

Gospel Hermeneutics in Joseph Ratzinger's *Jesus of Nazareth*

GEOFFREY WAINWRIGHT
*Duke University Divinity School
Durham, North Carolina*

WHILE *Jesus of Nazareth* bears on its title page the binome “Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI,” the author himself in his foreword disclaims any exercise here of the papal Magisterium; rather the work is “solely an expression of my personal search ‘for the face of the Lord’ (cf. Ps 27:8).”¹ The book is perhaps all the more interesting on that “autobiographical” account, for it distills a lifetime’s reading of the Gospels in the Church by a man who is first and foremost a believer, who then has ministered as a teacher, a preacher, and a pastor. Thus we have an exemplary engagement with the Scriptures that is placed in service to others who also “wish to see Jesus” (cf. Jn 12:21).

My aim here is simply to display the hermeneutical principles and procedures practiced by Joseph Ratzinger and the results that he now places before his readers in the modestly expressed confidence that they, too, may benefit directly from them and perhaps also be encouraged—within the communion of the Church and under its guidance—to follow the same methods in their own reading of the Bible. To bring out these methods and purposes of the author, we may follow up two or three hints that he himself does not develop in a theoretical way at the places where they formally occur. The first hint is dropped in the foreword to this book and concerns “the old doctrine of the fourfold sense of Scripture”: “The four senses of

¹ Joseph Ratzinger/Benedikt XVI, *Jesus von Nazareth*, Erster Teil: *Von der Taufe im Jordan bis zur Verklärung* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2007); Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007). Citations will follow the English translation; here p. xxiii.

Scripture are not individual meanings arrayed side by side, but dimensions of the one word that reaches beyond the moment" (p. xx). A few years earlier, in his preface to the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001), Cardinal Ratzinger had written: "The recognition of the multidimensional nature of human language, not staying fixed to a particular moment in history, but having a hold on the future, is an aid that permits a greater understanding of how the Word of God can avail of the human word to confer on a history in progress a meaning that surpasses the present moment and yet brings out, precisely in this way, the unity of the whole."² Later in the present book he writes that we are to "read the Bible, and especially the Gospels, as an overall unity expressing an intrinsically coherent message, notwithstanding their multiple historical layers" (*Jesus of Nazareth*, 191). Putting those hints together, it may be expected that Joseph Ratzinger will read the multi-faceted texts as canonical Scripture bearing a trustworthy witness to a comprehensive yet particular history of God with the world, into which the readers or hearers in their own multidimensionality are invited as part of a continuing community that is sustained by the Word of God. And in *Jesus of Nazareth*, in particular, he will be putting his reading at the service of others, in order to nourish an encounter with the Jesus who stands in the midst of the congregation gathered in his name (Matt 18:20; cf. Lk 22:27), whose purpose is to draw all men to himself (Jn 12:32, always a favorite text of Ratzinger's), and who already dwells in the hearts of believers as their very life (Gal 2:20).³ It will be in terms of the traditional "fourfold sense of Scripture" that I illustrate here the gospel hermeneutics of Joseph Ratzinger in his *Jesus of Nazareth*.

The fourfold sense of the Scriptures is neatly captured in the medieval mnemonic verse, variously attributed to Nicholas of Lyra or Augustine of Denmark:

² Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002; here pp. 5–12. In that preface, Cardinal Ratzinger, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, recognized the problem of maintaining the internal unity of the Bible in the face of historical-critical exegesis: "The very concept of an interpretation of historical texts must be broadened and deepened enough to be tenable in today's liberal climate, and capable of application, especially to Biblical texts received in faith as the Word of God. Important contributions have been made in this direction over recent decades." In that same connection he alluded also to a previous document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993).

³ On various modes of Christ's presence in the liturgical assembly, see Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §7—including this: "He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church."

Littera gesta docet,
quid credas allegoria,
moralis quid agas,
quo tendas anagogia.

Grounded in “what happened” historically (the *gesta*), we can further learn “what to believe, *credere*” (doctrinally), “what to do, *agere*” (ethically) and “where to head, *tendere*” (mystically and eschatologically).

Throughout Christian history the successive generations have read the Scriptures with these ends in view, and it is appropriate that each new generation should in turn draw lessons from past readings in its own recourse to the canonical texts for guidance in understanding and application in the present situation. In expounding the Gospels, Joseph Ratzinger cites the doctrines and liturgies of the Church as well as the lives and writings of “the saints,” who are “the true interpreters of Holy Scripture” (78). These include here St. Augustine of Hippo (24, 207, 245), St. Benedict of Nursia (131), St. Francis of Assisi (77–79), St. Bernard of Clairvaux (87), St. Francis Xavier (162–63), St. Thérèse de Lisieux (76, 164), and St. Cyprian of Carthage, who is a special favorite of our author (131, 151–52, 156, 163–64, 166, 245).

In the foreword to this first volume of his “portrayal of Jesus,” Joseph Ratzinger declares that he has “postponed for now” the treatment of “the infancy narratives” because it struck him “as the most urgent priority to present the figure and the message of Jesus in his public ministry, and so to help foster the growth of a living relationship with him” (xxiv). That was probably a prudent decision technically also, because those opening chapters of St. Luke and St. Matthew are a frequent target of the more skeptical biblical scholars, with whom Ratzinger knows that he will eventually have to deal—if only on account of their influence upon many contemporary readers of Scripture.

In fact, then, Ratzinger begins his story of “what happened” with the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan at the hands of John the Baptist—an event which even the “historical critics” usually let stand because it contains a potential problem for what became Christian dogma—and which already the Evangelist recognized: “John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” (Mt 3:14). The very story of Jesus’ Baptism, as it happens and unfolds, contains vital clues to his identity and his work as they will be confessed by the Christian faith. As Ratzinger expounds it, Jesus’ Baptism “anticipated his death on the Cross”; it was “an acceptance of death for the sins of humanity”; and “the heavenly voice that calls out ‘This is my beloved

Son' over the baptismal waters is an anticipatory reference to the Resurrection" (18). Ratzinger draws upon "the Eastern Church, [which] has further developed and deepened this understanding of Jesus' Baptism in her liturgy and in her theology of icons":

She sees a deep connection between the feast of the Epiphany (the heavenly voice proclaiming Jesus to be the Son of God: for the East the Epiphany is the day of the Baptism) and Easter. She sees Jesus' remark to John that "it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt 3:15) as the anticipation of his prayer to the Father in Gethsemane: "My Father . . . not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Mt 26:39). (19)

The liturgical hymns for the days immediately preceeding January 6 correspond to those for Holy Week, and "these correspondences are picked up by the iconographic tradition":

The icon of Jesus' Baptism depicts the water as a liquid tomb having the form of a dark cavern, which is in turn the iconographic sign of Hades, the underworld, or hell. Jesus' descent into this watery tomb, into this inferno that envelops him from every side, is thus an anticipation of his act of descending into the underworld: "When he went down into the waters, he bound the strong man" (cf. Lk 11:22), says Cyril of Jerusalem. John Chrysostom writes: "Going down into the water and emerging again are the image of the descent into hell and the Resurrection." (19)

"Has this ecclesiastical interpretation and rereading of the event of Jesus' Baptism taken us too far away from the Bible?" is Ratzinger's rhetorical question (20), and clearly the answer is "No," as he proceeds to show from the best modern exegesis of a Joachim Jeremias or a Joachim Gnilka in relation to the words of John the Baptist on seeing Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! . . . I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him. . . . I have seen and borne witness that this is the Son of God" (cf. Jn 1:29–35).

In the scene of Jesus' Baptism, Ratzinger writes, "together with the Son, we encounter the Father and the Holy Spirit. The mystery of the Trinitarian God is beginning to emerge, even though its depths can be fully revealed only when Jesus' journey is complete. . . . [T]here is an arc joining this beginning of Jesus' journey and the words with which he sends his disciples into the world after his Resurrection: 'Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Mt 28:19). The Baptism that Jesus' disciples have been administering since he spoke those words

is an entrance into the Master's own Baptism—into the reality that he anticipated by means of it. That is the way to become a Christian" (23).

"To accept the invitation to be baptized now means to go to the place of Jesus' Baptism. It is to go where he identifies himself with us and to receive there our identification with him. The point where he anticipates death has now become the point where we anticipate rising again with him. Paul develops this inner connection in his theology of Baptism (cf. Rom 6), though without explicitly mentioning Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan" (18–19). Thus Jesus' Baptism as the original event ("what happened"), and its sacramental prolongation in Christian baptism, can be expounded for "what to believe" concerning the identity and work of Jesus, as well as "what to do" and "where to head": "How can we who died to sin still live in it? . . . Consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. . . . The return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6).

While "The Baptism of Jesus" figures as "chapter one" in *Jesus of Nazareth*, Joseph Ratzinger has actually let it be preceded by an "initial reflection on the mystery of Jesus." Jesus is "the prophet like unto Moses" promised in Deuteronomy 18:15. Whereas the "face-to-face" encounters of the first Moses with the Lord had their limitations (Exod 33:11; Deut 34:10; but also Exod 33:17–23), "[w]hat was true of Moses only in fragmentary form has now been fully realized in the person of Jesus: he lives before the face of God not just as a friend, but as a Son; he lives in the most intimate unity with the Father" (6). This "new Moses" will bring out the universal and eschatological dimensions of what God has begun with Israel—and indeed creation:

Among all the paths of history, the path to God is the true direction that we must seek and find. Prophecy in this sense is a strict corollary to Israel's monotheism. It is the translation of this faith into the everyday life of a community before God and on the way to him. (4)

The disciple who walks with Jesus is thus caught up with him into communion with God. And that is what redemption means: this stepping beyond the limits of human nature, which had been there as a possibility and expectation in man, God's image and likeness, since the moment of creation. (8)

The identity of Jesus as the Son Incarnate is absolutely crucial to the "portrait" presented in *Jesus of Nazareth*, which itself constitutes an invitation to faith (the *quod credas* entails a *credere in quem*; the "what to believe" a "believe in whom")—and, consequently, a summons to love as

the “what to do” (the *quid agas* given in the “dual commandment” of Matthew 22:37), and a direction for “the way to look and go” (the *quo tendas* found in Jesus as “the way to the Father” according to John 14:6). While one or another of these interpretative strands may become the most prominent in different passages, Joseph Ratzinger characteristically weaves them all together in a harmonious pattern, with Christ himself as the *fil d’or*, or *roter Faden* as the Germans say. In the impossibility of working through the whole book along those lines, we will concentrate on chapter five: “The Lord’s Prayer.”

In expounding the Beatitudes, and particularly the sixth, Ratzinger has already said that “it belongs to his [Jesus’] nature that he sees God, that he stands face-to-face with him, in a permanent interior discourse—in a relation of Sonship” (95); and now, in considering the Lord’s Prayer, we must “keep in mind that the Our Father originates from his own praying, from the Son’s dialogue with the Father” (133). Luke’s Gospel, in particular, significantly “places the Our Father in the context of Jesus’ own praying”:

Jesus thereby involves us in his own prayer; he leads us into the interior of triune love; he draws our human hardships deep into God’s heart, as it were. This also means, however, that the words of the Our Father are signposts to interior prayer, they provide a basic direction for our being, and they aim to configure us to the image of the Son. The meaning of the Our Father goes much further than the mere provision of a prayer text. It aims to form our being, to train us in the inner attitude of Jesus (cf. Phil 2:5). (132)

Concerning the structure of the Lord’s Prayer (“an initial salutation and seven petitions”), Ratzinger compares the sequence of the three “thou-petitions” and the four “we-petitions” to the two tablets of the Decalogue: “Essentially they are explications of the two parts of the great commandment to love God and our neighbor—in other words, they are directions toward the path of love” (134):

The Our Father, then, like the Ten Commandments, begins by establishing the primacy of God, which then leads naturally to a consideration of the right way of being human. Here, too, the primary concern is the path of love, which is at the same time a path of conversion. If man is to petition God in the right way, he must stand in the truth. And the truth is: first God, first his Kingdom (cf. Mt 6:33). The first thing we must do is to step outside ourselves and open ourselves to God. Nothing can turn out right if our relation to God is not rightly ordered. For this reason the Our Father begins with God and then, from that starting point, shows us the way toward being human. (134)

So, then, by the opening salutation of “Our Father who art in heaven,” we are shown “in whom we are to believe.” Saying “Our Father” locates us within the family of God, first of all in the sense that God “has created each individual human being” (137–38), and then that we are all to be drawn into Christ’s humanity, “and so into his Sonship, into his total belonging to God” (138). In this salvific sense, it is “[o]nly within the ‘we’ of the disciples [that we can] call God ‘Father,’ because only through communion with Jesus Christ do we truly become ‘children of God’” (141). Thus “[w]hen we say the word *our*, we say Yes to the living Church in which the Lord wanted to gather his new family” (141):

In this sense, the Our Father is at once a fully personal and a thoroughly ecclesial prayer. In praying the Our Father, we pray totally with our own heart, but at the same time we pray in communion with the whole family of God, with the living and the dead, with men of all conditions, cultures, and races. The Our Father overcomes all boundaries and makes us one family. (141)⁴

The “in heaven” of the salutation in the Lord’s Prayer is, of course, taken not of “location,” but of “transcendence”: As Father, God is “the ultimate source of our being,” who “has thought and willed us from all eternity,” and to whom “all are meant to return” (142–43). “Hallowed be thy name” is then a recognition of worship due: God “puts himself within reach of our invocation. He enters into relationship with us and enables us to be in relationship with him. Yet this means that in some sense he hands himself over to our human world” (143). This has happened in the Incarnate Son, who has “manifested [God’s] name to men” (cf. Jn 17:6). And the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer is a “plea” that God “himself take charge of the sanctification of his name, protect the wonderful mystery of his accessibility to us, and constantly assert his true identity as opposed to our distortion of it” (144–45).

The second and third petitions declare God’s purpose and goal for creation: “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” In line with what he has said in an earlier chapter concerning Jesus’ first announcement of “the gospel of the kingdom of God” (46–63), Ratzinger presents the divine kingdom Christologically: “Jesus is the Kingdom of God in person. The Kingdom of God is present wherever he is present. . . . To pray for the Kingdom of God is to say to Jesus:

⁴ Keeping due proportions, Ratzinger disclaims writing an ecclesiological treatise: “[T]his book, being a book about Jesus, is primarily concerned with the Lord himself, and deals with the topic of the Church only insofar as it is necessary for a correct understanding of the figure of Jesus” (296).

Let us be yours, Lord! Pervade us, live in us; gather scattered humanity in your body; so that in you everything may be subordinated to God and you can then hand over the universe to the Father, in order that ‘God may be all in all’ (1 Cor 15:28)” (146–47). “God’s will flows from his being and therefore guides us into the truth of our being, liberating us from self-destruction through falsehood. Because our being comes from God, we are able, despite all of the defilement that holds us back, to set out on the way to God’s will” (148–49). That way is personified in Jesus, who “came to do God’s will” (cf. Jn 4:34; Heb 10:5–10), who “accepts us, draws us up to himself, into himself”; and “in communion with him we too learn God’s will” and are made “capable of the lofty height to which we are called” (150). Thus the “quo tendas” has both a mystical and an eschatological reference, “upwards and onwards” (cf. 49–50).

The fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer appears as “the most ‘human’ of all the petitions”: the Lord “knows about our earthly needs” and “invites us to pray for our food and thus to turn our care over to God” (150). Joseph Ratzinger cites the post-Vatican II Missal to the effect that bread is “the fruit of the earth and the work of human hands”—and immediately adds that “the earth bears no fruit unless it receives sunlight and rain from above”: “This coming together of cosmic powers outside our control stands opposed to the temptation that comes to us through our pride to give ourselves life purely through our own power. . . . Such pride ends up destroying the earth” (151). Our earthly responsibility—under God—includes sharing our bread with others. St. John Chrysostom is quoted: “Every bite of bread in one way or another is a bite of the bread that belongs to everyone, of the bread of the world” (151). And St. Cyprian’s emphasis on praying for bread one day at a time is developed by our author so as to show the ethical and eschatological value of ascetical witness:

We cannot ignore the people who trust so totally in God that they seek no security other than him. They encourage us to trust God—to count on him amid life’s great challenges. At the same time, this poverty, motivated entirely by commitment to God and his Kingdom, is also an act of solidarity with the world’s poor, an act that historically has created new standards of value and a new willingness for service and for commitment on behalf of others. (152)

The scholarly Ratzinger deals with the exegetical ambiguity of the “mysterious” Greek adjective in *ton arton ton epiousion*—where one Latin translation reads *panem quotidianum* (“bread for the day”) and another *panem crastinum* (“bread for tomorrow”)—by drawing on a third: the

panem nostrum supersubstantialem of St. Jerome's Vulgate, which can unite "the bread we need in order to live" with "the future bread, the bread of the new world" by "pointing to the new, higher 'substance' that the Lord gives us in the Holy Sacrament as the true bread of our life" (154). To any charge that this may be "a false 'theologizing' of a word intended only in a straightforward earthly sense" the author replies that "it is necessary to keep in mind the larger context of Jesus' words and deeds, a context in which essential elements of human life play a major role: water, bread, and, as a sign of the festive character and beauty of the world, the vine and wine. The theme of bread has an important place in Jesus' message—from the temptation in the desert and the multiplication of the loaves right up to the Last Supper" (155; cf. 238–72). The interpretation given of the fourth petition is Christological to the core: "[M]an's real food is the Logos, the eternal Word, the eternal meaning, from which we come and toward which our life is directed" (155–56); and the ethical and ecclesiological implications are not far to seek: "[W]hen we pray for 'tomorrow's' bread today, we are reminded to live already today from tomorrow, from the love of God, which calls us all to be responsible for one another" (156).

These lines are prolonged in the exposition of the fifth petition. Ratzinger has already said (136–37) that "the love that endures 'to the end' (Jn 13:1), which Jesus fulfilled on the Cross in praying for his enemies, shows us the essence of the Father"—and "to become 'sons' ourselves" we are instructed to follow suit, as it were (cf. Mt 5:44–45). The fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer "presupposes a world in which there is trespass—trespass of men in relation to other men, trespass in relation to God" (157). The unceasing chain of guilt and retaliation can only be overcome by forgiveness: "God is a God who forgives, because he loves his creatures; but forgiveness can only penetrate and become effective in one who is himself forgiving" (157). "Forgiveness exacts a price—first of all from the person who forgives. He must overcome within himself the evil done to him; he must, as it were, burn it interiorly and in so doing renew himself. As a result, he also involves the other, the trespasser, in this process of transformation, of inner purification, and both parties, suffering all the way through and overcoming evil, are made new" (159). The cost to God of "the forgiveness of guilt, the healing of man from within" was "the death of his Son" (and Isaiah 53:4–6 is cited). If this seems implausible today, it is because we trivialize evil or because "our individualistic image of man" blocks our understanding of "the great mystery of expiation": "We can no longer grasp substitution because we think that every man is ensconced in himself alone" (159). Ratzinger promises to return to

these themes when he reaches the crucifixion of Christ the Incarnate Son. Meanwhile the fifth petition is at least a “moral exhortation” and a “daily challenge” but already “at its deepest core, . . . a Christological prayer”:

It reminds us of the one who allowed forgiveness to cost him descent into the hardship of human existence and death on the Cross. It calls us first and foremost to thankfulness for that, and then, with him, to work through and suffer through evil by means of love. And while we must acknowledge day by day how little our capacities suffice for that task, and how often we ourselves keep falling into guilt, this petition gives us the great consolation that our prayer is held safe within the power of his love—with which, through which, and in which it can still become a power of healing. (160)

The sixth and seventh petitions belong together, the latter giving a “positive twist” to the former (164). The sixth petition—“Lead us not into temptation”—receives a practical, almost colloquial exposition:

When we pray it, we are saying to God: “I know that I need trials so that my nature can be purified. When you decide to send me these trials, when you give evil some room to maneuver, as you did with Job, then please remember that my strength only goes so far. Don’t overestimate my capacity. Don’t set too wide the boundaries within which I may be tempted, and be close to me with your protecting hand when it becomes too much for me.” (163)

The perennial prayer for “deliverance from evil” acquires a contemporary ring in the face of today’s equivalent of “the dragon” of Revelation 12 and 13:

Today there are on the one hand the forces of the market, of traffic in weapons, in drugs, and in human beings, all forces that weigh upon the world and ensnare humanity irresistibly. Today, on the other hand, there is also the ideology of success, of well-being, that tells us, “God is just a fiction, he only robs us of our time and our enjoyment of life. Don’t bother with him! Just try to squeeze as much out of life as you can.” These temptations seem irresistible as well. The Our Father in general and this petition in particular are trying to tell us that it is only when you have lost God that you have lost yourself; then you are no more than a random product of evolution. Then the “dragon” has really won. . . . This, then, is why we pray from the depths of our soul not to be robbed of our faith, which enables us to see God, which binds us with Christ. (165–66)

In summary, Joseph Ratzinger invokes “Cyprian, the martyr bishop who personally had to endure the situation described in the Book of Revelation”: “When we say ‘deliver us from evil,’ then there is nothing further left for us to ask for. Once we have asked for and obtained protection against evil, we are safely sheltered against everything the devil and the world can contrive. What could the world make you fear if you are protected in the world by God himself?” (166, citing Cyprian, *De dominica oratione*, 19). That is the same confidence as St. Paul expresses in Romans 8:31–39. And “in this sense,” says Ratzinger, “the last petition brings us back to the first three: in asking to be liberated from the power of evil, we are ultimately asking for God’s Kingdom, for union with his will, and for the sanctification of his name” (167; cf. 134).

For the remainder of this first volume Ratzinger takes us through the calling of the disciples; the parables of Jesus; the images, titles, and names that identify him; and Peter’s confession of him. The last “event” that our author expounds is the Transfiguration, which can be seen as a pendant to the Baptism. “The Transfiguration,” Ratzinger strikingly says, “is a prayer event; it displays visibly what happens when Jesus talks with his Father: the profound interpenetration of his being with God, which then becomes pure light. . . . The reality that he is in the deepest core of his being . . . becomes perceptible to the senses at this moment: Jesus’ being in the light of God, his own being–light as Son” (310). The Transfiguration reveals not only the identity of Jesus but also, like the Baptism already, presages the culmination of his saving work—and thereby offers the invitation, the summons, and the direction for our sharing in it by grace. He talks with Moses and Elijah about “the ‘exodus’ that he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Lk 9:31; cf. Lk 24:26–27); and as the disciples go down from the mountain, they have to “learn once again that the messianic age is first and foremost the age of the Cross, and that the Transfiguration—the experience of becoming light from and with the Lord—requires us to be burned by the light of the Passion and so transformed” (315). If, recalling “Jesus’ garment of white light at the Transfiguration,” white garments will be worn by the saved (Rev 7:9, 13; 19:14), “[t]he garments of the elect are white because they have washed them in the blood of the Lamb (cf. Rev 7:14)”: “[T]his means that through Baptism they have been united with Jesus’ Passion, and his Passion is the purification that restores to us the original garment lost through our sin (cf. Lk 15:22)” (310).

