist as a critical exegete from Tübingen University debunked by Pope Peter II. The devil himself is a “a Bible expert” and a “theologian” (I, 35).

The Pope writes on the story of the temptation of Jesus, “The devil proves to be a Bible expert who can quote the Psalm exactly. The whole conversation of the second temptation takes the form of a dispute between two Bible scholars. Remarking on this passage, Joachim Gnilka says that the devil presents himself here as a theologian. The Russian writer Vladimir Soloviev took up this motif in his short story ‘The Antichrist.’ The Antichrist receives an honorary doctorate in theology from the University of Tübingen and is a great Scripture scholar. Soloviev’s portrayal of the Antichrist forcefully expresses his skepticism regarding a certain type of scholarly exegesis current at the time. That is not a rejection of scholarly Bible interpretation as such

<sup>3</sup> Erbacher, *Papst*, 180f. Translated from the German.

<sup>4</sup> Hansjürgen Verweyen. Joseph Ratzinger – *Benedikt XVI.: Die Entwicklung seines Denkens*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007, p. 2.

but an eminently salutary and necessary warning against possible its possible aberrations. The fact is that scriptural exegesis can become a tool of the Antichrist. Soloviev is not the first person to tell us that; it is the deeper point of the temptation story itself” (I, 35).

The Pope essentially explains this as follows: “The alleged findings of scholarly exegesis have been used to put together the most dreadful books that destroy the figure of Jesus and dismantle the faith. The common practice today is to measure the Bible against the so-called modern worldview, whose fundamental dogma is that God cannot act in history—that everything to do with God is to be relegated to the domain of subjectivity. And so the Bible no longer speaks of God, the living God; no, now we alone speak and decide what God can do and what we will and should do. And the Antichrist, with an air of scholarly excellence, tells us that any exegesis that reads the Bible from the perspective of faith in the living God, in order to listen to what God has to say, is fundamentalism; he wants to convince us that only *his* kind of exegesis, the supposedly purely scientific kind, in which God says nothing and has nothing to say, is able to keep abreast of the times. The theological debate between Jesus and the devil is a dispute over the correct interpretation of Scripture, and it is relevant to every period of history. The hermeneutical question lying at the basis of proper scriptural exegesis is this: What picture of God are we working with? *The dispute about interpretation is ultimately a dispute about who God is. Yet in practice, the struggle over the image of God, which underlies the debate about valid biblical interpretation, is decided by the picture we form of Christ: Is he, who remained without worldly power, really the Son of the living God?*” (I, 35–36; emphasis at the end of the quotation is mine).

This viewpoint demonstrated by the Pope is not new. Rather, it takes up what the Pope already said in 1988 in his Erasmus Lecture, entitled “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis” in New York and put to paper in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis*,<sup>5</sup> as this 1988 guest lecture is found to be only slightly changed in the second chapter of the book on Jesus (I, 25–45).

## The Historical Method

When the Pope holds “the historical method” (I, xv) to be indispensable for biblical interpretation, he is completely in line with Evangelicals. Faith and history belong together, and faith and the historical credibility of the central events of the Christian faith belong together. “The important thing for us, then, is to ascertain, whether the basic convictions of the faith are historically plausible and credible when today’s exegetical knowledge is taken in all seriousness” (II, 105).

He does not see the historical method as a threat but instead sees the Christian faith as so tightly linked with the historicity of the essential events that there is no faith without historical scrutiny. He writes, “I would like to sketch at least the broad outlines of the methodology, drawn from these documents, that has guided me in writing this book. The first point is *that the historical-critical method* [my emphasis]—specifically because of the intrinsic nature of theology and faith—is and remains an indispensable dimension of exegetical work. For it is of the very essence of biblical faith to be about real historical events. It does not tell stories symbolizing suprahistorical truths, but is based on history, history that took place here on this earth.

<sup>5</sup> Josef Ratzinger. “Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit,” pp. 15–44 in the same (ed.),

*Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit. Quaestiones disputatae 117*. Freiburg: Herder, 1989, here pp. 15ff; comp. Hansjürgen Verweyen. Joseph Ratzinger – Benedikt XVI, op. cit., pp. 86–89. All quotes have been translated from the German original.

The *factum historicum* (historical fact) is not an interchangeable symbolic cipher for biblical faith, but the foundation on which it stands: *Et incarnatus est*—when we say these words, we acknowledge God’s actual entry into real history. *If we push this history aside, Christian faith as such disappears* [my emphasis] and is recast as some other religion. So if history, if facticity in this sense, is an essential dimension of Christian faith, then faith must expose itself to the historical method—indeed, faith itself demands this. I have already mentioned the conciliar Constitution on Divine Revelation; it makes the same point quite explicitly in paragraph 12 and goes on to list some concrete elements of method that have to be kept in mind when interpreting Scripture” (I, xiv–xv).

The Pope writes similarly in the second volume, “If the historicity of the key words and events could be scientifically disproved, then the faith would have lost its foundation. Conversely, we may not expect ... to find absolutely certain proof of every detail, given the nature of historical knowledge. The important thing for us, then, is to ascertain, whether the basic convictions of the faith are historically plausible and credible when today’s exegetical knowledge is taken in all seriousness” (II, 104–105).

The Pope wants to bring history and faith together again (II, xvi and often; see the index, p. 349, “History”). With that, he wants to “finally [take up] the principles formulated in the Second Vatican Council (in *Dei Verbum* 12),” which had hardly been the case for him up to this point.

## Historical or Historical-Critical?

However, the Pope now repeatedly oscillates between the formulations “historical method” and “historical-critical method” and does not keep them clearly distinguished from each other. He also does not use them congruently.

If the Pope simply means “historical research” when he uses the term “historical-critical,” the issue would be very simple. Insofar as this research has brought historical truths to light, it cannot be ignored. However, insofar as issues are poorly or wrongly worked through, the results are therefore to be rejected and (no longer) endanger the faith.

The Pope, however, chose the path of not only criticizing concrete historical-critical results. *Rather, all of historical-critical research is simultaneously taken to be valuable and indispensable and also, in the end, damaging.* He proceeds as if one has to work in a historical-critical manner and can, after having done so prune it according to faith. In my opinion, Evangelicals see and say this more transparently for outsiders. Faith and historical research interact, and to be honest, faith does not come into play in hindsight. This is also the case with Pope Benedict, only he does not say this so clearly.

“The historical-critical method—let me repeat—is an indispensable tool, given the structure of Christian faith. But we have to add two things. This method is a fundamental dimension of exegesis, but it does not exhaust the interpretive task for someone *who sees the Biblical writings as a single corpus of Holy Scripture inspired by God*” (I, xvi; my emphasis).

“For the time being, it is important—and this is a second point—to recognize the limits of the historical-critical method itself. For someone who considers himself directly addressed by the Bible today, the method’s first limit is that by its very nature it has to leave the biblical word in the past” (I, xvi).

“This is connected with a further point. Because it is a historical method, it presupposes the uniformity of the context within which the events of history unfold. It must therefore treat the biblical words it investigates as human words” (I, xvi–xvii).

“Scholarship overplays its hand with such reconstructions” (I, 302), Benedict states. Overreach is, however, not a historic formulation. The results are wrong, meaning that they have been made up out of thin air because there is no data, or they are correct. “Overreach” means, however, that scholarship should not have addressed this question in the first place.

At this point, the criticism is *not* that historical-critical methods have simply done a bad job, brought about wrong results, or, for instance, moved ahead with wrong judgments. Rather, the results placing the faith into doubt are then criticized as being insufficient. The method “does not exhaust the interpretative task,” “overreaches,” has to “let the biblical word ... remain in the past,” and “treat[s] the biblical words it investigates as human words”—all this is indeed not a criticism of the contents of their results but is rather of a much more fundamental nature.

*In a large part of the book, the Pope argues just the other way around and does this very well. He refutes the results of critical depictions of the gospels with historical arguments and makes a plausible case that things are more evident and better explained if one takes the historical statements of the gospels seriously.*

Let us choose another example: “Exaggerating a little, one could say that I set out to discover the real Jesus, on the basis of whom something like a ‘Christology from below’ would then become possible. The quest for the ‘historical Jesus,’ as conducted in mainstream critical exegesis in accordance with its hermeneutical preconditions, lacks sufficient content to exert any significant historical impact. It is focused too much on the past for it to make possible a personal relationship with Jesus” (II, xvi). Again the question arises: Are the results only “paltry” if correct, or does the paucity demonstrate that the results are wrong, i.e., poorly researched?

It has to do with a “combination of two quite different types of hermeneutic” (II, xv). It that really possible? Or should it not be made clear that in the case of doubt the faith of the church is what counts? And is that not at least a distinct end point of the primacy of the historical-critical method (in the liberal sense)?

*Lip service toward the historical-critical method thus opposes another practice.* Jan-Heiner Tück summarizes this somewhat casually: “Let those who are historical-critical discuss their hypotheses. I prefer to hold to the canonical Gospels and the living memory of the Church that brought this about.”<sup>6</sup>

Nowhere does the Pope proceed *de facto* on the basis of real errors in the Gospels, unless one mentions some reservations in cases of individual ascription of authorship. Even when the Pope ascribes the Gospel of John to a close student of the apostle John, the “presbyter” John, he never places the text of the New Testament into question and emphasizes that, with that said, the contents in the end stem from eye witnesses and above all from John the disciple of Jesus.

Once again, the Pope apparently simply equates “historical-critical work” and “historical work.” He leaves no possibility open for simply rejecting many existing speculations and hypotheses under the umbrella of the ‘historical-critical method’ due to their not working historically at all in the sense of historical scholarship.

*The problem is all too often that the results of historical-critical exegesis do not stand in the court of historical-scholarly work and are replaced by the next hypotheses.* Now and then, the Pope addresses this directly, for example when he says, “One thing is clear to me: in two hundred years of exegetical work, historical-critical exegesis has already yielded its essential fruit.

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<sup>6</sup> Jan-Heiner Tück. “Leben und Sterben für Gott und Menschen: Der zweite Band des Jesus-Buches von Papst Benedikt XVI.” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, March 12, 2011. <http://www.nzz.ch/aktuell/startseite/leben-und-sterben-fuer-gott-und-die-menschen-1.9859971>.

If scholarly exegesis is not to exhaust itself in constantly new hypotheses, becoming theologically irrelevant, it must take a methodological step forward and set itself once again as a theological discipline, without abandoning its historical character. It must learn that the positivist hermeneutic on which it has been based does not constitute the only valid and definitively evolved rational approach; rather, it constitutes a specific and historically conditioned form of rationality that is both open to correction and completion and in need of it. It must recognize that a properly developed faith-hermeneutic is appropriate to the text and can be combined with a historical hermeneutic, aware of its limits, so as to form a methodological whole" (II, xiv–xv).

In the end, wrong, “constantly new hypotheses” only lead to results that are “theologically irrelevant” and not to results’ being plainly and simply false and often after a short time superseded.

Repeatedly, the Pope speaks out against the hypothesis that the later church developed all of this, for instance when he says, “The anonymous church is credited with an astonishing level of theological genius” (I, 324). “To say that it is the fruit of anonymous collective formulations whose authorship we seek to discover, does not actually explain anything” (I, xxii). At this point, the problem is the completely simple one that the hypotheses are wrong!

The Pope provides a reminder here that the historical-critical work done on the Bible follows ideological precepts and that these should be more strongly disclosed and scrutinized.

## **Excursus:**

### **Historical-critical theologians have to be historical-critical<sup>7</sup>**

If historical-critical study means that one seeks to work historically and at the same time utilize the principles of scholarly criticism (e.g., research, historical method, reconstruction of the original documents, discussion with other researchers, openness to correction of one’s own view, and continual re-examination), then representatives of an Evangelical (Bible-believing) understanding of the Scriptures readily work in an historical-critical manner.

However, “historical-critical” has long since ceased to stand as a synonym for “scholarship” but rather denotes a certain basic critical approach to the principles of the Bible. Moreover, it also designates at least a colorful bouquet of all sorts of methods, theories, and results that range in credibility level from convincing to the absurd. Since this is the case, it is necessary to scrutinize or at least necessary to say which sort of historical-critical research is meant.

If, however, historical-critical study is to be understood in such a way that a correct understanding of the text includes not being allowed to understand it at the same time as a word in human language and as a divine revelation, thus indicating that the concept of historical-critical study demands “methodological atheism,” and this gets tethered to whether one doubts as frequently as possible the statements of the Bible even if there are no other historical sources that force one to take this position, an Evangelical (“biblically oriented”) understanding would thus reject this stance. Its representatives also reject the idea that one is working in an historical-critical manner if one shares certain majority opinions (such as multiple sources in the Pentateuch or the two-source hypothesis with respect to the Gospels). At the same time, there are indeed many researchers who also, for historical and scholarly

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<sup>7</sup> Slightly edited excerpt from <http://www.bucer.de/ressource/details/bibeltreue-in-der-offensive.html>.

reasons, are convinced that the traditional ascriptions of authorship of the New Testament books are correct.

After all, there are many historians, ancient Near Eastern specialists, and other scholars who as a matter of course work in an “historical-critical” fashion and who evaluate the historical credibility of the Bible to be significantly greater than how many theologians assess it. For this reason, it is important not to elevate the definition of “historical-critical” from the side of theology to a normative position but rather to place it aside other sciences that work historically.

In short, if the concept “historical-critical” is to be understood in a manner associated with literary scholarship, it is also a good concept to apply to the Bible. Also, when theologians use it in this manner, this is understandable. In fact, however, the concept actually often has an antiquated, tendentious meaning with predetermined results. I reject such an understanding.

(end of the excursus)

Again: In my opinion, despite his impressive approach and thorough exegetical work, the Pope mixes two different questions and, with that, two tiers.

If one says that historical or even historical-critical research has the priority, then one has to also accept that the historical result can be very meager and, owing to new findings, repeatedly in flux.

Or one might say—as the Pope nowhere says directly but de facto implies—that historical research has erred to a large degree. Thus, owing to wrong hermeneutical guidelines, it has not found the “true” story and is rather a self-prescribed illusion. It was not really “historical-critical”! As stated, the Pope nowhere states this explicitly but writes the entire time as if that were precisely the case.

The Pope exclusively quotes historical-critical literature and, as a German, almost exclusively German literature. However, his sources include Catholic, Evangelical, and Jewish literature. He is not acquainted with Anglo-Saxon literature, which in its historical-critical form concedes much greater historical credibility to the Scriptures. He is even less acquainted with theologically conservative literature, not to mention prominent series of Evangelical commentaries or New Testament introductions. If the Pope were acquainted with the global corpus of literature, he would know that one cannot speak about a predominance within the Catholic sphere of disputing traditional authorship of the Gospels. For there are even Catholic publications in German, such as the introduction to the New Testament by the Viennese theology professor Karl Jaros, that date most New Testament Scriptures very early and rate their attributions of historical credibility very highly.<sup>8</sup>

## **The Historical-Critical Method in the Third Volume on the Childhood Stories of Jesus**

Let us inquire as to the discussion of the historical-critical method in the third volume of the Jesus Trilogy, which Benedict introduces as follows:

“This short book on Jesus’ infancy narratives, which I have been promising to write for some time, is at last ready to be presented to the reader. It is not a third volume, but a kind of small

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Jaros. *Das Neue Testament und seine Autoren: Eine Einführung*. UTB. Wien: Böhlau, 2008; comp. my commentary at <http://www.thomasschirmmacher.info/archives/1377>.



‘antechamber’ to the two earlier volumes on the figure and the message of Jesus of Nazareth. I have set out here, in dialogue with exegetes past and present, to interpret what Matthew and Luke say about Jesus’ infancy at the beginning of their gospels” (III, xi).

Given the content of the third volume, it is intended to be the first (“Prologue”) and addresses the infancy accounts. One notices that it was written under greater time pressure in order to conclude the series on Jesus, either because the Pope saw his strength dissipating or because he already had planned his resignation. The volume is only half as large and does not contain any basic statements on handling the Holy Scriptures. Only in the foreword does Benedict raise the issues highlighted in the following passage: “I am convinced that good exegesis involves two stages. Firstly one has to ask what the respective authors intended to convey through their text in their own day—the historical component of exegesis. But it is not sufficient to leave the text in the past and thus relegate it to history. The second question posed by good exegesis must be: is what I read here true? Does it concern me? If so, how? With a text like the Bible, whose ultimate and fundamental author, according to our faith, is God himself, the question regarding the here and now of things past is undeniably included in the task of exegesis. The seriousness of the historical quest is in no way diminished by this: on the contrary, it is enhanced. In this sense, I have taken pains to enter into dialogue with the texts. In so doing, I have been conscious that this conversation, drawing in the past, the present, and the future, can never come to an end, and that every exegesis must fall short of the magnitude of the biblical text. My hope is that this short book, despite its limitations, will be able to help many people on their path toward and alongside Jesus” (III, xi–xii).

Just how much the Pope ultimately considers the historical sources credible becomes clear precisely by his taking the disputed childhood stories seriously. Thus, he says that Luke indicates that Mary is a source. “Naturally, modern ‘critical’ exegesis will tend to dismiss such connections as naive” (III, 16). However, he then simply asks the question, “But why should there not have been a tradition of this kind ... ?” (III, 16)

Overall, he claims even more when he argues, “The accounts in Matthew and Luke are not myths taken a stage further” (III, 53). “Is what we profess in the Creed true, then?” (III, 58). His answer is an “unequivocal yes” (III, 58).

Here I consider the Evangelical position to be more honest and direct, as it admits to having a basic trust in the texts from the outset and then argues that up to now the results of historical research, especially those of historians, archaeologists, and linguists, have confirmed the Bible to a degree that one could have hardly imagined earlier.

The difference becomes particularly clear in his advocacy of the virgin birth (III, 41–43, 46–57). The Pope does not find an answer to Isaiah 7:14 and why this verse in the New Testament refers to the virgin birth of Jesus. The reference to the Messiah is for him—in good biblically critical fashion—excluded since the idea of the Messiah is presumed to belong to the time of the exile. He is not aware that there are formidable advocates and arguments for a pre-exilic messianic concept. It is too bad that the Pope does not deal with the Old Testament sources in the same way as he deals with the Gospels! He apparently relies too uncritically upon his Old Testament colleagues.

Nevertheless, he asks whether Christians did not necessarily have to relate this word to the birth of Jesus (III, 50). “Indeed, I believe that in our own day, after all the efforts of critical exegesis, we can share anew this sense of astonishment at the fact that a saying from the year 733 B.C. ... came true at the moment of the conception of Jesus Christ” (III, 50–51).

Would it not make more sense to say here with Augustine and Anselm of Canterbury that we believe in order to understand? That we believe but can then also underpin this belief

exegetically, indeed by questioning cherished historical constructions relating to Old Testament Israel?

## **On the Pope's Dealing with the Historical-Critical Method in Volumes 2 and 3 of the Jesus Trilogy**

It is striking that in the second and third volumes of his Jesus books, the Pope does not express himself anywhere near as sharply against the historical-critical method as in the first volume. However, he still speaks simply of “the criticism.” Furthermore, he says, “This book presupposes historical-critical exegesis and makes use of its findings, but it seeks to transcend this method and to arrive at a genuinely theological interpretation” (II, 295). The Pope proceeds, “The mystery of atonement is not to be sacrificed on the altar of overweening rationalism” (II, 240). That is just not an historical statement but a dogmatic-parenetic one.

Here, too, the tension remains unresolved as to whether the theological interpretation thus ultimately becomes an ahistorical one, or whether it is actually the true historical one because it actually understands the text. After all, in his view the theological interpretation in the end means (1) to understand the reports in terms of faith, (2) to thereby understand their historical credibility, and (3) to refer canonically the entire Holy Scriptures in order to interpret a text so that in terms of the understanding of atonement, for instance, much more is said about the epistles of Romans and Hebrews than about the Gospel texts themselves.

In the section on reconciliation and atonement (II, 229–240, chapter 8, 3)—to give one example—the Pope refers to Romans 3:25 and then to the Epistle to the Hebrews (II, 231–233, 40, 60). I like that very much, but it presupposes the unity of biblical revelation and teaching, which assumes that the interpretation of the later apostles depicts the correct view of earlier events and thus also of the life of Jesus. The Pope writes in the chapter entitled “The Jewish Feast of Atonement as Biblical Background to the High Priestly Prayer” (II, 76–81), “Jesus’ high-priestly prayer is the consummation of the Day of Atonement, the eternally accessible feast, as it were, of God’s reconciliation with man” (II, 79). This is delightful and should actually be a good Catholic perspective, but today it is mostly heard only in Evangelical environments and in the Tübingen school.<sup>9</sup>

## **Hermeneutics Presupposes Faith— as Is the Case with Evangelicals**

That the Pope, just like Evangelicals, does not simply arrive at research results but starts from essential trust in the Holy Scriptures is repeatedly made clear by his concern for “a properly developed faith-hermeneutic” (II, xv). I just find it more honest to say this right from the start. Faith does not have to shy away from historical research, but one should not pretend that without an existing faith in the Holy Scriptures such disputes would anyway occur.

Thus the Pope writes plainly and simply: “The main implication of this for my portrayal account of Jesus is that I trust the Gospels” (I, xxi).

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<sup>9</sup> Below I will make a couple of critical observations on the trivialization of the concept of atonement and on suppressing the wrath of God.

Sometimes the Pope deliberately expresses himself vaguely. He says, for example, “Peter takes it for granted that it was David who originally prayed this psalm” (II, 255), but then he naturally assumes that the quotation makes sense only from David’s point of view.

When the Gospel states that “Jesus knew that he was about to die” (II, 113), then this is a clear historical statement and not only a theological one. And since Jesus understood his death to be atoning in nature, the Pope is of a different opinion from the majority of Gospel exegetes, even if he has quite significant individual voices on his side.

If the empty tomb is not proof of the resurrection of Jesus but “a necessary condition” (II, 254), for which the Pope refers to arguments by Thomas Söding, Ulrich Wilckens, and others to indicate that the proclamation of the resurrection would have been impossible if one could have referred to the corpse, then this is also clearly an historical statement.

Therefore, the Jesus of the Gospels is for him the real and proper Jesus: “I wanted to try to portray the Jesus of the Gospels as the real, ‘historical’ Jesus in the strict sense of the word. I am convinced and I hope the reader will be, too, that this figure is much more logical and, historically speaking, much more intelligible than the reconstructions we have been confronted with in the last decades” (I, xxi–xxii).

“Jesus’ claim” is that he is—according to the Pope—the “Torah—as the Word of God in person” (I, 110). “The Jesus of the Fourth Gospel and the Jesus of the Synoptics is one and the same: the true ‘historical’ Jesus” (I, 111).

The Pope sees “you are the Christ ...” (e.g., Matthew 16:16) as *not* post-Easter (I, 287–304). Correct! But is this a result of historical-critical research or faith, which has its starting point in the fact that I believe the same here and now and that Jesus is precisely the Christ he already was at that time?

## The Unity of Scriptures and the Canon

Contrary to large parts of historical-critical theology, the Pope mostly implicitly, but sometimes also explicitly, assumes the unity of the New Testament and the unity of the entire canonical Scriptures. Even if in it he follows so-called “canonical exegesis,” he mostly goes far beyond its results. Moreover, this remains a faithful presupposed decision which leads him into the Evangelicals’ camp rather than into the camp of conservative Catholic exegetes.

What John Calvin called the “harmony of the Gospels” comes across fully with the Pope. For the Pope, everything that Scripture says about Jesus belongs to the overall historical picture, the Jesus of the Gospels, of Paul, of the Epistle to the Hebrews, of the Revelation of John, or of the shorter New Testament letters as well as the Jesus of Isaiah 53.

The Pope says that he can understand the New Testament not only from the “unity of Scripture” (I, xviii; I, 191), but above all from the intimate unity of the Son with the Father (I, 6). Amen! However, this is profoundly a statement of faith that binds research to the Scriptures and is not the result of historical-critical research! For here not only is a faith presupposed as to how the New Testament is to be understood, but also, this actual core of the New Testament corresponds to an actual reality! And since this reality is the triune God, this can only be traced back to revelation, for “no one has ever seen God” (John 1:18).

“Ultimately, it considers the individual books of Scripture in the context of their historical period, and then analyzes them further according to their sources. The unity of all of these writings as one ‘Bible,’ however, is not something it can recognize as an immediate historical datum. Of course it can examine the lines of development, the growth of traditions, and in that sense can look beyond the individual books to see how they come together to form the one

‘Scripture.’ Nevertheless, it always has to begin by going back to the origin of the individual texts, which means placing them in their past context, even if it goes on to complement this move back in time by following up the process through which the texts were later brought together” (I, 1xvii).

The Pope pleads for “canonical exegesis” (I, xix–xxi), which “does not contradict historical-critical interpretation, but carries it forward in an organic way toward becoming theology in the proper sense” (I, xix).<sup>10</sup> In reality, however, canonical exegesis does not continue historical-critical theology. Rather, it precedes it as a decision of general principle!

It is pleasing that the Pope again gives the Gospel of John the space it deserves, which is why he again emphasizes the priesthood of Jesus more strongly—together with the acceptance of the Epistle to the Hebrews. If we add the continual and frequent references to the Old Testament in Benedict, which use Old Testament facts to explain New Testament texts, we obtain a unity of Scripture that I know only from Evangelicals.

The Reformation’s “*tota scriptura*” (the whole Scripture) is fulfilled here, and “*sola scriptura*” (Scripture alone) is not expressly mentioned. However, in practice it is at least drawn out with respect to Jesus. This is due to the fact that regarding the sources of information for Jesus, the entirety of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation is valid and not any later tradition.

## Inspiration

Twice the Pope speaks about the topic of “inspiration,” but his description of inspiration both times is very unusual. This is because he sees the meaning of inspiration above all in the fact that the author does not write simply as an individual but as a part of the people of God. The first time this happens is right at the beginning of Volume I:

“At this point we get a glimmer, even on the historical level, of what inspiration means: The author does not speak as a private, self-contained subject. He speaks in a living community, that is to say, in a living historical movement not created by him, nor even by the collective, but which is led forward by a greater power that is at work. There are dimensions of the word that the old doctrine of the fourfold sense of Scripture pinpointed with remarkable accuracy. The four senses of Scripture are not individual meanings arrayed side by side, but dimensions of the one word that reaches beyond the moment. This already suggests the second aspect I wanted to speak about. Neither the individual books of Holy Scripture nor the Scripture as a whole are simply a piece of literature. The Scripture emerged from within the heart of a living subject—the pilgrim People of God—and lives within the same subject. One could say that the books of Scripture involve three interacting subjects. First of all, there is the individual author or group of authors to whom we owe a particular scriptural text. But these authors are not autonomous writers in the modern sense; they form part of a collective subject, the “People of God,” from within whose heart and to whom they speak” (I, xx–xxi).

Later, the following is said: Inspiration “transcends the sphere of our own understanding and knowing. It is a being-led by the Holy Spirit, who shows us the connectedness of Scripture, the connection between word and reality, and, in doing that, leads us ‘into all the truth.’ This also has some fundamental implications for the concept of inspiration. The gospel emerges from human remembering and presupposes the communion of those who remember, in this case very concretely the school of John and, before that, the community of disciples. But because the

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<sup>10</sup> Comp. Hansjürgen Verweyen. Joseph Ratzinger . . . op. cit., pp 88–89.

author thinks and writes with the memory of the Church, the ‘we’ to which he belongs opens beyond the personal and is guided in its depths by the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of truth. In this sense, the gospel itself opens up a path of understanding, which always remains bound to the scriptural word, and yet from generation to generation can lead, and is meant to lead, ever anew into the depth of all the truth. This means that the Gospel of John, because it is a ‘pneumatic Gospel,’ does not simply transmit a stenographic transcript of Jesus’ words and ways; it escorts us, in virtue of understanding-through-remembering, beyond the external into the depth of words and events that come from God and lead back to him. As such, the Gospel is ‘remembering,’ which means that it remains faithful to what really happened and is not a ‘Jesus poem,’ not a violation of the historical events. Rather, it truly shows us who Jesus was, and thereby it shows us someone who not only was, but is; who can always say ‘I am’ in the present tense. ‘Before Abraham was, *I am*’ (John 8:58). It shows us the real Jesus, and we can confidently make use of it as a source of information about him” (I, 234–235; emphasis in original).

Typical of Benedict’s wandering between the worlds is his solution to the Johannine question, namely how he can say that the Gospel of John does not come from John the disciple of Jesus and yet comes from him, thus having eyewitness character (I, 218–237, “The Johannine Question”). John namely had a close confidant, also named John, and the vibrant circle of John’s students transmitted his eyewitness accounts to posterity (I, 226–228).

According to the Pope, Eusebius distinguishes between the apostle John and the “presbyter” John, who according to Benedict is the author of the second and third letters of John (I, 226). Therefore, the Pope follows Peter Stuhlmacher and others with the idea that the presbyter John was the familiar mouthpiece of the apostle (I, 226). “This Gospel ultimately goes back to an eyewitness, and even the actual redaction of the text was substantially the work of one of his closest followers within the living circle of his disciples” (I, 226).

## **Are There Evangelical Features in the Jesus Trilogy?**

### **The Central Relationship to Jesus**

Pope Benedict’s book is an expression of a “personal search” and not an exercise of the magisterium, which is why everyone is free to “contradict me” (I, xxiii). In his Jesus Trilogy, Pope Benedict is concerned with presenting Jesus “so that they may hold fast to faith in the person of Jesus Christ” (II, xiii). That the Pope says that the Gospels must be interpreted in such a way that one “may hold fast to faith in the person of Jesus Christ” sounds very Evangelical, even if it naturally does not contradict Catholic doctrine. It is also exactly what John writes at the end of his Gospel as the intention of his work (John 20:30–31).

At the beginning of the third volume, Pope Benedict writes, “My hope is that this short book, despite its limitations, will be able to help many people on their path toward and alongside Jesus” (III, xii).

### **The Lord’s Prayer and Our Prayers**

How much the Pope reads the book as a believer and cannot read it any other way is shown by his remarks on the Lord’s Prayer: “It is very important to listen as precisely as possible to the word of Jesus as it is handed down to us in Scripture. We must try as hard as we can to truly recognize the thoughts of Jesus. ... But we must also keep in mind that the Lord’s Prayer comes

from his own praying, from the Son's conversation with the Father. This means that it reaches into great depths beyond words. It encompasses the whole expanse of being human throughout all time and is therefore not to be fathomed with a purely historical interpretation, however important that may be" (I, 133, my emphasis).

For this reason, "the great men and women of prayer throughout the centuries" have tapped into the riches of prayer; in this prayer, each one of us is allowed to find himself accepted and lifted up in "*our totally personal relationship with God*" (I, 133; my emphasis).

Evangelicals view this the same way, only they say more openly and in advance that they cannot separate their concrete experience of faith in prayer from the interpretation of the Lord's Prayer.

That doesn't mean they have to fear historical research. If Jesus meant it that way and still conveys it so to us today, then this meaning is also the historical meaning. Anything else places a meaning upon the text that it never had.

## On the Office of the Papacy

The Pope, who sees himself above all as pastor and teacher of the Church with recognizably little to do with the fact that he is also head of state, writes that "secular power of the papacy" is "no longer a temptation today" (I, 42). That is certainly his view. I dare to doubt whether this also applies to the Secretariat of State of the Holy See.

In a footnote the Pope writes, "Since this book is dedicated to the figure of Jesus, I have deliberately avoided offering a commentary on the statements regarding primacy in the context of Peter's confession. I refer in this connection to Oscar Cullmann, *Peter* (1952)" (I, 373). At that time, Cullmann advocated that "the rock" in Matthew 16:18 of course refers to Peter as a play on words,<sup>11</sup> but at the same time he rejected the idea that an office for his successors could be derived exegetically as well as dogmatically from it.<sup>12</sup> The "foundation" of the apostles (Ephesians 2:20; Romans 15:20, cf. Revelation 20:14) is to be understood as chronologically unique.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Cullmann's view is that Peter never moved his bishop's seat away from Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup>

## What Sounds Evangelical

Otherwise, the pope also again and again sounds very Evangelical. I also know that with a statement such as the following, Catholic doctrine is not abandoned: "Our own morality is insufficient for the proper worship of God. This Saint Paul stated quite emphatically in the dispute over justification" (II, 235). Nevertheless, his predecessor would not have said such an unguarded thing without immediately qualifying it.

In all three volumes of the Jesus Trilogy, the Pope lets one opportunity after another to find pure Roman Catholic faith in the Gospels pass by. Thus, in the section called "The Women at the Foot of the Cross: The Mother of Jesus" (II, 219–222), he does not call for the veneration of Mary. Although he refers to Revelation 12:1–6, a classic Marian text, he does not proceed in

<sup>11</sup> Oscar Cullmann. *Petrus: Jünger – Apostel – Märtyrer*. Zwingli-Verlag: Zürich, 1952, pp. 231–237.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 239–268.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

good Catholic fashion and see Mary in the woman giving birth but rather the Church in a good exegetical (and “historical”) way!

Even in the many statements on Jesus’ Lord’s Supper with his disciples, the Pope refrains from depicting the Roman Catholic doctrine of the sacraments.

The chapter entitled “That They May All Be One ...” (II, 93–102) is astonishing; apart from some individual formulations, it could have been written by the World Evangelical Alliance. On the unity of the Church, the Pope mentions the sacraments and apostolic succession, but he remains at the level of the Old Church. The Old Church saw the “sacrament of succession, Scripture, the rule of faith (creed)” (II, 99) as the basis of the Church, and the Reformers agreed with this. For the Pope, the unity of the Church is based on faith! Just as in Volume I (373), the Pope renounced interpreting Jesus’ word to Peter as referring to the Pope and consciously remained with its original meaning. In Volume 2 he also forgoes the interpretation of the same word as pointing to the Papacy (II, 249).

### Where Does This Leave the Atonement?

It is striking that the Pope often presents faith in a rather politically correct way, such as by barely mentioning the wrath of God despite long passages about reconciliation, atonement, and the cross.<sup>15</sup> Although he balances the love and justice of God in matters relating to the cross, as in his *Encyclical Letter on Christian Love (Deus Caritas Est)*, the wrath of God hardly belongs to the latter. For him, the event of atonement is indeed omnipresent, but it is not a vicarious sacrifice with respect to punishment or wrath (Greek *orgē*). However, we would have liked to know how he understands Jesus’ statements in this regard, for instance in Luke 3:7 or John 3:36.

Jan-Heiner Tück admittedly has a completely different view of the Pope’s position: “Benedict even assumes that Jesus understood his death in the sense of the suffering servant of God who carries away the guilt of the people.”<sup>16</sup>

Tück continues, “The common objection is that an atonement-based theological interpretation of the death on the cross cannot go back to Jesus himself. He had put God’s unconditional willingness to forgive at the center of his message; it was for that reason impossible for him to link salvation to the condition of an atoning death after all. Benedict solves this contradiction by positioning an inner development within Jesus’ thinking. The proclamation of the onset of the Kingdom of God had been rejected by the majority of Israel at that time. In order to still be able to maintain the message of approaching salvation in view of his impending death, Jesus used the song of the suffering servant of God (Isaiah 53) to interpret his own destiny. The cross must therefore be interpreted as the ‘radicalization of the unconditional love of God,’ in which Jesus takes upon himself people’s no and thus draws them into his yes.

“However, the topic of substitution encounters problems of understanding. Not only the contemporary trained in Kant will ask himself how the lack of moral acceptability of the subject can go together with the topic of the dying substitute without finding a truly satisfactory report. There is also the suspicion that God is a ‘cannibal in heaven’ when he demands the bloody

<sup>15</sup> Also see the index at the end of the book. Rainer Riesner is particularly critical in his review of Volume II of the Jesus Trilogy in *Diakrisis* 32 (2011) 4: 171–177.

<sup>16</sup> Jan-Heiner Tück. “Leben und Sterben für Gott und Menschen: Der zweite Band des Jesus-Buches von Papst Benedikt XVI,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, March 12, 2011. <http://www.nzz.ch/aktuell/startseite/leben-und-sterben-fuer-gott-und-die-menschen-1.9859971>.

sacrifice of the Son in order to appease his wrath over human sin. Joseph Ratzinger countered this caricature of Christian salvific faith by saying that the cross marked the end of the practice of sacrifice. God does not demand service in advance by the sinner but has conversely offered the gift of reconciliation in the crucified one. Love, not the desire for retaliation, rests in the background of Jesus' mission. On the cross, God steps in in the form of his Son to come to the side of the beaten, but a mirror is held up to the executioners to show their injustice."<sup>17</sup>

## Ratzinger and the Bible

Let us now turn to Cardinal Ratzinger, and thus to what Pope Benedict said and defended on the subject before his election as Pope.

Aidan Nichols, OP, holds the view that no prefect since the foundation of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1542 has ever acted like Ratzinger. Nichols himself has written theology and has appeared as an independent producer of theology in addition to the Pope.<sup>18</sup> John L. Allen points out that no cardinal has ever become so famous.<sup>19</sup>

I would, however, see an exception for both, namely 450 years earlier at the beginning of the 1542 Congregation (at that time the "Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition"), in Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621), whose Catechism *Christianae doctrinae explicatio* appeared in 60 languages and 400 editions and whose collected works were printed as late as 1874 in 12 volumes.

Nevertheless, there is no question that Cardinal Ratzinger has shaped Catholic theology—also, for instance, through the World Catechism of the Catholic Church—as no Cardinal before him has done for a long time. This also especially applies to his attitude toward the Holy Scriptures.

John L. Allen sees 1971 (as a reaction to the 1968 era) as the "coming out" of the conservative Ratzinger and then again a further conservative thrust beginning in 1983.<sup>20</sup> Prior to that point, Ratzinger was in favor of strengthening the authority of the bishops and of the national bishops' conferences in the sense of collegiality. Later, he emphasized the primacy and authority of the Pope prior to and above the bishops.<sup>21</sup>

John L. Allen saw three points on which Ratzinger and Pope John Paul II had disagreements and leaked them: (1) The Pope did not consider liberation theology to be as dangerous as the Cardinal thought, (2) Ratzinger considered the high number of canonizations to be wrong; (3) Ratzinger criticized the interreligious prayer for peace conducted in Assisi.<sup>22</sup>

## Joseph Ratzinger and the Historical-Critical Method

"As probably no other 20th century Catholic theologian, Joseph Ratzinger, as early as from the onset of his theological studies (1947), clearly recognized the central dilemma of historical-

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Aidan Nichols, OP. *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI*, op. cit., p. 171.

<sup>19</sup> In particular John L. Allen. *Joseph Ratzinger*, op. cit, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> John L. Allen. *Joseph Ratzinger*, op. cit., pp. 59+36.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 51–53, 29–37.

<sup>22</sup> John L. Allen. *Joseph Ratzinger*, op. cit., p. 163.



critical exegesis.”<sup>23</sup> He stated the following upon the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission: The question “also belongs, so to speak, among the issues in my autobiography.”<sup>24</sup>

In what in my opinion is the best presentation of Ratzinger’s theology, Hansjürgen Verweyen<sup>25</sup> has shown that the tension between true faith and historical-critical exegesis accompanied Ratzinger for many decades, from the beginning of his theological studies in 1947 and his priestly ordination in 1951, during the time prior to and during the Vatican Council, and up to his entire time as prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 1981 to 2005. For decades, Ratzinger has emphasized that what are at best the probable results of historical-critical exegesis are not suitable as a basis for a binding statement of faith. According to Verweyen, Ratzinger wrestles and wrestles, having sharp words in opposition to the historical-critical exegesis but also against its opponents.

In this connection, Verweyen refers to Ratzinger’s 1969–1970 debate with Walter Kasper, who found that Ratzinger’s book *Introduction to Christianity* played down the difficult search for the historical Jesus.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Ratzinger sought to conduct precise research but also saw the methodical self-limitation of theological scholarship.

“Arguably, Ratzinger rightly felt himself to be a fighter torn between all fronts”<sup>27</sup> by arguing that systematic theology must not ignore the results of historical-critical exegesis but conversely must not be dominated by them.

According to Cong Quy Joseph Lam, Ratzinger always wanted to mediate between Catholic and Reformed positions when it came to Scripture.<sup>28</sup> In particular, this concerned the relationship of tradition and magisterial teaching authority to the Scriptures.

Ratzinger, according to Söding, understood Martin Luther to mean that there was a danger that the Church would become the mistress of Scripture. “There is hardly a Catholic dogmatist who would have proclaimed with such clear and critical words the hermeneutic significance of Scripture and exegesis.”<sup>29</sup>

## The Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*

As an advisor to Joseph Cardinal Frings, Ratzinger experienced the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* in its making<sup>30</sup> and at all stages—he himself aimed at strengthening the position of Scripture vis-à-vis tradition and the Magisterium—and directly after the Council he

<sup>23</sup> Hansjürgen Verweyen. *Joseph Ratzinger . . .*, op. cit., p. 84.

<sup>24</sup> *Die Tagespost*, July 5, 2003, pp. 5-6, quoted in Hansjürgen Verweyen. *Joseph Ratzinger – Benedikt XVI*, op. cit., p. 84.

<sup>25</sup> Hansjürgen Verweyen. *Joseph Ratzinger – Benedikt XVI.: Die Entwicklung seines Denkens*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007. in part. pp. 22–25, 35–38, 84–98.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>28</sup> Cong Quy Joseph Lam. *Joseph Ratzinger’s Theological Retractions*, op. cit., pp. 28–29.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Söding. “Die Lebendigkeit des Wortes: Das Verständnis der Offenbarung bei Joseph Ratzinger,” pp. 12–55 in: Frank Meier-Hamidi, Ferdinand Schumacher (eds.). *Die Theologie Joseph Ratzingers*. Herder: Freiburg, 2007, p. 36.

<sup>30</sup> On the development of *Dei Verbum* see Hubert Kirchner. *Die römisch-katholische Kirche vom II. Vatikanischen Konzil bis zur Gegenwart. Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen IV/1*. Evangelische Verlagsanstalt: Leipzig, 1996, pp. 62–63, 75–76 and often.

wrote the German commentary on it.<sup>31</sup> In that commentary, he writes very critically about the Constitution but also reveals his view of Scripture, tradition, and the Magisterium.<sup>32</sup> Ratzinger writes very critically, for example, as four quotations should prove:

“Vaticanum II unfortunately did not bring about any progress on this point. Rather, it almost completely ignored the critical moment with respect to tradition. It has thus given itself an important chance in the ecumenical discussion, in fact the elaboration of a positive possibility and necessity of inner-church tradition criticism would have been ecumenically more fruitful than the quite fictitiously called “dispute about the quantitative completeness of Scripture.”<sup>33</sup>

“The prooemium, in its austere form and in the only laboriously masked logical breaks it contains, still quite clearly reveals the obscure prehistory from which it emerged.”<sup>34</sup>

“Admittedly, one is not be able to suppress reservations that at this point the Council once again identifies its proposition unnoticed with the service of the Kerygma as such and thus inappropriately identifies it.”<sup>35</sup>

“The text ... naturally ... bears the traces of its arduous history. It is an expression of diverse compromises. ... It is a synthesis of great importance. The text combines faithfulness to Church tradition with a yes to critical scholarship.”<sup>36</sup>

Ratzinger finds the evidence in *Dei Verbum* to be good, in which Scripture is the more important factor, for example when in the final passage “the function of Scripture is to entirely refer back to Scripture,” and likewise in Article 9 of *Dei Verbum*.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, according to Hans Verweyen, also in Article 9, the Scriptures and tradition have in fact become established as being completely and materially juxtaposed. This applies above all to the final sentence that both should be “accepted and honored with equal love and respect.” Thus, it has also found its way into the (international) 1993 Catechism of the Catholic Church, for which Ratzinger substantially shared responsibility.<sup>38</sup>

Thomas Söding, however, opposes this and rather agrees with Ratzinger: In *Dei Verbum* only the Scripture is called the “Word of God,” but not tradition (*Dei Verbum* 9).<sup>39</sup> He continues: “There can thus be no question that the Cardinal speaks in favor of a subordination of exegesis to dogmatics; his claim is for exegesis to keep pace with philosophical criticism and not persist with a historicism and rationalism that has become obsolete. ... Joseph Ratzinger

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Ratzinger. “Einleitung,” pp. 498–503 in: *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche. 2. Auflage. Band 13 (= Ergänzungsband II)*. Herder: Freiburg, 1967 (reprint 2014); Joseph Ratzinger. “Kommentar zum Prooemium, I. und II. Kapitel,” *Ibid.*, pp. 504–528; Joseph Ratzinger. “Sechstes Kapitel,” “Kommentar,” *Ibid.*, pp. 571–583.

<sup>32</sup> Comp. Tracey Rowland. *Ratzinger’s Faith*, op. cit., pp. 48–65; Hansjürgen Verweyen. *Joseph Ratzinger . . .*, op. cit., pp. 35–38 + 93–98; Cong Quy Joseph Lam. *Joseph Ratzinger’s Theological Retractions*, op. cit., pp. 54–70; John L. Allen. *Joseph Ratzinger*, op. cit., pp. 22–28, 27; Rudolf Voderholzer. “Joseph Ratzinger/Benedikt XVI. und die Exegese,” op. cit., pp. 100–102; Thomas Söding. “Die Lebendigkeit des Wortes,” op. cit., pp. 16–18.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Ratzinger. “Kommentar zum Prooemium, I. und II. Kapitel,” op. cit., pp. 520; comp. Hansjürgen Verweyen. *Joseph Ratzinger . . .*, op. cit., pp. 37.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Ratzinger. “Kommentar zum Prooemium,” op. cit., p. 504.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 505.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 502–503.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*; comp. Hansjürgen Verweyen. *Joseph Ratzinger . . .*, op. cit., pp. 37–38.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38 on the *Katechismus der Katholischen Kirche*. Oldenbourg: München, 1993, § 80–83; [http://www.vatican.va/archive/DEU0035/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/DEU0035/_INDEX.HTM).

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Söding. “Die Lebendigkeit des Wortes,” op. cit., p. 31 on *Dei Verbum* 9.

considers it essential that exegesis give an account of its interests and its intellectual-historical presuppositions.”<sup>40</sup>

It is also important that Ratzinger advocated that the Magisterium have an interpretation-critical but not productive role vis-à-vis revelation.<sup>41</sup> Pope Benedict XVI did not see or practice that any differently. Thus the following is stated in his Council Commentary: “that in the realm of the question of criteria, Scripture can be the only counterpart to the Magisterium.”<sup>42</sup>

## The 1964 Essay on Tradition and the Concept of Revelation

In his commentary on the Council text, Ratzinger not only discussed the role of tradition in detail.<sup>43</sup> He had already published an essay on the question of tradition during the Council in 1964.<sup>44</sup> In it he gives Scripture the highest position: “Tradition by its very nature is always interpretation. It does not exist independently but as an explication, as an interpretation ‘according to the Scriptures.’”<sup>45</sup>

In addition to the Church’s office of watchman, there is, according to Ratzinger in 1964, “a watchman’s office of exegesis.” “In this respect there is then something like a self-reliance on Scripture as an independent and in many respects quite unambiguous standard over against the ecclesiastical Magisterium. This is undoubtedly a correct insight on the part of Luther, who has not yet been given enough room in the Catholic Church under the standards of the Magisterium, the inner boundary of which has not been seen clearly enough.”<sup>46</sup>

As is generally known, he did not assert himself at the Council with this almost Protestant concept of tradition. Later, as Pope, this point of view still shines through. However, it is nowhere made concrete.

For Ratzinger, tradition is the consequence of the fact that revelation and Scripture are not congruent. Scripture is only the “customer” of revelation, which alone is “reality.” “Scripture is the material principle of revelation . . . , but it is not revelation itself.”<sup>47</sup>

Ratzinger refers to what for him “means analogia fidei between the Testaments. The New Testament theology of the Old Testament is indeed, as already mentioned, not identical with the Old Testament’s own theology of the Old Testament which can be determined historically from within; rather, it is a new interpretation in the light of the Christ event which does not emerge from the mere historical consideration of the Old Testament alone. By carrying out such a reinterpretation, however, it does nothing completely alien to the Old Testament’s essence, which would only approach it from the outside, but it continues the inner structural form of the Old Testament, which itself lives and grows in such reinterpretations.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 37–38.

<sup>41</sup> Hansjürgen Verweyen. “Josef Ratzinger und die Exegese” [June 28, 2013]. [http://www.uni-muenster.de/imperia/md/content/fb2/c-systematichetheologie/dogmatikunddogmengeschichte/verweyen\\_antritt\\_rat\\_.pdf](http://www.uni-muenster.de/imperia/md/content/fb2/c-systematichetheologie/dogmatikunddogmengeschichte/verweyen_antritt_rat_.pdf) [June 28, 2013], p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Ratzinger. “Einleitung,” op. cit., p. 498.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Ratzinger. “Kommentar zum Prooemium . . . ,” op. cit., pp. 515–526.

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Ratzinger. “Ein Versuch zur Frage des Traditionsbegriffs,” pp. 24–49 in: Karl Rahner (ed.). *Offenbarung und Überlieferung. Quaestiones Disputatae*. Herder: Freiburg, 1964. All quotes from this essay have been translated from the German original.

<sup>45</sup> Joseph Ratzinger. “Ein Versuch zur Frage des Traditionsbegriffs,” op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

“(e) There is a New Testament theology of the New Testament—corresponding to the Old Testament theology of the Old Testament, that is, that theology which the historian as such can infer from inside the New Testament; by the way, it is also characterized and structured by the same growth, by the new understanding of the old in a new situation.

“(d) There is an ecclesiastical theology of the New Testament called dogmatics. It relates to the New Testament theology of the New Testament in the same way that the New Testament theology of the Old Testament relates to the Old Testament theology of the Old Testament. The peculiar ‘more’ that distinguishes dogmatics from biblical theology is what we call tradition in a precise sense.”<sup>48</sup>

What is interesting at this point is Ratzinger’s concept of revelation,<sup>49</sup> which says that Scripture must not be equated with revelation. This brings him close to Karl Barth. However, in my opinion, it unnecessarily weakens the authority of Holy Scripture.

Nowhere does he justify this, because Scripture often says something different about itself! Ratzinger later and then also as Pope often repeated this view but never justified it in detail from Scripture itself.

He states, “Scripture can be had without having revelation. For revelation always and only becomes reality where there is faith.” With that, he does not differentiate between Scripture as objective revelation and the position that it becomes revelation *for me* or when it becomes revelation *for me*, being only a subjective reality! And this from Ratzinger! Therefore, the non-believer is to understand Scripture and yet “not be privy to revelation.”<sup>50</sup>

Thus, like Karl Barth, he mixes two topics, as if revelation would only become revelation if I agree to it.

I would counter this by saying that revelation is of course more than just Holy Scripture, and that of course revelation includes taking to heart and implementing prior revelation, but I would also say that the thought that Scripture will only really become revelation when the reader understands it and takes it to heart is alien to Scripture itself. Rather, there is an additional work of the Holy Spirit upon the individual.

According to the testimony of Holy Scripture, the Holy Spirit plays a much more comprehensive role in the context of revelation than only in the (admittedly central) authorization of the entire written document of the Christian faith: One can distinguish between the following aspects of the Spirit’s action in relation to the Word:

1. immediate revelation to people (2 Samuel 23:2; Revelation 4:2);
2. the transcription and editing of this revelation<sup>51</sup> (Acts 1:16; Zechariah 7:12; 2 Timothy 3:16);
3. understanding, interpreting, and taking the Word to heart by the reader or listener (Acts 10:44; 1 Thessalonians 1:6);
4. the application of the word to actual life (Romans 8:2–4); and
5. the authority to proclaim the Word in evangelism and the church (Acts 4:31; 1 Thessalonians 1:5).

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 43

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 34–36; comp. Rudolf Voderholzer. “Joseph Ratzinger/Benedikt XVI. und die Exegese,” op. cit., pp. 102–104.

<sup>50</sup> Alles Joseph Ratzinger. „Ein Versuch zur Frage des Traditionsbegriffs“. a. a. O. S. 35.

<sup>51</sup> Items 1 and 2 could coincide temporally, for instance in the composition of a Pauline letter.

## Excursus dating from 2016: The Pontifical Biblical Commission

In its 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*,<sup>52</sup> the Pontifical Biblical Commission elevated the historical-critical method to canonical rank, so to speak, and thus also approved all the methods that emerged from it, such as feminist exegesis. However, it condemned the “fundamentalist” interpretation of Scripture as the only ignorant and dangerous one.<sup>53</sup> The following is said about the historical-critical method:

“The historical-critical method is the indispensable method for the scholarly study of the meaning of ancient texts. Since Holy Scripture has been written as the ‘Word of God in human language,’ in all its parts and sources, by human authors, its true understanding not only permits this method as legitimate, but also requires its application. Since Sacred Scripture was written as the ‘Word of God in human language’ by human authors in all its parts and sources, its true understanding not only allows this method as legitimate but also requires its application.”<sup>54</sup>

The Pontifical Biblical Commission is part of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in a sense the theological commission of the Vatican. For a long time, the Congregation was led by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who also supervised the Pontifical Biblical Commission. However, the commission chooses its leader itself and is semi-independent in its publications. In 1993, the elected secretary was the Ratzinger critic Albert Vanhoye, who from 1984 to 1990 was also rector of the Pontifical Bible Institute. He had sharply criticized Ratzinger’s 1988 lecture with the famous ‘Antichrist’ passage. Although Pope John Paul II was enthusiastic about the Biblical Commission’s 1993 paper, Ratzinger furnished it “with a rather chilly foreword,”<sup>55</sup> in which he emphasized that the Commission is not part of the Catholic Magisterium.

Under Pope Benedict XVI and now Pope Francis, the Pontifical Biblical Commission has again become more conservative in its attitude toward the Bible. During this time, the Congregation was under the leadership of Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller. The document *The Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture* (2014)<sup>56</sup> demonstrates the massive change of course. Historical-critical methods are no longer wholeheartedly elevated to an almost canonical rank but are rather relativized. In 2015, I compared both the 1993 and 2014 Pontifical Biblical Commission documents.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission. *Die Interpretation der Bibel in der Kirche*. 23.04.1993. *Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls 115*. Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz: Bonn, 1996<sup>2</sup>. Out of print but available for download at [www.dbk.de](http://www.dbk.de) as a pdf file. The original Latin version and other translations can be found at [www.vatican.org](http://www.vatican.org). English: [https://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC\\_Interp-FullText.htm](https://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp-FullText.htm) and <https://litpress.org/Products/GetSample/B4903>

<sup>53</sup> Comp. initially Thomas Schirrmacher. *Eugen Drewermann und der Buddhismus*. VTR: Nürnberg, 2000<sup>1</sup>; 2002<sup>2</sup>, pp. 6–13.

<sup>54</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission. *Die Interpretation der Bibel in der Kirche*, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>55</sup> Hansjürgen Verweyen. *Joseph Ratzinger*, op. cit., p. 91, on the entire case pp. 91–93.

<sup>56</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission. *Inspiration und Wahrheit der Heiligen Schrift: Das Wort, das von Gott kommt und von der Welt spricht, um die Welt zu retten*. 22. Februar 2014. *Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls Nr. 196*. Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz: Bonn, 2014 (can be ordered free of charge and downloadable at [www.dbk.de](http://www.dbk.de)).

<sup>57</sup> “Die Päpstliche Bibelkommission wird konservativer in ihrer Bibelhaltung,” *Glauben und Denken heute* (Martin Bucer Seminar) 8 (2015) 1: 22–35.

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