

## Pope Benedict XVI: A Biblical Portrayal of Jesus

THOMAS G. WEINANDY, O.F.M., CAP.  
*Capuchin College*  
*Washington, DC*

POPE BENEDICT'S *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007) is a marvelous book. Its attractiveness lies not simply in the depth of its theology or in its clarity of expression, but also in the serene and prayerful manner in which it is written—a serenity and a prayerfulness that is conveyed to the heart and mind of the reader. This last comment must not be mistakenly interpreted to imply that this is fundamentally a book of meditations, no matter how spiritually beneficial this book may be to read. It is a robust theological work that addresses authentic contemporary biblical, historical, philosophical, and doctrinal issues, though some scholars may rightly feel that Benedict, at times, too quickly draws conclusions from somewhat inadequate or insufficient argumentation. Some scholars might quibble as well that Benedict quotes most frequently, both positively and negatively, authors of an older generation. Yet a close examination of his sources shows that Benedict is conversant with contemporary scholarship even if one would have appreciated his commenting on a particular scholar's work.

Nonetheless, what makes this book refreshingly unique is that all of the various academic and scholarly concerns are pondered from within the living household of faith—the confident and vibrant faith of the Catholic Church, to which Pope Benedict ardently adheres with a loving heart and inquiring mind. This book exemplifies the true meaning of the Augustinian dictum of “faith seeking to understand.” It is precisely because Benedict believes in Jesus that he is seeking to understand him more deeply. The beauty of this book, then, is its prayerful intellectual quest for a more profound biblical and theological understanding of Jesus

and, once the reader has discovered it, interior serenity and intellectual joy ensue.

### **Jesus and Biblical Hermeneutics**

If the purpose of this book is to provide a more profound understanding of Jesus, the manner in which this end is achieved is equally important. For Benedict, the Bible is the fount of our knowledge of Jesus and the well to which the Church continually returns so as to quench her thirst for Jesus that is never fully satisfied. It is precisely here that, at the very onset of his study, Benedict takes up the fundamental issue of how the Bible is to be read and studied. If one's philosophical presuppositions and historical methodology for reading the Bible are such that an authentic knowledge of Jesus is unattainable and further study will lead only to further unproven hypotheses about who Jesus is, then the Bible is no longer the wellspring of faith's life, but rather it becomes a poisoned spring which first enfeebles and ultimately kills faith.

While admitting that the historical-critical method has advanced our scholarly understanding of the Bible and its formation, Benedict notes that many contemporary studies of the biblical Jesus have not actually advanced our understanding of him, but rather they are "like photographs of their authors and the ideals they hold." The impression is given that "we have very little certain knowledge of Jesus and that only at a later stage did faith in his divinity shape the image we have of him." This situation is, for Benedict, critical. Faith's "point of reference is being placed in doubt: Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air" (all above quotations are from p. xii). Later, in an even more critical assessment of contemporary biblical scholarship, Benedict states: "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 foundational error resides within "the so-called modern worldview, whose fundamental dogma is that God cannot act in history . . ." (both quotations are from p. 35). What Benedict bluntly terms "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. (36)

These are indeed strong words and such criticisms punctuate Benedict's book throughout. By way of contrast, Benedict's own biblical methodology and scholarly arguments, which are principally founded upon Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* and the Pontifical Biblical Commission's *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) and *The Jewish People and Their Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001), foster a much more confident approach for obtaining the truth contained within the biblical proclamation and thus a more reliable and objective understanding of Jesus.

For Benedict, then, the historical-critical method cannot be abandoned, for the Christian faith is founded upon historical events. "*Et incarnatus est*—when we say these words, we acknowledge God's actual entry into real history" (xv). However, the historical-critical method does not exhaust the interpretive task. While it is able to consider the various books of the Bible in their historical contexts and discern their various sources, "the unity of all of these writings as one 'Bible,' however, is not something it can recognize as an immediate historical datum" (xvii). For Benedict, the content of the Bible must not merely be interpreted historically but, above all, it must be interpreted theologically. "If you want to understand the Scripture in the spirit in which it is written, you have to attend to the content and to the unity of Scripture as a whole" (xviii). This means that, while the Bible is composed of many different "books" written in various historical eras in various literary genres, its unity is a theological datum. This theological datum is not imposed upon it, but is found within it. That theological datum is Jesus Christ himself, who unites both the Old and the New Testaments.

This Christological hermeneutic, which sees Jesus Christ as the key to the whole and learns from him how to understand the Bible as a unity, presupposes a prior act of faith. It cannot be the conclusion of a purely historical method. But this act of faith is based upon reason—historical reason—and so makes it possible to see the internal unity of Scripture. (xix)

Benedict is here providing some very significant and fruitful insights. Yes, we need to know what historical events took place, but it is only through faith that we recognize these historical events as divine revelatory actions and so are able to grasp, in faith, their theological significance as a whole. For Benedict, Jesus provides not only a historical unity to the Bible, in that all historical revelation leads to him and finds its completion in him, but he also simultaneously provides the theological hermeneutic for interpreting this historical unity, in that the historical

revelation prior to him can only be fully understood theologically in the light of its being completed in him. What is most novel and insightful is that Benedict argues that Jesus himself teaches us how we are to understand the unity of biblical revelation. He understood himself and his mission and so revealed his own identity and mission only from within the totality of this prior biblical revelation. Jesus embodies the whole of the Old Testament revelation. In his person he completes and in his mission he fulfills the Old Testament's veiled, though originally intended, meaning and in so doing elevates it to a new level of clarity.

Benedict's above understanding allows him to do two things throughout the course of his book. First, because he sees the Bible as a unity, Benedict is eager to demonstrate the theological inter-relationship between the Old and the New Testaments, especially the manner in which New Testament revelation cannot be fully understood without a thorough understanding of the Old Testament, and, simultaneously, how the New Testament completes the Old and so provides a deeper understanding of it. Because he judges, in faith, that the Old and New Testaments contain the entire history of God's revelatory action, Benedict is rejecting the oblique Marcionism contained in some contemporary biblical scholarship, which limits the meaning of a particular Old Testament book solely to its historical context. Second, again because of this biblical unity, Benedict is not afraid to interweave passages from a variety of biblical books, after the manner of the Fathers of the Church, so as to develop a theological point, particularly concerning the person and work of Christ. Some scholars may consider this the unjustified mixing of apples and oranges, but Benedict is convinced that, while there are many different authors from both covenants, together they are, each in their own distinct manner, professing and proclaiming one and the same Gospel. It is, therefore, completely fitting to knit their various revelatory truths into a configuration that does justice to the whole. Thus, for Benedict, "‘Canonical exegesis’—reading the individual texts of the Bible in the context of the whole—is an essential dimension of exegesis" (xix; cf. 191). Moreover, Benedict defends his own method of exegesis by stating: "I have merely tried to go beyond purely historical-critical exegesis so as to apply new methodological insights that allow us to offer a properly theological interpretation of the Bible" (xxiii).

I have allotted a significant amount of space for presenting Benedict's biblical and theological methodology because I believe that he has articulated a methodology that not only pertains to his own book, but also provides a Christian/Catholic alternative for doing theology. On the one hand, there is no doubt that this book's primary concern is to enunciate an

authentic biblical understanding of Jesus that supports the Church's later doctrine development. On the other hand, one cannot help but sense that Benedict is also attempting, in this process, to rescue Scripture from a pseudo-academic environment where it has languished for decades and to return it to its proper environment, that is, the living household of faith, the Church. Thus, his method not only allows biblical scholars to be true to their exegetical principles, but it also provides them new opportunities to engage in authentic theological inquiry, something their own historical-critical method hindered them from fully undertaking. For Benedict, biblical scholars ought not to be shackled by a method that does not allow them full and free access to the entire biblical text as a unity. Moreover, Benedict's methodology once more allows systematic theologians (of which he is one) access to the biblical text. The Bible is no longer under the strict governance of an elite biblical academy, but now that the Bible is permitted to be interpreted from within a theological and ecclesial perspective, actual theologians can once more rightly claim it as their own.

It is from within this methodological context that Benedict proceeds to examine in the body of his book key historical events and teachings within the life of Jesus as they are presented to us in the Gospels.

### **Jesus: The New Moses**

Benedict begins his study with the Book of Deuteronomy where Moses promises the people that God will "raise up for you a prophet like me from among you" (Deut 18:15). Such a promise is necessary because the Israelites' entrance into the Promised Land does not fully constitute their salvation. Israel must await a new Moses in whom their full liberation would be fulfilled. For Benedict, this new Moses "will be granted what was refused to the first one—a real, immediate vision of the face of God, and thus the ability to speak entirely from seeing, not just from looking at God's back" (5–6; cf. 265). This new Moses would establish then a greater covenant. It is from within this context that Benedict believes that the prologue of John's Gospel must be read. "No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (Jn 1:18). Jesus, as the new Moses, "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). Much later in his book Benedict will emphatically reiterate this same point. "Only the one who is God sees God-Jesus. He truly speaks from his vision of the Father, from unceasing dialogue with the Father, a dialogue that is his life" (265–66). What Jesus reveals is not, then, a product of human reasoning, but results from his human prayer, which is "a participation in this filial communion with the Father" (7).

Here Benedicts expresses for the first time, what I consider, the major theme of his book. Jesus is the incarnate Son of God who bestows upon all believers what he himself shares—a filial intimacy and knowledge of the Father. Benedict will orchestrate this signature theme under various modalities throughout the entirety of his book until it reaches its crescendo with the great “I am” of John’s Gospel.

### **The Baptism of Jesus: Entering into the Depths of Sin**

Following the Gospel narratives, Benedict emphasizes Jesus’ historicity and so his communion with the whole history of humankind. In Luke, Jesus’ primogenitor is not father Abraham, as in Matthew’s Gospel, but father Adam. Thus Jesus is, literally, “the son of man” (10). Moreover, the baptism of Jesus highlights not merely his solidarity with some generic and sanitized form of humanity but precisely his solidarity with the sinful race of Adam. Benedict perceives already in Jesus’ baptism “a confession of guilt and a plea for forgiveness in order to make a new beginning” (17), and thus a foreshadowing of his death and resurrection.

Looking at the events in light of the Cross and Resurrection, the Christian people realized what happened: Jesus loaded the burden of all mankind’s guilt upon his shoulders; he bore it down into the depths of the Jordan. He inaugurated his public activity by stepping into the place of sinners. His inaugural gesture is an anticipation of the Cross. (18)

Benedict perceptively appreciates in Jesus’ baptism, to which the above alludes, the foreshadowing of what it truly means for Jesus to have assumed a humanity from fallen Adam in that he must bear the burden of sin to its ultimate end. Echoing Irenaeus, Benedict sees Jesus recapitulating, assuming within his own historical humanity, the whole of humankind’s sinful history. Furthermore, without any apology or even a slight questioning pause of the pen, Benedict appropriates a familiar, though controversial, von Balthasarian theme. He clearly acknowledges that Jesus, the son of Adam, enters into the domain of the devil. However, Benedict does alter the emphasis of this theme.

His entering into the sin of others is a descent into the “inferno.” But he does not descend merely in the role of a spectator, as in Dante’s *Inferno*. Rather, he goes down in the role of one whose suffering-with-others is a transforming suffering that turns the underworld around, knocking down and flinging open the gates of the abyss. His Baptism is a descent into the house of the evil one, combat with the “strong man” (cf. Lk 11:22) who holds men captive. (20)

Notice that Jesus' descent into hell is not some passive event for Benedict. It is not simply or only the submissive experience of abandonment accompanied by its consuming anguish. Rather, for Benedict, Jesus descends into the domain of Satan in order to do combat so as to free humankind from hell's captivity, that is, from the sufferings of sin, death, and damnation. Moreover, this descent into hell does not simply occur after Jesus' death, but rather it "accompanies him along his entire journey. He must recapitulate the whole of history from its beginnings—from Adam on; he must go through, suffer through, the whole of it, in order to transform it" (26). Further on Benedict once again emphasizes that it is not only after his death "but already by his death and during his whole life, that Jesus 'descends into hell,' as it were, into the domain of our temptations and defeats, in order to take us by the hand and carry us upward" (161; cf. 99). Benedict is keenly aware that only if the Son of God, having become man of the sinful race of Adam, actually experiences the full effects of sin—temptation, suffering, and death—and so breaches sin's very domicile, that is, hell, can he overthrow it and lift us up into the new abode of heavenly life. This journey of descent not only expressed Jesus' love for us, but also the love of the Father in rescuing his Son from the demonic realm of sin and death. Jesus descended "into the abyss of death, into the night of abandonment, and into the desolation of the defenseless. He ventured *this* leap as an act of God's love for men. And so he knew that, ultimately, when he leaped he could only fall into the kindly hands of the Father" (38).

Already at Jesus' baptism, where he first publicly begins his descent into the abyss, the love and protection of the Father were present. It is here, when Jesus first aligned himself with sinful humanity and assumed to himself its ultimate fatal consequences, that the Father sent forth his Spirit upon him and declared his identity as the beloved Son and as the Anointed One: his "kingly and priestly dignity were formally bestowed upon him for all time in the presence of Israel" (26).

While Benedict does not shy away from the language of descent and even that of "descent into hell," yet he gives to such notions a much more active and broader perspective than is normally understood. While Jesus may experience the depths of sin and the suffering that ensues from it, he turns such experiences into the means whereby he conquers sin and vanquishes death and so triumphs over Satan. It is here, though, that one would wish for some soteriological mechanism to come into play. How does the taking on of the sin and guilt of humankind and so suffering its effects even to the depths of hell bring about hell's demise? Benedict does not clearly say.

I would argue that it is precisely in Christ's love that this transformation occurs. In love the Son of God assumed our sinful humanity and on the cross assumed its curse to the end—even entering into the abyss. Moreover, he simultaneously on the cross offered, in love, his life as a sacrifice to the Father in reparation for all of humankind's sin. He entered hell, then, as the one who so much loved his brothers and sisters in Adam as to assume their punishment as well as the one who lovingly offered his sinless and holy life to the Father on behalf of his sinful brothers and sisters. It is this twofold love that freed sinful humankind from hell's condemnation and made it possible for humankind to be transformed into righteous sons and daughters of the Father after the likeness of Jesus, the Son. It will be fascinating to see if and how Benedict develops this theme in his second volume which will focus on the Passion narratives.

### **Jesus and the Kingdom of God**

Whereas Jesus preached the coming of God's Kingdom, Benedict notes, the apostolic Church proclaimed Jesus as the Christ. This was not a mutation of the original Gospel, but rather the Church's awareness that the Kingdom of God is embodied in the person of Jesus himself. It is "not simply in Jesus' physical presence that the 'Kingdom' is located; rather, it is in his action, accomplished in the Holy Spirit" (60). For Benedict, then, the Kingdom of God is not some human engineered utopia in which God ultimately disappears (cf. 54). Rather, in Jesus, "God has here and now entered actively into history in a wholly new way" (60). "What did Jesus actually bring, if not world peace, universal prosperity, and a better world? What has he brought?" Benedict's biblical answer to these and similar questions echoes throughout his book. "The answer is very simple: God" (44; cf. 354). This understanding of the Kingdom of God is similarly perceived within the Sermon on the Mount, which Benedict perceptively interprets in a Christological manner.

It is unanimously understood that Matthew portrays Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as the new Moses. However, Benedict, in interpreting the Sermon, advances his theme that Jesus, as the Son of God incarnate, establishes an intimacy with God. Unlike the Israelites' harrowing experience of God's presence on Mount Sinai, God now "speaks intimately, as one man to another" (67). Moreover, the Beatitudes present "a veiled interior biography of Jesus" for they "display the mystery of Christ himself, and they call us into communion with him" (74). Jesus himself is the one who is poor in spirit, who is meek, who seeks for righteousness, etc., and, as such, he reveals his intimate union with God. Such intimacy is to be the life of the Church, who practices the Beatitudes, and

of those who are her members. This is specifically seen in the Beatitude that the pure of heart will see God.

For it belongs to his [Jesus'] nature that he sees God, that he stands face-to-face with him, in permanent interior discourse—in a relationship of Sonship. In other words, this Beatitude is profoundly Christological. We will see God when we enter into the “mind of Christ” (Phil 2:5). Purification of heart occurs as a consequence of following Christ, of becoming one with him. (95)

As the above exemplifies, the more one draws closer to Jesus and thus to God the more one becomes truly human. The Sermon on the Mount teaches us “how to be a human being.” But to be such we must live “in relation to God” (128).

If Jesus himself embodies the Beatitudes, which fulfill the Ten Commandments, he also, for Benedict, personifies and fulfills the Torah. Benedict notes the recognized reading that Jesus, when he states, “You have heard it said . . . but I say to you,” has appropriated to himself “the same exalted level as the Lawgiver—as God” (102). But, then, Benedict once more draws upon his constant theme. The Torah is holy because it comes forth from the all-holy God, but if Jesus, with a display of divine authority is altering the Torah, then he too must be the all-holy God.

Jesus understands himself as the Torah—as the word of God in person. The tremendous prologue of John's Gospel—“in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1)—says nothing different from what the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount and the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels says. The Jesus of the Fourth Gospel and the Jesus of the Synoptics is one and the same: the true “historical” Jesus. (110–11)

Here we observe how subtly, and yet unmistakably, the Synoptics profess the divinity of Jesus. It is not, as is often assumed within scholarly circles, that the Synoptics portray the earthly, human, historical Jesus while the Gospel of John divinizes him to the detriment of human historicity. Rather, Benedict clearly shows that, in a profound appraisal of the Gospels, both are proclaiming the same truth in different manners, and in so doing enhancing our understanding of who Jesus is.

This bears itself out when Benedict comments on John 6 where Jesus proclaims that he is the true bread of life. While God gave the Israelites the manna in the desert, yet the real food that he gave them, of which manna is a symbol, was his words of life—the Torah. “So the Torah is ‘bread’ from God, then. And yet it shows us only the back, so to speak. It

is a 'shadow.' 'For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world' (Jn 6:33)" (267). Jesus is the real bread of life and so Jesus is the fulfillment of the Torah. "The Law has become a *person*. When we encounter Jesus we feed on the living God himself, so to speak; we truly eat 'bread from heaven' " (268). This finds its ultimate fulfillment in the Eucharist, where the eternal Word  $\pi$  Torah nourishes us on his resurrected body and blood.

### **Jesus and the Our Father**

If the Sermon on the Mount reveals that Jesus is truly the Son of God and therefore demonstrates just how close God is to us, and also teaches us how to be human by being related to God through Jesus, the Our Father is at the heart of this revelation. Benedict astutely observes that normally thoughts precede our words. But this is not always the case when it comes to prayer. Here, especially in the Psalms and the liturgy, our words of prayer precede our thoughts—actually the words of the Psalms and the liturgy conform our minds to the truths expressed in such prayers and so we actually pray in conformity with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. 130–31). This is also the case when we pray the Our Father.

The Our Father, obviously, arose from Jesus' own life of prayer, from his filial "dialogue with the Father" (133). Benedict observes the relationship between the Our Father and the Ten Commandments and so the intimate connection between the Old and the New Testaments and, in so doing, emphasizes once again that we can be human only in relationship to the Father. "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" (134). While we pray to the Father, that address can only be made in Jesus because he "is 'the Son' in the strict sense—he is one substance with the Father. He wants to draw all of us into his humanity and so into his Sonship, into his total belonging to God" (138). The Our Father exemplifies a central Christian mystery. Through his humanity Jesus unites us to his own sonship and so provides the means to become children of the Father. "We are not ready-made children of God from the start, but we are meant to become so increasingly by growing more and more deeply in communion with Jesus. Our sonship turns out to be identical with following Christ" (138). Benedict understands our relationship to the Father in and through his Son to be the essence of what it means to be human and warns of the consequences of its absence. Commenting on the petition "deliver us from evil," he states: "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 nothing more than a random product of evolution" (166).

### **The Parables as the Mystery of Jesus**

In introducing his chapter on the parables, Benedict once more highlights the paucity of much contemporary liberal biblical scholarship, though "in its day it was viewed as the *ne plus ultra* of scientific rigor and reliable historiography and was regarded even by Catholic exegetes with envy and admiration." The reason is that it reduces the parables to entertaining morality tails and Jesus to that of a wise guru. Similar to the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, "this type of interpretation that makes Jesus a moralist, for all of its significant historical insight, remains theologically impoverished, and does not even come close to the real figure of Jesus" (both quotations from p. 186).

Not surprisingly, Benedict once again, as he did when interpreting the Sermon on the Mount and the Our Father, recognizes that the parables concern the mystery of who Jesus is (cf. 188). With admirable insight Benedict also informs us that "it is on the Cross that the parables are unlocked" (190). Because this is such a marvelous insight, allow this lengthy quote.

The parables speak in a hidden way, then, of the mystery of the Cross; they do not only speak of it—they are part of it themselves. For precisely because they allow the mystery of Jesus' divinity to be seen, they lead to contradiction. It is just when they emerge into a final clarity, as in the parable of the unjust vintners (cf. Mk 12:1–12), that they become stations of the way of the Cross. In the parables Jesus is not only the sower who scatters the seed of God's word, but also the seed that falls into the earth in order to die and so to bear fruit. (191)

Jesus is the only beloved divine Son of the Father whom the vintners will kill, and yet his death will be the seed that bears much fruit. This same theme is woven into Benedict's interpretation of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, which he also reads in the light of the raising of Lazarus of Bethany. "Do we not recognize in the figure of Lazarus—lying at the rich man's door covered in sores—the mystery of Jesus, who 'suffered outside the city walls' (Heb 13:12) and, stretched naked on the Cross, was delivered over to the mockery and contempt of the mob, his body 'full of blood and wounds'?" (216–17) Moreover, as the rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers because they would believe someone who rose from the dead, so Jesus is "the true Lazarus" (both of the parable and of the actual raising), who "*has* risen from the dead—and he has come to tell us so" (217).

In a manner reminiscent of the Fathers of the Church, Benedict has beautifully woven together various passages of Scripture so as to offer a deeper understanding of the parables and miracles, an understanding that enables us to discern the mystery of who Jesus is as the Son of God incarnate and of his passion, death, and resurrection.

### **The Johannine Portrayal of Jesus**

Benedict's study of the Synoptic Gospels covers approximately two-thirds of his book. One of his primary aims is to demonstrate that these Gospels, in many and various ways, truly do proclaim the divinity of Jesus. "Listening to the Synoptics, we have realized that the mystery of Jesus' oneness with the Father is ever present and determines everything, even though it remains hidden beneath his humanity" (218). While this truth only gradually penetrated the hearts and minds of Jesus' disciples, his opponents clearly perceived the significance of what Jesus was saying and doing, and they ardently rejected it as blasphemous. However, "in John, Jesus' divinity appears unveiled" (219).

It is precisely because Jesus' divinity is so evident in John's Gospel that many scholars have rejected its historicity. Benedict launches into a passionate, lengthy, and, ultimately, effective defense of its historicity (cf. 218–38). For Benedict, the disciple whom Jesus loved has not abandoned history, but, through prayerful reflection, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he has faithfully presented the words and actions of Jesus and in so doing has penetrated their inner meaning and significance. "Just as Jesus, the Son, knows about the mystery of the Father from resting in his heart, so too the Evangelist has gained his intimate knowledge from his inward repose in Jesus' heart" (222–23). In response to those who argue that John's Gospel does not bear witness to history, but is intended simply to strengthen the faith of the early Church, Benedict perceptively queries:

What faith does it "testify" to if, so to speak, it has left history behind? How does it strengthen faith if it presents itself as a historical testimony—and does so quite emphatically—but then does not report history? . . . A faith that discards history in this manner really turns into "Gnosticism." It leaves flesh, incarnation—just what true history is—behind. (228)

Having defended the historicity of John's Gospel, Benedict discusses four Johannine images—that of water, vine and wine, bread, and the shepherd. It is not possible to comment in detail on all or any one of these images. Nonetheless, it is not surprising, given the established pattern of his book, that Benedict perceives that all of these images have

to do with Jesus, as the Son of God incarnate, granting access to his Father in the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the images of water, vine and wine, and bread find their fulfillment in the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. Through Baptism the Christian is united to Christ, the vine, and so comes to share in the new life of the Holy Spirit as a child of the Father. Likewise Jesus, the vine, continually nourishes this life through the Eucharist. Benedict perceives that those who follow Jesus as the shepherd have access to the Father through him. This is why the Church is commissioned to preach the Gospel to all nations and peoples: "There is only one Shepherd" (284).

### **Peter's Profession and the Transfiguration**

Having examined a variety of Jesus' teachings and actions by and through which he revealed the mystery of himself as the Son incarnate, Benedict focuses on two events that lie at the heart of this mystery—Peter's profession of faith and the Transfiguration. While, throughout his book, Benedict has linked the Incarnation with the cross, he now deepens this connection in a most thoughtful manner.

Benedict first notes that Jesus questions his disciples about his identity as he sets out to Jerusalem—the journey of the cross—a journey that his disciples must also undertake if they are to be his faithful followers. This provides the context of Jesus' query: "Who do the people say that I am?" While the responses of John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah are all prophets, yet they all prefigure some form of suffering and death as well as the eschatological events through which Israel would be restored. Nonetheless, while they may approximate who Jesus is, they fall far short. Jesus is more than just a prophet. For Benedict this distinction is crucial within the context of global religions. "Today it is fashionable to regard Jesus as one of the great religious founders who were granted a profound experience of God" (293). However, such an understanding is always a human experience that, at best, obtains fragments of divine truth. "The individual decides what he is going to accept from the various 'experiences,' what he finds helpful and what he finds alien. There is no definitive commitment here" (293). Peter's confession elevates Jesus to a unique and singular status that differs in kind from the founders of other religions.

While Benedict notes that the wording of Peter's confession differs in the three Synoptics, the real issue is not in attempting to sort out which one is authentically the historical, the *ipsima verba Petri*. Rather, it is to grasp, in faith, the truth that the Gospels are proclaiming. Scholars discern two ways of interpreting Peter's confession, which they often see as opposed to one another—as expressing Jesus' ontological nature or as

expressing his role or function within salvation history. For Benedict, Peter's profession is both. In all three forms his profession states something that is "'substantive'—you *are* the Christ, the Christ of God, the Christ, the Son of the living God" (298). Yet, this proclamation of who Jesus is must equally be understood within its salvific context—the mystery of the cross and resurrection. Benedict concludes:

At certain key moments, the disciples came to the astonishing realization: This is God himself. They were unable to put all this together into a perfect response. Instead they rightly drew upon the Old Testament's words of promise: Christ, the Anointed One, Son of God, Lord. These are the key words on which their confession focused, while still tentatively searching for a way forward. It could arrive at its complete form only when Thomas, touching the wounds of the Risen Lord, cried out, in amazement: "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28). . . . Only by touching Jesus' wounds and encountering his Resurrection are we able to grasp them [Thomas' words], and then they become our mission (304–5).

While Peter rightly professed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, he did not place such a profession in relationship to the cross and so his faith was defective. "Jesus' divinity belongs with the Cross—only when we put the two together do we recognize Jesus correctly" (305).

There is an intimate connection between Peter's profession of faith and the Transfiguration. Benedict notes that Peter's profession would have occurred on the great Day of Atonement, the one day of the year where the high priest would have solemnly pronounced the name of Yahweh. This reinforces the interpretation that Jesus is truly God as well as his mission being inherently tied to the cross. The following week would then be the Feast of Tabernacles, the Transfiguration occurring on the final day of the feast. Luke sets the Transfiguration within the context of Jesus praying. For Benedict, the Transfiguration "displays visibly what happens when Jesus talks with his Father: the profound interpenetration of his being with God, which then becomes pure light. In his oneness with the Father, Jesus is himself 'light from light'" (p. 310). Unlike the light that shone upon Moses, the light of the Transfiguration comes forth from within Jesus himself.

While it would appear that Peter's remark about setting up three tents, one for Jesus and one each for Moses and Elijah, is but confused nonsense, Benedict sees it as a direct reference to the Feast of Tabernacles itself. God dwelt within the Tabernacle, but now through the Incarnation, God literally "has pitched the tent of his body among us and has thus inaugurated the messianic age" (315). Moreover, as the holy cloud, the *shekinah*, hovered over the Tent of Meeting displaying the presence of God, so now "Jesus is

the holy tent above whom the cloud of God's presence now stands and spreads to 'overshadow' the others as well" (316). As noted earlier, the Father's exhortation to listen to his Son, who is flanked by Moses and Elijah, both indicates his continuity with the Torah and the Prophets as well as his being the new Torah and the fulfillment of God's promises.

### The Identity of Jesus

Benedict brings his book to a close by examining the titles of Jesus which clearly identify him as God, such as "Christ," "Lord," "Son of Man," "the Son," and the "I Am". Here I want briefly to reflect on the title "Son" and the "I Am".

Benedict rightly notes that one must distinguish the title "Son of God" from that of "the Son," which Jesus himself employs. In the Prologue John sets the context for Jesus' use of the title. "No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (Jn 1:18). The truth of this statement, Benedict again states, arises out of Jesus' prayerful filial dialogue with the Father. "At the same time, it also becomes clear what 'the Son' is and what this term means: perfect communion in knowledge, which is at the same time communion in being. Unity in knowing is possible only because it is a unity of being" (340). It is this biblical understanding of the term "Son" along with other biblical evidence that Benedict has provided throughout his book that rightly gives rise to the Council of Nicea's *homoousios*. "This philosophical term serves . . . to safeguard the reliability of the biblical term" (320).

Jesus' self revelation is most strikingly seen in his use of "I am." This phrase was first used in Exodus 3:14 where God reveals his name as "I am who I am." God designates himself as "I am." Deutero-Isaiah emphasizes that the Israelites will know that "I am he" (Is 43:10). For Benedict, when Jesus says "I am," he is not simply placing himself alongside of the Father, but "because he is the Son, he has every right to utter with his own lips the Father's self-designation" (348). However, Jesus' self-designation as God by appropriating to himself the very name of God, "I am," also reveals that as God incarnate he is to die on the cross. "When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am he" (Jn 8:28). As Benedict states: "On the Cross, his Sonship, his oneness with the Father, becomes visible. . . . The burning bush is the Cross. The highest claim of revelation, the 'I am he,' and the Cross of Jesus are inseparably one" (349).

It must not be thought that Jesus' use of the "I am" is exclusive to John's Gospel and so historically suspect. It is also found in the Synoptics, though in a less conspicuous manner. For example, in Mark, Jesus walks on the water as he approaches the disciples on the stormy lake. They are fright-

ened at his sight, but he assures them: "Take heart, it is I [I am he]; have no fear" (Mk 6:50). Benedict observes that within the Bible men are overwhelmed with fear when confronted by the presence of God. "It is this 'divine terror' that comes over the disciples here. For walking on the waters is a divine prerogative: God 'alone stretched out the heavens, and trampled the waves of the sea,' we read in the book of Job (Job 9:8; cf. Ps 76:20 in the Septuagint version; Is 43:16). The Jesus who walks upon the waters is not simply the familiar Jesus; in this new Jesus they suddenly recognize the presence of God himself" (352).

### **Personal Relationship with Jesus**

In his book Benedict is keen, as all the above demonstrates, to show that, because of his unique relationship with the Father, Jesus is the eternal Son of God incarnate. Moreover, what also becomes evident in so many ways throughout this book, as the above also exemplifies, is that this relationship is available to those who believe in Jesus. In an almost Protestant Evangelical fashion, Benedict stresses that it is through our personal relationship with Jesus, our friendship with Jesus, by means of faith and the sacraments, that we come to share in his own personal relationship with the Father (see, for example, xii, xxiv, 24, 138). This, I believe, is significant. It reveals Benedict's pastoral awareness that contemporary men and women are seeking personal relationships that are authentic and loving. For Benedict, this human "personalism" can only be obtained if one first has a personal relationship with Jesus, who allows one to share in the divine life of the Father through the love of the Holy Spirit. It is through our sharing in the life and love of the Trinity that we can truly share our lives with one another in love. As Benedict states:

In the end, man needs just one thing, in which everything else is included; but he must first delve beyond his superficial wishes and longings in order to learn to recognize what it is that he truly needs and truly wants. He needs God. And so we now realize what ultimately lies behind all the Johannine images: Jesus gives us "life" because he gives us God. He can give God because he himself is one with God, because he is the Son. He himself is the gift—he is "life." (353–54).

In providing the reader with an authentic biblical portrayal of Jesus, Benedict has offered the reader an opportunity to meet Jesus himself, and, in so doing, allowing the reader to come to a deeper personal relationship with him. Benedict has learned from Jesus himself that this is the true purpose of theology and the hoped for goal of faith—to encounter the living God in Christ Jesus.