

Classics and Theology

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THOSE who pay attention to the trends of modern Gospel interpretation notice a spectacular irony in the dominant contemporary paradigm for the exegesis of the Gospels. Today Catholic Scripture scholars generally dismiss patristic exegesis because it is too allegorical.¹ Supposedly the Fathers did not read the text “literally” enough, and so they can be safely ignored. Yet the predominant way of reading the Gospels today is essentially a new form of allegorical exegesis which does not call itself that. R. Bauckham has recently authored a monograph that expresses serious criticism of this dominant paradigm.² Bauckham observes that the sustained attempt since the late 1960s to take seriously the claim that each Gospel addresses the specific situation of a particular Christian community has had two main characteristics: (1) the development of more or less allegorical readings of the Gospels in the service of reconstructing not only the character but the history of the community behind the Gospel; and (2) the increasingly sophisticated use of social-scientific methods for reconstructing the community behind each Gospel. Bauckham observes that modern exegetes typically interpret the characters and events in the Gospel story as representing groups within the community and experiences of the community. For example, the disciples in Mark

¹ The programmatic statement for the American guild was made in 1967 by R. E. Brown, who judged as a failure the attempts by Henri Cardinal de Lubac and Jean Cardinal Daniélou to give great value to patristic exegesis as exegesis and declared confidently: “I think we must recognize that the exegetical method of the Fathers is irrelevant to the study of the Bible today.” “The Problems of the *Sensus Plenior*,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 43 (1967): 463.

² R. Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

stand for proponents of a *theios-aner* Christology that Mark is fighting within his community; the relatives of Jesus represent the Jerusalem Jewish Christian leaders; Nicodemus stands for Christians whose inadequate Christology prevents them from making a complete break with the synagogue; the successful mission of Jesus and the disciples to Samaritans in John 4 is supposed to reflect a stage in the history of the Johannine community when it engaged in successful mission to Samaritans. Bauckham ponders what such imaginative and conjectural reconstructions must look like from the perspective of an outsider:

The many different reconstructions throw some doubt on the method, which to a skeptic looks like a kind of historical fantasy. It is difficult to avoid supposing that those who no longer think it possible to use the Gospels to reconstruct the historical Jesus compensate for this loss by using them to reconstruct the communities that produced the Gospels. All the historical specificity for which historical critics long is transferred from the historical Jesus to the evangelist's community. The principle that the Gospels inform us not about Jesus but about the Church is taken so literally that the narrative, ostensibly about Jesus, has to be understood as an allegory in which the community actually tells its own story.³

However valid one may judge the new allegorical approaches to the Gospels criticized by Bauckham to be—and I myself judge them to be minimally valid—it is hardly legitimate to describe what these modern scholars are doing as “literal historical exegesis.” The text’s literal historical meaning is precisely what these interpreters are aiming to transcend. One wonders about the integrity of the scholarly principles involved here, since to an outsider a double-standard appears to be at work: modern exegetes are permitted to turn the Gospels essentially into parables about early Christian communities. Yet their method is still defined as “literal exegesis.” Simultaneously ancient Christian exegesis is dismissed as irrelevant because it is allegedly “more-than-literal,” “pre-critical,” and arbitrary. And yet, the ancient exegetes assumed the primary truth of the literal historical meaning of the Gospels.

Against the backdrop of such contemporary allegorical trends in Gospel interpretation, the first strength I shall call attention to with regard to Pope Benedict’s exegesis of the Gospels in *Jesus of Nazareth* is its literal and straightforward way of reading the narratives.⁴ The Pope

³ Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians*, 19–20.

⁴ Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, translated from German by Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

conceives the historical-critical method to be an indispensable tool for the exegete and theologian, *precisely because the very essence of biblical faith concerns real historical events*. The Bible does not tell stories symbolizing supra-historical truths, but is based on history that took place here on earth. "Historical fact is not an interchangeable symbolic cipher for biblical faith, but the foundation on which it stands" (xv). It seems to me that the Holy Father's approach to the historical-critical study of the Gospels is consonant both with the corrective Bauckham is summoning the modern guild to undertake, and also with the magisterial tradition of the Catholic Church. *Jesus of Nazareth* displays to us what post-Vatican II Catholic exegesis might have looked like had *Dei Verbum* been implemented. Rather than conjectural theories about the imagined community of the beloved disciple, or about the "Q" school, or about the Lukan community, Catholics might have been fed solid exposition of the Gospel narratives and the doctrinal implications of these narratives.

The pope's main idea is that the Jesus of the Gospels, of all four Gospels, is the real historical Jesus. He wants to close the gap between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, since the Gospel history is datable history, and Gospel events are real historical events. Jesus brought us God when he appeared on earth. It is He, and not the theological construction of the early Church, who has revealed to us the face of the God of Israel, the mystery of Trinitarian love. To the charge that such an approach is "fundamentalist," since it takes the Gospels at face value, the Holy Father says that people who say things like that dogmatically assume that God cannot act in history and that no exegesis counts but their own.

Related to this theme is the discussion of the "Johannine Question" in chapter 8. The Holy Father rightly insists (against a disturbing tendency of some modern interpreters) that John 1.35, 40; 13.23; 18.15–16; 19.26, 34–35; 20.2–10; 21.7 cannot be deemed to be completely irrelevant to the discussion of authorship. "If the favorite disciple [an unhappy translation] in the Gospel expressly assumes the function of a witness to the truth of the events he recounts, he is presenting himself as a living person. . . . Otherwise the statements we have examined, which are decisive for the intention and the quality of the entire Gospel, would be emptied of meaning" (223). The tentative suggestion is made that the historical tradition behind the Fourth Gospel traces to John the son of Zebedee, but the actual composition may have been by "John the presbyter" as his transmitter and mouthpiece, and a sort of literary executor of the favorite disciple. This theory is not the same as the traditional view, which attributes authorship to John the apostle and son of Zebedee. The Pope follows Hengel's and Bauckham's theory of authorship by "John the

presbyter,” an imaginative conjecture based in my judgment on a misreading of the Papias texts preserved in Eusebius. For Eusebius so intensely disliked the author of the *Apocalypse* for his chiliasm that he was only too glad to find it possible to assign authorship to a John other than the apostle. Scholars have not been sufficiently critical of Eusebius in this regard.⁵ But either way, whether composed by John the apostle and son of Zebedee, or by another eyewitness named “John the Presbyter,” the Fourth Gospel ultimately goes back to eyewitness testimony about the real doings and sayings of the real historical Jesus.

I value the Holy Father’s exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount and the way he has brought out the implicit Christology of Jesus’ words. This section contains an interesting dialogue with Rabbi Jacob Neusner, the theme of which is Jesus’ disturbing claim to be the Torah and the implicit Christology that is embedded in Jesus’ claims. There is also present throughout this book, as everywhere else in the Holy Father’s writings, a constant engagement with the thought of the Church Fathers. They are not always given the last word in exegesis, since we continue to learn more things about history that were inaccessible to them, but they are always invited to sit at the table of the exegetes. As we have noted above, this openness and docility to the voice of the Fathers is a strength that distinguishes Pope Benedict’s approach to New Testament exegesis from the vast majority of modern Catholic exegetes. Consider the interesting observation made by Cardinal Ratzinger concerning the “ecumenical” Scripture commentary project, *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar*. He wrote:

In this it is interesting that Protestant exegetes refer back more strongly to their ‘Fathers’ (Luther, Calvin) and draw them in as contemporary partners in dialogue into the struggle to understand scripture than do Catholic exegetes, who seem to a considerable extent to be of the view that Augustine, Chrysostom, Bonaventure and Thomas cannot contribute anything to exegesis today.⁶

The deep prejudice against patristic exegesis that exists in the modern guild of Catholic scripturists was revealed to me in a glaring way recently when I did a careful study of the changes and alterations of the *Jerusalem Bible* (1966) that have been introduced into the *New Jerusalem Bible* (1985, ed. H. Wansbrough). The 1985 edition uses the 1966 edition as its

⁵ See D.A. Carson and D. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 234.

⁶ “Luther and the Unity of the Churches,” in *New Essays in Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 106.

template, but the contributors have systematically deleted the majority of the discussions of patristic exegesis that are found in the footnotes of the original edition, especially in footnotes to texts that the Fathers viewed as foreshadowings of Christ and the Trinity. Clearly the discussions of the Fathers proved to be an embarrassment to the Catholic editors in a way that is not reciprocated by Protestant exegetes.

A third strength of *Jesus of Nazareth* is the author's intensive and extensive knowledge of Scripture. The book begins with a detailed discussion of Deuteronomy; throughout the book Old Testament passages are intensively engaged and discussed as foundational background to understanding the New Testament. This is how New Testament exegesis should be done, and, of course, such a procedure should not be remarkable for a study of the Gospels. The only problem is that several recent scholars have noticed that modern Catholic scripturists lack an extensive and intensive knowledge of the Bible. For instance, J. O'Keefe and R. Reno recently noted: "Most contemporary biblical scholars are not, in a strict sense, scholars of the Bible. They are experts who specialize in certain books of the Bible or historical periods in which various portions of it were written."⁷ I doubt these authors would be able to make the same criticism of Pope Benedict. Likewise, L. T. Johnson has recently revealed some of the secrets of the guild's confessional: "And it must be said, to our shame, that many contemporary exegetes, even scholars, simply do not know the contents of the Bible."⁸ No honest reader of *Jesus of Nazareth* will be able to say such things of the author.

In summary, the strengths of this piece of exegesis of the Gospels are (1) the literal, straight-forward manner of reading the narratives about Jesus as opposed to the modern tendency to read the Gospels as allegories about the early Church; (2) the way the Church Fathers are invited to the table of the exegetes; (3) the author's extensive knowledge of the whole of Scripture. I found two mistakes in the text: On page 178, I believe the Holy Father intended the Gospel of Luke (9.54) rather than John in reference to the stormy temperament of James and John. On page 225 the Holy Father dates the death of Papias to around 220. This should be 120.

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⁷ John J. O'Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 24.

⁸ L. T. Johnson and W. S. Kurz, *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 112.

