

A “New Synthesis”: Joseph Ratzinger’s *Jesus of Nazareth*

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SEVENTEEN YEARS before his election to the papacy, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger delivered his 1988 Erasmus Lecture on the state of biblical scholarship as a discipline within the Church.¹ Ratzinger began his remarks by identifying several weaknesses in historical biblical exegesis as it was practiced within the Church at the time.² Since this lecture, many of Ratzinger’s diagnostic observations have become commonplace within biblical studies, such as the recognition of a reader’s locatedness and the shaping effect of theological and philosophical presuppositions on exegetical conclusions. Instead of abandoning historical criticism, Ratzinger proposes a renovation of the method, which “takes into account both the undeniable insights uncovered by the historical method, while at the same time overcoming its limitations and disclosing them in a thoroughly relevant hermeneutic.”³ Such a project would

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¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today,” in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. R. J. Neuhaus (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 1–23.

² Among the problems Ratzinger identifies are the following: an overriding focus on reconstructing the history behind the biblical text to the neglect of what the text itself claims; the aversion to Scripture from many systematic theologians; fundamentalism; the disregard for the text’s original setting by ideological critics, who openly employ the Bible to advance a political agenda. See Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis,” 1–5.

³ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

enable a more fruitful reintegration of historical biblical studies with Christian faith and practice and thus create a more properly Christian approach to biblical interpretation.

According to Ratzinger, the path to improving biblical exegesis does not lie in practicing better critical analysis according to the current methods or in the interpreter striving to be more objective (in the sense of being unbiased). Rather, the historical-critical method itself needs to be assessed at its most basic, philosophical level.⁴ Ratzinger thus proposes “a criticism of criticism,” which examines the history of modern exegesis to illustrate the shaping effect of theological and philosophical pressures on the conclusions of modern exegetes.⁵ Ratzinger follows through on this proposal by discussing the theological premises which guided the form-critical work of Dibelius and Bultmann. In the final section of the lecture, Ratzinger makes some positive suggestions for what he calls “a New Synthesis.”⁶ This program of a philosophically renovated historical criticism would be more open to the text’s claim and not exclude certain possibilities (such as divine intervention in the world) on philosophical grounds. Other features of this program include the consideration that events are meaningful in themselves, an awareness of the exegete’s location within the Church community, and the acceptance of the Church’s faith as an interpretive key, not an impediment, for understanding Scripture.

Nearly twenty years after this lecture, Joseph Ratzinger produced the first volume of his *Jesus of Nazareth*. Throughout this essay, I will refer to the author of this book as Joseph Ratzinger rather than with his papal name “Benedict XVI” because Ratzinger did not write this book as an exercise of his papal authority. Ratzinger specifies that this book does not constitute magisterial teaching, but rather it is his own work and position as a believer and theologian.⁷

In this book, Ratzinger focuses on selected events in Jesus’ life from his baptism to the Transfiguration as presented in the canonical Gospels. The book resists a simple generic categorization, for it does not correspond straightforwardly to conventional categories such as historical Jesus study, critical Gospel commentary, or a spiritual meditation on Scripture. And yet the answer given to the genre question can significantly impact

⁴ Ratzinger states, “At its core, the debate about modern exegesis is not a dispute among historians: it is rather a philosophical debate” (“Biblical Interpretation in Crisis,” 16).

⁵ Ibid., 4–7, 22.

⁶ Ibid., 17–23, quotation from 17.

⁷ Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. A. J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xxxiii.

the overall assessment of Ratzinger's work. Ratzinger states that this book constitutes "an expression of my personal search 'for the face of the Lord' (cf. Ps 27:8)."⁸ In this project, Ratzinger blends together intellectual acumen, a deep, prayerful spirituality, and pastoral insight to articulate a richly layered meditation on the figure of Jesus, who reveals the meaning of human existence. It is, I propose, Ratzinger's substantive effort to carry out the "New Synthesis," which he articulated in the Erasmus Lecture.

In order to categorize Ratzinger's project appropriately and so understand it, I will begin with his programmatic remarks about his interpretive approach to the Gospels, illustrating them with actual examples of his practice. From here, I will turn to Ratzinger's interpretation of Christ's life, focusing on several of its key aspects. In the final section, I will discuss some of the larger issues raised by Ratzinger and suggest some possibilities for further research.

Understanding Ratzinger's Project

Ratzinger's Interpretive Principles

As he did in the Erasmus Lecture, Ratzinger operates with a generally positive evaluation of historical biblical criticism in *Jesus of Nazareth*.⁹ Ratzinger allows the historical-critical method and many of its conclusions to frame his own project. He remarks programmatically (and somewhat sweepingly) that he assumes "everything that the Council and modern exegesis tell us about literary genres, about authorial intention, and about the fact that the Gospels were written within the context, and speak within the living milieu, of communities."¹⁰ At times, Ratzinger follows through on this programmatic statement and incorporates conclusions of this sort into his interpretation. He acknowledges that conflict with synagogue groups shaped the Gospels of Matthew and John but does not appear reflected in Luke.¹¹ When introducing his chapter on the Sermon on the Mount, Ratzinger discusses how the Lukan account of the Sermon differs from the Matthean in emphasis and theological concern.¹²

⁸ Ibid., *Jesus of Nazareth*, xxiii.

⁹ Ratzinger makes the following statement regarding historical biblical scholarship: "I write with profound gratitude for all that [modern exegesis] has given and continues to give to us. It has opened up to us a wealth of material and an abundance of findings that enable the figure of Jesus to become present to us with a vitality and depth that we could not have imagined even just a few decades ago" (*Jesus of Nazareth*, xxiii).

¹⁰ Ibid., xxi.

¹¹ Ibid., 181.

¹² Ibid., 68–69.

It would definitely be a category mistake to consider this book as Ratzinger's attempt at historical-critical exegesis. As readers of his other writings can recognize, Joseph Ratzinger is a very biblically grounded theologian, who frequently employs Scripture as a primary source for his theological thinking.¹³ However, Ratzinger himself is not a specialized biblical exegete, and in this work, he does not try his hand at historical-critical analysis (à la Schillebeeckx).¹⁴ Ratzinger insists quite plainly that his goal "is not to counter modern exegesis," and he does not wish "to enter into the debates of historical-critical research."¹⁵ He acknowledges that much of his interpretation does not conform to the norms of conventional biblical scholarship and admits that many of his conclusions "[go] beyond what much contemporary exegesis . . . has to say."¹⁶

Instead, Ratzinger relies frequently, although not uncritically, on the work of various biblical scholars.¹⁷ Ratzinger's choice of interlocutors in biblical scholarship is somewhat curious. Many of his interlocutors are from a past generation, such as Bultmann, Cullmann, and Jeremias, and most of the biblical scholarship he consults is German. He draws on an ecumenical range of scholars, mostly Catholic and Protestant, and his most sustained engagement with any contemporary biblical scholar is with Jacob Neusner. Some of Ratzinger's claims and choices pertaining to critical issues are questionable. For instance, he claims that Galatians was written to a Jewish Christian audience, whereas Galatians 3:3 suggests a community made up of converts from Gentile paganism.¹⁸

¹³ For discussions of Ratzinger's theological use of Scripture, see Francis Martin, "Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, on Biblical Interpretation: Two Leading Principles," *Nova et Vetera* 5 (2007): 285–314; Scott W. Hahn, "The Authority of Mystery: The Biblical Theology of Benedict XVI," *Letter and Spirit* 2 (2006): 97–140.

¹⁴ Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. H. Hoskins (New York: Seabury Press, 1979); idem, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. J. Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

¹⁵ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xxiii and 365, respectively.

¹⁶ Ibid., xxiii.

¹⁷ For instance, Ratzinger's discussion of the Fourth Gospel's authorship draws heavily on Martin Hengel's *The Johannine Question*. But Ratzinger disagrees with Hengel both on the identity of the Beloved Disciple and the extent to which the Fourth Gospel reflects the historically reliable, eyewitnessing of the Beloved Disciple. See Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 220–35; Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989).

¹⁸ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 100. Elsewhere, however, Ratzinger speaks of the Galatians as coming from an "atheistic past" (implying that they were non-Jewish). See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Sr. M. F. McCarthy, S.N.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 69.

Also, when surveying the major symbols of the Fourth Gospel, he omits any discussion of light and darkness. While Ratzinger often incorporates modern exegetical conclusions, they usually do not have a far-reaching impact on his interpretations.

Ratzinger considers historical-critical analysis to be a necessary prerequisite for Christian exegesis.¹⁹ He invokes God's activity in salvation history as the rationale for this conclusion. Since God has acted in the course of real historical events, a historical mode of investigation is appropriate to exegesis. Invoking *Dei Verbum* §12 and the Pontifical Biblical Commission's 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Ratzinger argues that the Incarnation requires that history be studied and taken seriously as constituent to Christianity. Ratzinger's insistence on the foundational character of historical-critical study for Christian exegesis seems to be directed against a Gnostic/Hegelian exegesis in which the biblical narratives are read as expressions of ahistorical, speculative truths.²⁰

While the historical-critical method may be a necessary foundation and starting point, Ratzinger does not consider it to be all-sufficient or comprising the entirety of Christian biblical interpretation.²¹ He identifies several defects in the historical-critical method, which need to be overcome for it to be more serviceable in a Christian hermeneutic. First, the historical-critical method studies the biblical text solely as an object from the past. By virtue of its methodological concern with originative historical contexts, the historical-critical method cannot by itself make the biblical text speak as a present reality.²² If the Bible is to be read as God's Word,

¹⁹ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xv–xvi.

²⁰ Ratzinger's argument that historical-critical exegesis provides inoculation against Gnosticism approaches that of Hans Urs von Balthasar. See Kevin Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs Von Balthasar: An Irenaean Retrieval* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2002), 118–23. While Ratzinger does identify a disregard for history as "Gnostic" (*Jesus of Nazareth*, 228), he does not explicitly name Hegel. Nevertheless, the identification of Hegel and his philosophical reading of Scripture as Gnostic has been pursued in recent scholarship. On the identification of Hegel as Gnostic, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, introduction to *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies*, trans. J. Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981–1990), 1–11, esp. 4–5; Cyril O'Regan, *Gnostic Return in Modernity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001) 1–22; idem, "Balthasar and Gnostic Genealogy," *Modern Theology* 22 (2006): 609–50; Mongrain, *Systematic Thought of Hans Urs Von Balthasar*, 133–53. For a discussion of Hegel's Gnostic reading of biblical narrative, see Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994) 151–69.

²¹ For Ratzinger's programmatic discussion of the limitations in the historical-critical method, see *Jesus of Nazareth*, xvi–xviii.

²² As Ratzinger states, the historical method's "very precision in interpreting the reality of the past is both its strength and its limit" (*Jesus of Nazareth*, xvi).

its meaning and voice must be heard in the reader's present. Ratzinger also notes that the interpretive significance of the canon is not a properly historical-critical concern. The study of individual biblical books in their historical contexts does not require attention to the theological relationship between them as comprising a unified, canonical Scripture.

Second, since historical-critical exegesis treats the biblical text as the product of historical processes and language, there is often little concern for the transcendent. While Ratzinger does not make the connection explicit in *Jesus of Nazareth*, this critique corresponds to his identification of implicit Kantian influence in exegesis.²³ In the Erasmus Lecture, Ratzinger argues that Kantian epistemology, with its claim that the object of knowing is the phenomenon and not the *Ding an sich*, has unnecessarily restricted the scope of biblical exegesis. With a Kantian epistemological structure, Ratzinger writes, "comes the restriction to the positive, to the empirical, to the 'exact' science, which by definition excludes the appearance of what is 'wholly other'."²⁴ Consequently, there arises the tendency to forego consideration of God's appearance or activity in human events and to focus solely on empirically verifiable historical processes. Any posited appearance of God within human events must in principle be something else, which is empirically accessible. Ratzinger states, "What might otherwise seem like a direct proclamation of the divine can only be myth, whose laws of development can be discovered."²⁵

Ratzinger develops this kind of critique in his treatment of Jesus' second temptation in Matthew 4:5–7. Ratzinger understands this temptation, in part, as an exegetical dispute over the identity of God. He interprets Satan's use of Psalm 91:11–12 and Jesus' response with Deuteronomy 6:16 (cf. Matt 4:6–7) as centering on the temptation to force God to conform to a particular human request or condition in order to prove himself. Ratzinger connects this temptation with the exegetical tendency to make the human being or any contemporary system into the standard for judging the biblical claim. As Ratzinger writes, a "common practice today is to measure the Bible against the so-called modern worldview, whose fundamental dogma is that God cannot act in history."²⁶ This approach, Ratzinger argues, cannot but fail to hear God through the Scripture: the "arrogance that would make God an object and impose our laboratory conditions upon him is incapable of

²³ Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," 15–16. Cf. Hahn, "Authority of the Mystery," 103–5.

²⁴ Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁶ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 35.

finding him."²⁷ The extent to which modernity makes humanity the measure is the same extent to which it deafens itself to God's voice.

Third, Ratzinger calls attention to the hypothetical character of many conclusions in historical-critical exegesis. Given the historical and cultural distance between any modern interpreter and antiquity, high degrees of certitude are not possible when the Bible is studied historically as an artifact of the past. In a statement evocative of the Erasmus Lecture, Ratzinger states "some hypotheses enjoy a high degree of certainty, but overall we need to remain conscious of the limit of our certainties—indeed, the history of exegesis makes this limit perfectly clear."²⁸

Two examples from *Jesus of Nazareth* illustrate Ratzinger's claim. First, he calls attention to Bultmann's influence on twentieth century Johannine scholarship. He notes that much contemporary Johannine scholarship has abandoned Bultmann's argument for a Gnostic redeemer myth as a source and conceptual background for the Fourth Gospel. Ratzinger suggests that the sharp turn away from Bultmann shows "how little protection the highly scientific approach can offer against fundamental mistakes."²⁹ Second, Ratzinger introduces his chapter on the parables by discussing the contributions of Jülicher, Jeremias, and Dodd to parables study.³⁰ He argues that works of Jeremias and Dodd, which highlight (in their respective ways) the eschatology in parables, shows the inadequacy of Jülicher's Liberal interpretation of Jesus as a teacher of Enlightenment-friendly morality. This episode from the history of parables research "enables us to glimpse the limits of liberal exegesis, which in its day was viewed as the *ne plus ultra* of scientific rigor and reliable historiography."³¹ In both of these cases, Ratzinger argues to the tentative character of certain historical-critical conclusions by appealing to the history of interpretation. As in the Erasmus Lecture, Ratzinger finds value in studying the history of modern exegesis because it brings to light the ways in which an exegete's time, location, and theological assumptions shape exegetical conclusions. While historical-critical exegesis can provide valuable insights, it cannot provide much by way of certain knowledge, a claim which in times past it was often purported to provide.

To overcome these limits of the historical-critical method, Ratzinger incorporates other interpretive principles into his reading of the Gospels. First, Ratzinger consciously employs the Church's faith as a hermeneutical

²⁷ Ibid., 37.

²⁸ Ibid., xvii.

²⁹ Ibid., 220.

³⁰ Ibid., 183–88.

³¹ Ibid., 186.

key for reading Scripture. He believes that the Gospels present the truth about Jesus, which the Church has come to articulate in doctrine and practice. The adoption of Christian faith as a hermeneutical key rather than an impediment to genuine knowledge about Jesus places Ratzinger at odds with the originating impulses of historical biblical criticism. As Ratzinger stated elsewhere about Reimarus and his kind of critical exegesis: "Jesus was to be sought, not *through* dogma, but *against* it, if one wanted to arrive at a historical knowledge of him. Historical reason became the corrective of dogma; critical reason became the antipode of traditional faith."³² Ratzinger's use of faith as a hermeneutical guide corresponds to the classical Christian use of the *regula fidei* as both the lens and standard for interpretation.

This use of faith as a hermeneutical principle is a very significant move for Ratzinger. It compensates for two deficiencies Ratzinger discerned in the historical-critical method. First, it positions Ratzinger to counter the Kantian influence in biblical studies and modern thinking. He had criticized the Kantian shape of modern exegesis, which restricts itself to historical, empirically verifiable matters to the exclusion of God's transcendent activity in human affairs. However, many tenets of Christian faith involve particular events and people in the course of salvation history.³³ Implicit here is Ratzinger's affirmation that faith is a genuine and legitimate form of knowledge.³⁴ What is known by faith should have a legitimate bearing on historical reasoning. Thus, a fundamental issue in Ratzinger's adoption of faith as an interpretive principle is the relationship of faith and reason, and specifically, historical reasoning. As will be discussed later, the legitimacy of faith-knowledge significantly shapes Ratzinger's understanding of the relationship of Jesus and the Gospels.

Second, reading from the standpoint of faith enables Ratzinger to take the canon as being hermeneutically relevant.³⁵ Following on *Dei Verbum* §12 and 16, Ratzinger holds that the Gospels should be read within the unity of the Testaments, which witness to the one divine plan of creation and redemption. Ratzinger, therefore, sees great value in a canonical crit-

³² Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 92. Cf. Hahn, "Authority of Mystery," 103–5.

³³ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "On the 100th Anniversary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission: Relationship between Magisterium and Exegetes" (May 10, 2003), available at www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20030510_ratzinger-comm-bible_en.html.

³⁴ Cf. Martin, "Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, on Biblical Interpretation." On this point, Martin refers (286 n.1) to Ratzinger's "Relationship between Magisterium and Exegetes."

³⁵ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xviii–xix.

icism, which reads the individual parts of the canon in light of the context created by the whole. A canonical reading of Scripture, Ratzinger affirms, is "an essential dimension of exegesis . . . [which] carries it [that is, historical-critical exegesis] forward in an organic way toward becoming theology in the proper sense."³⁶ Canonical reading moves exegesis into theology because it creates the space for a Christocentric reading of Scripture. Such an understanding of Scripture "sees Jesus Christ as the key to the whole and learns from him how to understand the Bible as a unity."³⁷

Along with the explicit assumption of the Church's faith, Ratzinger also embraces his locatedness within the Church as an interpretive principle. In the Erasmus Lecture, Ratzinger acknowledged the active role played by readers in the interpretive process: they read from within a context and are shaped by various theological and philosophical presuppositions. Objective (that is, unbiased) neutrality is not possible in the interpretive process.³⁸ Since unbiased, a-contextual reading is impossible, the Christian exegete "must realize that he does not stand in some neutral area, above or outside history and the church."³⁹ The Christian exegete reads Scripture as a member of a faith community. Reading the Bible within the Church also preserves its character as Scripture.⁴⁰ Ratzinger had stated that the historical-critical method was unable to address the present significance or the transcendent meaning of biblical compositions. However, when the biblical compositions are read within the context of their ecclesial reception, they are read as Scripture, God's Word for people in all times. By reading the Bible as Scripture within the Church, the claim of Scripture as God's Word for his people can be voiced and heard in the present.

For Ratzinger, reading within the context of the Church includes not only the contemporary faith community, but also the Church's tradition, the faith community over past generations.⁴¹ Here, Ratzinger's *ressourcement*

³⁶ Ibid., xix.

³⁷ Ibid., xix.

³⁸ As Ratzinger puts it, "Pure objectivity is an absurd abstraction. It is not the uninvolvement who comes to knowledge; rather interest itself is a requirement for the possibility of coming to know" ("Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," 7). While Ratzinger recognizes the role of the subject in interpretation, he also wants to guard against interpretation collapsing into complete subjectivity, in which the subject sees and hears only himself in the text.

³⁹ Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," 22.

⁴⁰ See Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xx–xxi.

⁴¹ Compare the following statement of Henri de Lubac in his preface to the first volume of *Medieval Exegesis*: "To a certain extent, the consciousness of a community of faith that exists between myself and those whose thought I am studying is quite well able to keep me from looking at my object from the outside. There is no reason why this shared faith should not allow me to reach the very heart

theology stands out. He reads Scripture with an eye toward the interpretations of the Church Fathers. For instance, Ratzinger's interpretation of the Our Father in Matthew 6:9–13 is heavily conditioned by Cyprian's treatise *On the Lord's Prayer*.⁴² He also gives considerable attention to the Fathers' exegesis in his interpretation of three Lukan parables.⁴³

However, like de Lubac, Ratzinger does not advocate a return to premodern exegesis as a kind of nostalgic retreat from modernity.⁴⁴ He acknowledges the many differences between modern and premodern exegesis and acknowledges that in many cases the latter "bypasses the text."⁴⁵ While Ratzinger acknowledges that many premodern interpretations are no longer viable, he views the Fathers as providing many theologically rich readings of Scripture. For instance, Ratzinger reports that the Church Fathers often interpreted the Good Samaritan's help for the wounded traveler as a figure of Christ's ministering to a wounded, sinful humanity. While some aspects of this interpretation need not be retained, Ratzinger applauds the basic interpretive rendering of the story. He writes the following:

[T]he great vision that sees man lying alienated and helpless by the roadside of history and God himself becoming man's neighbor in Jesus Christ is one that we can happily retain, as a deeper dimension of the parable . . . [and] the mighty imperative expressed in the parable is not thereby weakened, but only now emerges in its full grandeur.⁴⁶

The interpretations of the Church Fathers are worth taking seriously because of the theological insights which they derive from Scripture. Where viable, these theological interpretations constitute for Ratzinger a legitimate working out of scriptural meaning: "In some sense it reflects an inner potentiality in the text and can be a fruit growing out of it as from a seed."⁴⁷

of my object and thus come to a true understanding of it." Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: Volume 1—The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. M. Seban (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), xxii.

⁴² See Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 128–68.

⁴³ See *ibid.*, 194–217, esp. 199–201, 205–7, 209–11.

⁴⁴ Ratzinger makes the following statement: Exegesis "cannot simply retreat back to the Middle Ages or to the Fathers and place them in blind opposition to the spirit of the present age. [But] . . . One can hardly dismiss the exegesis of the Fathers by calling it mere 'allegory' or set aside the philosophy of the Middle Ages by branding it as 'precritical'" (Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," 16). Cf. de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, xx–xxi.

⁴⁵ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 199.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 199.

Ratzinger argues that the interpretive move to read Scripture through the Church and its Tradition is consonant with Scripture itself. He observes, "The Scripture emerged from within the heart of a living subject—the pilgrim People of God—and lives within this same subject."⁴⁸ The books of the Bible were produced by individuals, who were all located within a faith community. This faith community was and is constituted by its relationship with God, who speaks and acts towards them. This historical, trans-generational relationship with God is what makes the believing community the People of God. Moreover, Ratzinger calls attention to what is frequently called "inner-biblical exegesis": the process by which earlier texts are reread and interpreted in later biblical texts.⁴⁹ Much biblical writing, then, is the product of the faith community's interpretive tradition. The interpretive traditions of Israel and the New Testament Christians are intrinsic to the biblical books themselves. Therefore, reading the Bible within the context of the believing community, which includes that community's interpretive tradition, is nothing more than object-appropriate reading.

Ratzinger's hermeneutics are classically Christian. He provides a faith-filled reading of Scripture and sees the two Testaments as a unity, the principle of which is God's redemptive action in Christ. He embraces the rule of faith as a hermeneutical key and reads within the boundaries of the Church as a faith community, past and present.

Categorizing Ratzinger's Project

Ratzinger begins his foreword by mentioning several Jesus books from the early to mid twentieth century, which were based on the Gospel presentations and quite amenable to Christian faith and piety.⁵⁰ He contrasts these faith-friendly Jesus books with certain (unspecified) historical Jesus works from the 1950s. Ratzinger evaluates this latter kind of Jesus book quite negatively.⁵¹ These works create a gap between Jesus "as he really was" as a historical figure and what the Church believes him to be, that is, the distinction between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith." Ratzinger finds these historical Jesus books to be intellectually unsatisfying. As the many contradictory reconstructions of the historical Jesus illustrate,

⁴⁸ Ibid., xx.

⁴⁹ The classic work on this topic is Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); cf. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xviii–xix.

⁵⁰ He cites the following as examples: "Karl Adam, Romano Guardini, Franz Michel Willam, Giovanni Papini, and Henri Daniel-Rops" (*Jesus of Nazareth*, xi). One may speculate as to whether Ratzinger envisions his own work to be a twenty-first century updating of this kind of Jesus book.

⁵¹ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xi–xii.

this kind of research has created little academic consensus and much confusion about Jesus' identity. Echoing Albert Schweitzer's famous statement, Ratzinger writes, "[These historical Jesus books] are much more like photographs of their authors and the ideals they hold."⁵² This cacophony of Jesus scholarship has created a state of skepticism—even among ordinary believers—over the very possibility of knowing Jesus in any respect. Having genuine knowledge of Jesus is crucial for Ratzinger because, as I will discuss later, the primary goal of this book is to help foster a loving, personal relationship between human beings and Jesus.

Ratzinger seemingly envisions his book as an alternative to the kind of Jesus scholarship that is hostile or detrimental to Christian faith. Yet, it would be a category mistake to call this book a historical Jesus reconstruction (at least in the conventional sense of the category). Ratzinger does not attempt to get behind the Gospel narratives to construct a portrait of Jesus, which differs in some degree from the Gospel presentations. On the contrary, Ratzinger states quite plainly, "I trust the Gospels."⁵³ He believes that the canonical Gospels faithfully and accurately present Jesus as he truly was and is. And yet Ratzinger can state the following: "I wanted to portray the Jesus of the Gospels as the real, 'historical' Jesus in the strict sense of the word. [And] I am convinced, and I hope the reader will be, too, that this figure is much more logical and, historically speaking, intelligible than the reconstructions we have been presented with in the last decades."⁵⁴ Thus, while Ratzinger does not try to reconstruct the historical Jesus behind the Gospels, he claims to be interested in the "historical" Jesus.

Lest this position be taken as pre-modern naïveté, Ratzinger acknowledges that the Gospels were composed within community contexts and the evangelists exercised compositional creativity in shaping their presentations of Jesus. His treatment of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel illustrates well his incorporation of these conclusions into his interpretation.⁵⁵ Ratzinger recognizes that the interpretive activity of the Fourth Evangelist was a major factor in his Gospel's presentation of Jesus. Ratzinger associates this interpretive activity with the instances of "remembering" in the Fourth Gospel (2:17, 22; 12:14–16; cf. 16:13) through which the Paraclete brings the disciples to a deeper, spiritual understanding of Jesus' life.⁵⁶ Ratzinger

⁵² Ibid., xii.

⁵³ Ibid., xxi.

⁵⁴ Ibid., xxii.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 220–35.

⁵⁶ On the association of the disciples' remembering and the post-resurrection activity of the Paraclete, see also William M. Wright IV, "The Theology of Disclosure and Biblical Exegesis," *The Thomist* 70 (2006): 395–419, esp. 404–11.

argues that the substance for this "remembering" is the evangelist's own witnessing of events in Jesus' life.⁵⁷ Through the activity of the Paraclete upon him, the Fourth Evangelist composed his Gospel within an ecclesial context to disclose the inner truth of Jesus' words and deeds.⁵⁸ The presentation of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, then, is an unabashedly interpretive account of Jesus' life, not a disinterested recounting of factual data. With respect to Jesus' discourses in John, Ratzinger can make the following claim: "If 'historical' is understood to mean that the discourses of Jesus transmitted to us have to be something like a recorded transcript in order to be acknowledged as 'historically' authentic, then the discourses of John's Gospel are not 'historical.'"⁵⁹ However, since historical events which the evangelist himself witnessed provide the substance for his Spirit-guided, interpretive activity, the presentation of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel nevertheless remains faithfully moored in Jesus' historical life. Ratzinger continues: the Fourth Gospel asserts that "it has correctly rendered the substance of the discourses, of Jesus' self-attestation in the great Jerusalem disputes, so that the readers really do encounter the decisive content of this message and, therein, the authentic figure of Jesus."⁶⁰

Ratzinger thus maintains that the real, historical Jesus can be heard and known through the mediation of communities and the evangelists' compositional activity. The Gospel narratives do not obscure Jesus, but rather they bring his enduring significance to light. Instead of seeing the unfolding of apostolic tradition as corruptive or distorting, Ratzinger takes it to be the faithful outworking and interpretation of Jesus' teaching and work—a decision which runs contrary to what J. Z. Smith calls "the Protestant historiographic myth."⁶¹

⁵⁷ The remembering of Jesus in the New Testament Church is becoming an increasingly substantial topic in Jesus research. Among the variations on this topic, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 167–88; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, Christianity in the Making 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). For a recent survey of several works in this category, see Terrence W. Tilley, "Remembering the Historic Jesus—A New Research Program?" *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 3–35.

⁵⁸ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 233.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁶¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 43. See also Luke Timothy Johnson, "What's Catholic about Catholic Biblical Scholarship? An Opening Statement," in *The*

A certain tension thus runs through Ratzinger's handling of the Gospel material. Ratzinger acknowledges the distance between the Gospel presentations and the historical Jesus of Nazareth, and yet he also maintains that the Gospels present his authentic voice and person. While Ratzinger does not explicitly claim this, I suspect that the issue in his approach is not the process of Gospel composition or form criticism. Rather, for Ratzinger, the issue is epistemology and, in particular, the relationship between faith and historical reasoning.

As mentioned previously, Ratzinger holds to the Catholic axiom that faith is a genuine form of knowing.⁶² Ratzinger has discussed in other writings how the epistemological status of faith-knowledge became the subject of critique and rejection with the shift to modernity. The empiricist and scientific trend of the modern shift admits as legitimate only that knowledge which can be empirically verified.⁶³ Since it cannot be empirically verified, the knowledge of faith cannot be considered epistemically legitimate. Moral and religious matters become confined to the realm of individual subjectivity. The historical-critical method of biblical exegesis developed within this philosophical horizon. Critical historiography was taken to approximate the methods of the empirical sciences.⁶⁴ Assuming the premises of this epistemological system, critical historiography and historical-critical exegesis could produce knowledge that was scientifically verifiable and thus epistemologically acceptable.

Ratzinger argues that this quasi-scientific characterization of historical-critical work does not hold. Citing the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, Ratzinger remarks "our knowing never reflects only what is objective, but is always determined by the participation of the subject as well, by the perspective in which the questions are posed and by the capacity of perception."⁶⁵ Since all interpretation involves the perspective

Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation, by Luke Timothy Johnson and William S. Kurz, S.J. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 9–34.

⁶² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 2.

⁶³ Pope Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections," (September 12, 2006), available at www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_2006_0912_university-regensburg_en.html. As Kant himself writes in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, "the objective reality of these [metaphysical] concepts . . . and also the truth or falsity of metaphysical assertions cannot be discovered or confirmed by experience." Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. P. Carus and J. W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977), §40, p. 35.

⁶⁴ Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University." Cf. Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," 6.

⁶⁵ Ratzinger, "Relationship between Magisterium and Exegetes." Cf. Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," 6–7.

and location of the reader, to exclude things known by faith *a priori* is not an interpretive gain for the Christian reader. As Ratzinger puts it, "Faith itself is a way of knowing. Wanting to set it aside does not produce pure objectivity, but comprises a point of view which excludes a particular perspective."⁶⁶ Faith is a legitimate source of knowledge, and bracketing out this knowledge does not place the reader in a more hermeneutically desirable position for ascertaining the truth of things.

Faith, as a genuine form of knowledge, includes certain truth claims pertaining to specific persons and events in salvation history. Ratzinger brings the knowledge that he has from faith to bear on historical questions of Jesus and the Gospels. For Ratzinger, it is a fundamental component of faith that the Gospels truthfully present the reality of Jesus: "That Jesus—in all that is essential—was effectively who the Gospels reveal him to be to us is not mere historical conjecture, but a fact of faith."⁶⁷ This faith claim leads Ratzinger to read the Gospel presentations as being true and faithful to Jesus of Nazareth as he was.

However, the faith-knowledge that Ratzinger brings to his study is neither irrational nor incompatible with historical reasoning.⁶⁸ Often employing the work of other scholars, Ratzinger does take a stand on various historical issues, such as the authorship of the Fourth Gospel and the historical implausibility of the Liberal interpretation of Jesus as a teacher of individualized morality, on *historical grounds*. But his historical reasoning is shaped by his faith-knowledge. For Ratzinger, a fully informed study of Jesus includes the knowledge of things known by faith as well as the data which can be known by historical reasoning. In the words of J. A. DiNoia, "Since a complete account of the events narrated in the Gospels must include a reference to the divine agency and intentions at work in them, it is only in the light of faith that the events of Christ's life can be understood in their historical reality as such."⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ratzinger, "Relationship between Magisterium and Exegetes."

⁶⁷ Ibid. This is affirmed by the Second Vatican Council: "Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy maintained and continues to maintain, that the four Gospels just named, whose historicity she unhesitatingly affirms, faithfully hand on what Jesus, the Son of God, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up." *Dei Verbum* §19, cited from Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents—Volume 1*, new revised edition, 1992 (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1975–1992), 761.

⁶⁸ As Ratzinger states with respect to seeing the Testaments as a unity, centered on Christ, this belief "presupposes a prior act of faith. . . . But this act of faith is based upon reason—historical reason" (*Jesus of Nazareth*, xix).

⁶⁹ J. A. DiNoia, O.P., "Review of John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*," *Pro Ecclesia* 2 (1993): 122–25, quotation from 125.

A meta-issue throughout Ratzinger's handling of the Gospel material is the scope of rational discourse. For Ratzinger, the modern shift unduly limits the scope of reason by excluding God and theological knowledge. As he stated in his Regensburg Address, what is needed now is a "broadening [of] our concept of reason and its application. . . . We will succeed in doing so only if reason and faith come together in a new way, if we overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically verifiable, and if we once more disclose its vast horizons."⁷⁰ By incorporating the knowledge of faith into his historical and literary work, Ratzinger looks to expand the scope of rationality and thus defend the status of faith as a legitimate and rational mode of knowing. And so, Ratzinger couches biblical interpretation within an epistemology broader than that of positivist empiricism and Kantianism. Ratzinger does not want to reject the indisputable intellectual gains of modernity any more than he wants to reject historical-critical exegesis. However, Ratzinger sees both as being limited and requiring expansion. This requires the creation of the philosophical space for the transcendent action of God in the course of human events and the legitimate knowledge to be had about it.

Ratzinger's engagement with the "historical" Jesus reflects a profound Catholic commitment to the harmony of faith and reason, and in particular, historical reasoning. While faith and reason are distinct, they are not independent of each other as God is the one source of truth obtained by both. As is the case with philosophical reasoning, faith does not obscure historical reasoning but gives it direction and illumination. In the quest for the truth about Jesus, the knowledge of faith ought to be integrated with historical analysis and the interpretive process.

To summarize thus far, Ratzinger wants to start his study of Jesus from a historical-critical foundation, which takes seriously the historical, incarnate reality of Jesus. At the same time, Ratzinger goes beyond historical-critical analysis by reading within the Church community, including its faith and tradition. His interpretive stance is open to the transcendent intervention of God in the course of human events and enables a canonical, Christocentric reading of Scripture.

The combination of these elements constitutes Ratzinger's interpretive approach. Consequently, the best categorization for Ratzinger's *Jesus of Nazareth* is neither historical-critical exegesis nor a historical Jesus reconstruction. Rather, it is a work of *Christian theological exegesis*. As he himself remarks, "this book presupposes historical-critical exegesis and makes use of its findings, but it seeks to transcend this method and to

⁷⁰ Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University."

arrive at a genuinely theological interpretation of the scriptural texts."⁷¹ *Jesus of Nazareth* is Ratzinger's substantive attempt at the "new synthesis," a Christian, ecclesial hermeneutics.

Ratzinger's Theological Interpretation of Christ's Life

If *Jesus of Nazareth* is Ratzinger's theological interpretation of selected Gospel episodes, what can be said about the portrait of Jesus that emerges? I will focus on three aspects which are fundamental to his interpretation of Jesus.

Jesus' Place within the Context of Israel and Its Scripture

Of utmost importance for Ratzinger is the place of Jesus within the Scriptures and story of Israel. On numerous occasions, Ratzinger interprets Jesus' words and deeds by placing them within their Jewish context or in light of the Scriptures. He interprets Jesus' calling of the Twelve as a sign of the eschatological ingathering of the twelve tribes of Israel—the restored People of God.⁷² He discusses the apocalyptic context for the title "Son of Man" and argues that Jesus' use of the title in conjunction with his Kingdom preaching constitutes Jesus' own interpretation of Daniel 7.⁷³ Ratzinger also roots Jesus' Kingdom of God preaching within biblical and post-biblical trajectories concerning the manifestation of YHWH's sovereignty.⁷⁴ He reads the Sermon on the Mount and the debate over the Sabbath observance as Jesus' interpretation of Scripture.

Attention to Jesus' Jewishness and place within the history of Israel is important to Ratzinger for several reasons. First, Ratzinger thinks that this is a historically accurate claim: Jesus is best understood historically within his contemporary Jewish context. Throughout the book, Ratzinger carries on a multi-faceted argument against Harnack and the biblical exegesis of Liberal theology. A particular feature of this exegetical tradition, which Ratzinger disputes, is its construal of the relationship between Jesus and Judaism.⁷⁵ For Harnack and similar exegetes, Jesus' intentions and teaching run strongly against that of his Jewish contemporaries. According to this understanding, the Judaism of Jesus' day is the stereotypical *Spätjudentum*: a decrepit legalism, overly preoccupied with ritual and empty formalism.

⁷¹ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 365.

⁷² Ibid., 171.

⁷³ Ibid., 325–27.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 56–58.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 51, 106–7. The argument against Harnackian scholarship appears in much of Ratzinger's recent work. For instance, see Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. H. Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press,

Jesus rejects this religious thinking and teaches individualized morality over and against community identity and cultic practice. Jesus thus appears to anticipate post-Enlightenment, Liberal theology, which, after Kant, values morality as the principal contribution of religion. According to Ratzinger, interpreting Jesus as embedded within his Jewish context is more historically sound than the Harnackian/Liberal interpretation of Jesus as a teacher of individualized morality. As Ratzinger intimates, it is much more difficult to explain Jesus' crucifixion if his historical ministry consisted in teaching individualized ethics.⁷⁶

Second, the placement of Jesus in the context of Israel allows Ratzinger to interpret Jesus within the overarching divine plan of redemption. Ratzinger's theological interpretation of Jesus in light of Israel follows from his use of the canon as a hermeneutical principle. The canon leads Ratzinger to understand God's activity in Israel as part of a historical process of salvation, witnessed to by both Testaments, which leads up to and includes Jesus. Ratzinger argues that Jesus does bring something new and unique to the unfolding divine economy. Ratzinger discerns much of this in Jesus' interpretation of Torah in the antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:17–48) and the dispute over Sabbath observance.⁷⁷ Ratzinger sees in Jesus' interpretation an implied claim to divine authority to interpret Torah as he does. Jesus' authority and claim take precedence over that of Torah. Moreover, Jesus' teaching on certain parts of Torah, such as the loosening of Sabbath observance, enables these teachings to be moved from a specifically Jewish social context to a more universalized context. Within this context, "it is not the universally binding adherence to the Torah that forms the new family. Rather it is adherence to Jesus himself."⁷⁸

Ratzinger argues ardently that Jesus' activity should not be taken as deprecating or condemning what was present in Judaism. With respect to the antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount, Ratzinger states, Jesus "recapitulates and gives added depth to the commandments of the second tablet, but he does not abolish them."⁷⁹ Jesus' interpretation does depart from Jewish religious observance, but this newness should not be understood as

2003), 90–95; idem, preface to *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, available at www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html; Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University."

⁷⁶ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 186, 324.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 99–127.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 115.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 70. Elsewhere, Ratzinger says of Jesus' relationship with Israel: Jesus "was and remained a Jew; that is, he linked his message to the tradition of believing Israel. He did not abandon the Old Testament as something antiquated and now

a sharp disjunction with Israel and its Scripture. Indeed, Ratzinger roots Jesus' universalizing and radicalizing interpretation of Torah in Scripture itself and specifically the universal exhortation for Israel to be the light to the nations.⁸⁰ By interpreting Torah as he does, Jesus acts with divine authority to extend Israel's God to the Gentile nations. As Ratzinger puts it, Jesus builds "a renewed Israel, which does not exclude or revoke the old [Israel], but steps beyond it into the domain of universality."⁸¹

Ratzinger's insistence on the Jewish context for Jesus enables him to navigate between what he sees as two untenable theological poles.⁸² First, Ratzinger is anxious to resist Harnack's neo-Marcionism. A Harnackian interpretation interprets Jesus as sharply departing from his Jewish background and context. For Ratzinger, Jesus' Jewish context is not simply a background for Jesus to reject as it is for Harnack. Rather, it is an essential context for understanding Jesus and his work. Jesus cannot be understood apart from the history and Scriptures of Israel. Both Israel and Jesus are part of the same divine plan of salvation. While Ratzinger does not explicitly claim this, recognition of Jesus' Jewishness and place within the context of Israel also helps preserve the unity of the orders of creation and redemption, which are threatened by this Marcionite/Gnostic hermeneutic. Appreciation for Jesus' Jewishness also contributes to Ratzinger's valuation of historical reality against this Gnosticizing trend to read Scripture as expressing ahistorical, abstract truths. As a contemporary example of this trend, Ratzinger cites the tendency to interpret Scripture as not having a bearing on contemporary social realities.

The second theological possibility that Ratzinger wants to avoid is "a false legalism," which he identifies with political theology.⁸³ Ratzinger affirms that Jesus' teachings have undeniable and definite implications for ordering Christian living and social relations in the world. However, he is quite emphatic that Jesus' teachings should not be read as providing a detailed social program. He writes the following:

While the Torah presents a very definite social order, giving the people a juridical and social framework for war and peace, for just politics and

superseded. He lived in it and, in doing so, revealed his meaning: his message was the creative referral of tradition to its original foundation" (*Principles of Catholic Theology*, 95).

⁸⁰ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 21–23, 116–17.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 119–22.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 51–54; 121. Ratzinger does not name many specific examples of the political theologies, which he critiques. As a result, his critique on this point runs the risk of becoming something of a "straw man" argument.

for daily life, there is nothing like that to be found in Jesus' teaching. Discipleship of Jesus offers no politically concrete program for structuring society. The Sermon on the Mount cannot serve as a foundation for a state and a social order.⁸⁴

As mentioned previously, Ratzinger sees Jesus' loosing of Sabbath observance as a universalization, which moves certain elements of Torah from a specifically Jewish social context. Jesus' teaching (especially his Kingdom of God preaching) possesses a transcendent universality which resists identification with any earthly social order. Thus, in a very Augustinian way, Ratzinger insists, "No kingdom of this world is the kingdom of God, the total condition of mankind's salvation."⁸⁵ Ratzinger sees political theology as identifying the Gospel too closely with a specific political and social order. To make this move of political theology, according to Ratzinger, would be to bind the Gospel too closely to a specific social and political context and thus deprive the Gospel of its universality and transcendence. On his reading, Ratzinger sees political theology as a contemporary heir to the tendency in Galatians to move from the transcendent universality of the Gospel back to the social specificity of Torah observance. Another danger that Ratzinger detects in political theology is the potential it creates for the co-opting of Jesus' Kingdom of God teaching by political and social ideologies, which divest its specifically Christian content in the name of secular humanism. While Ratzinger does not name specific examples, he sees this de-Christianizing and secularizing interpretation of the Kingdom of God teaching in some post-Conciliar Catholic theology.⁸⁶

Another important implication of Jesus' Jewishness is Ratzinger's concern for the filial relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Ratzinger rejects the stereotype of *Spätjudentum* and strives to portray ancient Judaism in a very positive light. He insists that Jesus does not abolish Torah or the covenant with Israel. While Jesus' interpretations have a universalizing component, Ratzinger sees them as following upon certain trajectories in Scripture itself. Ratzinger's concern for Jewish-Christian relations appears quite clearly in his extended and honest dialogue with Jacob Neusner.⁸⁷ Ratzinger does not engage Neusner in order to rebut him. Rather, he holds Neusner up as a genuine dialogue

⁸⁴ Ibid., 114.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 43–44.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 53–54.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 103–22. See Neusner's response to Ratzinger in Jacob Neusner, "Renewing Religious Disputation in Quest of Theological Truth: In Dialogue with Benedict XVI's *Jesus of Nazareth*," *Communio* 34 (2007): 328–34.

partner, an example for the respectful, loving engagement with the other's religion while remaining committed to one's own. On several occasions, Ratzinger states that Christians can learn much from Jews and Jewish practices. He singles out the Jewish respect for Sabbath as modeling the respect Christians should have for the Lord's Day. He also calls attention to the importance of family/kinship relations, which the Sabbath socially reinforces for Jewish communities.⁸⁸ Christian recognition of Jesus' intrinsic Jewishness can provide substance continuing to foster positive Jewish-Christian relations, dialogue, and mutual respect.

A very significant text for Ratzinger's interpretation of Jesus is Deuteronomy 18:15, which speaks of the prophet-like-Moses whom God will raise up for Israel.⁸⁹ The expectation of a future prophet-like-Moses, Ratzinger contends, gave rise to later salvific hopes for a new Exodus and consequently a new Moses. According to Ratzinger, Moses' intimate relationship with God makes his roles as prophet and covenant mediator especially unique: "YHWH spoke to Moses face-to-face as a man spoke to his friend" (Exod 33:11; cf. Num 12:18; Deut 34:10). Moses' special relationship with God constitutes the foundation of his activity and prophetic ministry in particular. From the basis of his relationship with God, Moses communicates God's will for people's lives. The prophet-like-Moses would be like Moses in "his immediate relation with God, which enables him to communicate God's will and word firsthand and unadulterated."⁹⁰

Ratzinger states that while God spoke with Moses face-to-face, Moses was not permitted to see God directly as Exodus 33:18–23 suggests. For reasons not specified, Ratzinger claims that the prophet-like-Moses would not have the same limitations. The new prophet would have "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."⁹¹ Needless to say, Ratzinger identifies the prophet-like-Moses as Jesus. Significant is how Ratzinger frames the ministry of Jesus vis-à-vis Moses. With both figures, the foundation of their ministries is an intimate relationship with God. This leads to the second major aspect of Ratzinger's interpretation: the centrality of Jesus' *communio* with the Father.

⁸⁸ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 108–9, 121.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 1–8.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

Jesus' Communio with the Father

Ratzinger thinks that the key to understanding Jesus is his interior union with God the Father.⁹² Citing John 1:18, Ratzinger states that Jesus' direct and intimate relationship with the Father defines him in part as the prophet-like-Moses: "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."⁹³ Again and again, Ratzinger cites Jesus' interior relationship with the Father as the foundation of his mission and identity. Everything that Jesus says and does proceeds from this *communio* between the Father and the Son.⁹⁴

Ratzinger singles out Jesus' personal prayer as giving special insight into his filial relationship with God the Father.⁹⁵ He interprets Jesus' prayer as the intimate interaction of love between Jesus and the Father. Jesus' prayer reveals his own identity to be defined fundamentally by his relationship with the Father. Citing texts such as the Father-Son Q saying (Luke 10:21–22; Matt 11:25–27) and Jesus' priestly prayer in John 17, Ratzinger contends that Jesus' relationship with the Father is the basis for his title "Son." Jesus exists in this complete selfless relation with the Father. The same reciprocal relationality of *communio* defines God the Father as the Father of the Son. Therefore, when Jesus prays, he shows forth in his humanity the ongoing, personal exchange of love within the Trinity. Ratzinger writes, in his prayer, "Jesus' human consciousness and will, his human soul, is taken up into that exchange, and in this way human 'praying' is able to become a participation in this filial communion with the Father."⁹⁶ The interior relationship of Jesus and the Father, manifested in Jesus' human prayer, reveals the Trinitarian nature of God to be dynamic relationality of love between Persons.⁹⁷

Jesus seeks to incorporate humanity into his *communio* with the Father. Ratzinger interprets much of Jesus' teaching in light of this invitation for people to share in his *communio* with the Father. Given the importance

⁹² This conclusion appears in his other theological writings. It is brought out clearly in Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*, trans. G. Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 13–46.

⁹³ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 6.

⁹⁴ Ratzinger writes, "Jesus is only able to speak about the Father in the way he does because he is the Son, because of his filial communion with the Father" (*Jesus of Nazareth*, 7).

⁹⁵ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 7–8, 128–68, 170–71, 344. Cf. Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One*, 15–32.

⁹⁶ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 7.

⁹⁷ Ratzinger writes, "Jesus' prayer is different from the prayer of a creature: It is the dialogue of love within God himself—the dialogue that God is" (*Jesus of Nazareth*, 344; emphasis in the original).

Ratzinger sees in Jesus' own prayer, *communio* themes pervade his interpretation of the Lord's Prayer.⁹⁸ Ratzinger observes that in Luke, Jesus' prayer precedes his selection of the Twelve and his teaching of the Lord's Prayer. By teaching the disciples to pray, Jesus invites his disciples into his prayer and thus to share his own *communio* with the Father. Ratzinger writes, "Jesus thereby involves us in his own prayer; he leads us into the interior dialogue of triune love; he draws our human hardships deep into God's heart."⁹⁹ By entering into Jesus' prayer, disciples share in his filial relationship with the Father. This is what enables the disciples to address God as "Father" in the Lord's Prayer.

Contra Harnack, Ratzinger interprets the teaching of Jesus as having a strong communal dimension. Ratzinger reads the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3–12 as having both Christological and ecclesiological dimensions, a move evocative of the Augustinian doctrine of *totus Christus*.¹⁰⁰ Ratzinger observes that many of the virtues and characteristics in the Matthean version of the Beatitudes are applied elsewhere (in some manner) to Jesus.¹⁰¹ The Beatitudes can thus be read as speaking to attributes and characteristics of Jesus himself. The Beatitudes also articulate the way of life for Christ's disciples, living under God's sovereignty (that is, in the Kingdom of God). Since the Beatitudes reflect Christ himself, the life of discipleship appears as an ongoing process of being conformed to Jesus and thus being drawn more deeply into his filial relationship with God. By incorporating human beings into his filial relationship with the Father, Jesus incorporates them into God's family and establishes community among them.¹⁰² The visible structures and practices of Christian life embody this *communio* with Jesus, which is a sharing in his own *communio* with the Father. As Ratzinger succinctly puts it with respect to the Lord's Prayer, "Only within the 'we' of the disciples can we call God 'Father', because only through communion with Jesus Christ do we truly become 'children of God'."¹⁰³ By taking Jesus' filial relationship with the Father as his starting point, Ratzinger systematically integrates Trinitarianism, Christology, and ecclesiology all around the category *communio*.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 128–68.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 132; cf. 138.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 74. On *totus Christus* in Augustine, see Michael Fiedrowicz, general introduction to *Expositions of the Psalms* 1–32, by Augustine, trans. M. Boulding, O.S.B., Works of St. Augustine 3.15, ed. J. E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2000), 43–60.

¹⁰¹ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 74.

¹⁰² Ibid., 115–17.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 140–41.

An important theological consequence of attaching such foundational significance to Jesus' *communio* is the grounding of Christology in Jesus himself. The importance of this point for Ratzinger comes to light when contrasted with the Harnackian/Liberal portrayal of Jesus. For Ratzinger, if the Harnackian/Liberal interpretation of Jesus as a teacher of individualized morality is correct, then the early Church's faith-filled presentation of him in the New Testament is not true and faithful to Jesus as a historical individual. The Harnackian interpretation not only makes a distinction between the "Jesus of history" and "Christ of faith," but it posits a very wide gap between them. The "Christ of faith" has little to do with Jesus himself, and it originates in the creative and liturgical life of early Christian communities—a major tenet of form criticism. Contrary to this point of view, Ratzinger approaches the Gospels with Catholic faith as a hermeneutical key, which leads him to affirm the basic trustworthiness of the Gospel accounts. On historical grounds, Ratzinger argues that it makes good sense to understand Jesus as a significant figure, who had a powerful impact on his contemporaries beyond that of a moral teacher.¹⁰⁴ Appreciation for the powerful impact of Jesus on his contemporaries helps explain his crucifixion by the Romans and the early Church's preservation and interpretation of his words and deeds.

Ratzinger's interpretive decision about Jesus' *communio* influences his conclusions about the role of early Christian communities and tradition in shaping the Gospels. For instance, Ratzinger argues that while the presentation of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel has been shaped by the Paraclete and took shape within an early Church context, it remains historically grounded in the eyewitness testimony of the Beloved Disciple. The eyewitness testimony of the Fourth Evangelist is crucial for Ratzinger because it anchors John's theological interpretation in the historical reality of Jesus rather than in the creative impulse of his community. When examining the "Son of Man" sayings, Ratzinger reports a trend to divide Son of Man sayings into three different categories, all of which have a different originating *Sitz im Leben*.¹⁰⁵ For Ratzinger, this construal runs the risk of artificial distinctions and does not account for the powerful impact of Jesus himself. Ratzinger follows with his own position: "[T]he greatness, the dramatic newness, comes directly from Jesus; within the faith and life of the community it is further developed, but not created. In fact, the 'community' would not even have emerged and survived at all unless some extraordinary reality had preceded it."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 324.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 322–25.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 324.

Ratzinger readily acknowledges the role of early Christian communities in shaping and interpreting Jesus material. But he denies the creative power of the early Christian communities to invent a historically disconnected portrait of Jesus. According to Ratzinger, this is neither appropriate to the tenets of Christian faith nor does it make good historical sense. For Ratzinger, the evangelists and the early Church communities develop and interpret something that in some form was already present. The Gospel presentations of Jesus do not originate in the fabricating activity of early Christian communities, but in Jesus' *communio* with God the Father.

The Personal Relationship with Jesus

While much will be said about its theological merits, Ratzinger's *Jesus of Nazareth* is fundamentally a pastoral and spiritual exercise. At the close of his foreword, Ratzinger explicitly states his purpose in writing: "[I]t struck me 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."¹⁰⁷ The primary goal of Ratzinger's *Jesus of Nazareth* is for its readers to cultivate and deepen a personal relationship with Jesus. All the intellectual energy and argumentation throughout the book ultimately serve this pastoral and spiritual end.

On several occasions, Ratzinger presents the voice of Jesus in the Gospels as speaking to the present reader through the text. When discussing the calling of the Twelve by name, Ratzinger remarks, "God knows *us* by name and he calls *us* by name."¹⁰⁸ The contemporary voice of Jesus sounds throughout Ratzinger's interpretation of the three Lukan parables. In his interpretation of the shepherd in John 10, Ratzinger states, "In his Incarnation and Cross he brings home the stray sheep, humanity; he brings me home too."¹⁰⁹ Ratzinger also brings the voice of Jesus to bear on various contemporary situations. He interprets the Parable of the Good Samaritan in light of the situation in many African nations which are beset by poverty and violence like the robbed and wounded traveler in the parable.¹¹⁰ On several occasions, Ratzinger moves from the exposition of various Gospel episodes to an examination of conscience based on the teachings contained in them.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., xxiv.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 177; emphasis added.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 286.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 198–99; cf. 33–34.

¹¹¹ For example, Ratzinger does this in the course of his analysis of Jesus' temptations (*Jesus of Nazareth*, 25–45) and in his treatment of the "Hallowed be thy name" statement in the Lord's Prayer (ibid., 144–45).

In stressing the personal relationship and present significance of Jesus, Ratzinger reads the biblical text as the Word of God, which can speak powerfully and meaningfully to people in the present. While the Bible can be studied as a historical artifact quite profitably, it must be received within the ecclesial context of faith for God's Word to sound through it. The light of faith allows Ratzinger to discern things about Jesus which transcend the scope of historical reasoning. For instance, when discussing the origin of the Lord's Prayer in Jesus' *communio*, Ratzinger states that the Lord's Prayer "embraces the whole compass of man's being in all ages and can therefore never be fully fathomed by a purely historical exegesis, however important this may be."¹¹²

Even more important for Ratzinger is his belief that Jesus is not only a figure of the past. Ratzinger does not read the Gospels as if they were narrating the life and teaching of someone who only lived and died in the first century. Rather, he reads the Gospels with the strong conviction that Jesus is very much alive, present, and relevant to the world today. Jesus, who lived in the first century and lives today, can truly be encountered through the reading of Scripture and his voice can be heard through it. By encountering Jesus through the pages of Scripture, one can consequently grow in a personal relationship with him. The premise underwrites and shapes Ratzinger's entire project.

Ratzinger's concern for building cultivating personal relationships with Jesus also informs his arguments against rival theological positions. From a pastoral point of view, Ratzinger criticizes Harnackian/Liberal scholarship on Jesus because of the damage it can do to people's faith. In his introduction, Ratzinger observes that the confusion created by much historical Jesus research has threatened the possibility of any knowledge and thus relationship with Jesus. As Ratzinger puts it, "Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air."¹¹³ One of the more telling examples that Ratzinger cites in this regard is Vladimir Soloviev's portrayal of the Antichrist as a distinguished historical-critical exegete from Tübingen.¹¹⁴ Ratzinger cites this example to illustrate a deep Christian uneasiness with this brand of Liberal exegesis, which can be detrimental to faith.

Ratzinger also takes a passing swipe at the ways in which biblical scholarship can mute the transformative power of Scripture. In his exposition of the first Matthean Beatitude, Ratzinger cites St. Francis of Assisi

¹¹² Ibid., 133; cf. 78.

¹¹³ Ibid., xii.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 35–36. Ratzinger also opens his Erasmus Lecture with the same example from Soloviev; cf. Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," 1.

as an example of a performed exegesis. Francis' embrace of spiritual (and material) poverty illustrates the power of God's Word to shape lives in very radical ways for holiness. He briefly contrasts Francis' non-academic, practical interpretation with the character of much academic biblical scholarship. Ratzinger comments, Francis "simply wanted to gather the People of God to listen anew to the word—without evading the seriousness of God's call by means of learned commentaries."¹¹⁵

The contemporary presence and relevance of Jesus also contributes to Ratzinger's response to contemporary, atheistic secularism, which excludes any consideration of God and religion from the public arena. Ratzinger had cited the exclusion of the transcendent and the restriction of knowledge to empirically verifiable history as exegetical consequences of Kantian epistemology. Seemingly for Ratzinger, contemporary atheistic secularism is a working-out of the basic epistemological and metaphysical structures of Kantianism on a social level.¹¹⁶ Some of Ratzinger's strongest criticism of contemporary secularism appears in his treatment of the parables. In Ratzinger's interpretation of the Parable of the Tenants, when he attends to the tenants' willful disregard for the vineyard's owner, Ratzinger writes, "Isn't this precisely the logic of the modern age, of our age? Let us declare that God is dead, then we ourselves will be God."¹¹⁷ Similarly, he interprets the libertinism of the prodigal son as exemplifying the contemporary definition of freedom as radical autonomy.¹¹⁸ According to Ratzinger, this understanding of freedom as radical autonomy is both self-alienating and self-destructive. As in the parable, Ratzinger prescribes the return to God as the remedy for a modern humanity, which has become alienated from itself by forgetting God. By returning to God, Ratzinger argues, human beings will rediscover the truth about themselves as beloved creatures invited to participate in the divine Trinitarian *communio* through a personal relationship with Jesus of Nazareth.

¹¹⁵ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 79.

¹¹⁶ While he focuses on Hobbes and Spinoza, John Milbank likewise discerns a relationship between the development of historical-critical exegesis and the development of the modern secular sphere. See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), 12–20.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 257. Elsewhere, Ratzinger interprets the serpent's temptation in Genesis 3 in terms of the creature's desire to be the creator. See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "In the Beginning . . .": *A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, trans. B. Ramsey, O.P. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1985), 75–95, esp. 84–89.

¹¹⁸ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 204–5.

Concluding Observations

Ratzinger's *Jesus of Nazareth* is still a work in progress. On the basis of what he has published in the first volume, I wish to comment briefly on three aspects of *Jesus of Nazareth* which ought to generate further theological discussion. The first point concerns the association that Ratzinger makes between the historical-critical method and the Incarnation. Ratzinger argues that the historical-critical method is "indispensable" for Christian exegesis because of the historical reality of the Incarnation.¹¹⁹ God has acted in the course of specific historical events and therefore historical-critical exegesis is required to grasp that divine activity. Also informing this claim is the notion that historical-critical exegesis, by virtue of its concern for history and compositional origins, can defend against a Gnostic exegesis, which reads the biblical texts as relating ahistorical, speculative truths.

However, the claim that the Incarnation requires a specific set of exegetical procedures warrants further scrutiny.¹²⁰ The issue in question requires further categorical precision. Ratzinger never defines what he exactly means by the "historical-critical method" in either the Erasmus Lecture or *Jesus of Nazareth*. He treats the "historical-critical method" as a unity, whereas it more appropriately designates several exegetical procedures.¹²¹ Furthermore, Ratzinger sometimes uses "the historical-critical method" interchangeably with "the historical method." Ratzinger does not define the latter category either, but he seemingly understands it as a synonym for the former.

For present purposes, I will define "the historical-critical method" as the combination of text, source, form, and redaction criticisms.¹²² What remains unclear is why the historical reality of the Incarnation *necessarily* requires the use of *these specific interpretive procedures* such that without them Christian exegesis becomes defective. Text, source, form, and redaction crit-

¹¹⁹ Ibid., xv. This claim is likewise made in the 1993 Pontifical Biblical Commission document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1993), 35.

¹²⁰ I am indebted to a similar argument in Lewis Ayres and Stephen E. Fowl, "(Mis)reading the Face of God: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*," *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 513–23. See also A. K. M. Adam, "Docetism, Käsemann, and Christology: Why Historical Criticism Can't Protect Christological Orthodoxy," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996): 391–410.

¹²¹ So too Ayres and Fowl, "(Mis)reading the Face of God," 516 n.10.

¹²² The 1993 Pontifical Biblical Commission document *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* describes "the historical-critical method" in terms of procedural steps. One can infer from its discussion that it is comprised primarily of text, source, form, and redaction criticism. See *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 39–40; cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *Scripture, The Soul of Theology* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1994), 19–24.

icisms are, after all, principally methods for *textual analysis*, not for doing history. Christian faith believes that God has revealed himself in the course of human events, which are historically and culturally located. Historical exegesis rightly treats the biblical books as products of ancient contexts. In doing so, this kind of analysis is helpful for elucidating the sense of biblical writings within those historical and cultural contexts of origin. This is the role assigned to historical study of the Bible in *Dei Verbum* §12.

However, there is a distinction between studying the communicative claim of biblical texts as ancient compositions and affirming the reality of God's activity in the course of human events.¹²³ Theologically, the former may presuppose the latter. Historical-critical exegesis can analyze texts and hypothesize about pre-textual composition processes, but it cannot provide much by way of certain historical knowledge about the reality of textual referents (a claim that Ratzinger himself makes).¹²⁴ The variety of historical Jesus reconstructions and the widely divergent appraisals of the historical worth of Old Testament narratives attest to this. Historical knowledge and genre considerations have a strong and invaluable bearing on discerning the kind of truth claim made by a text. But questions about textual reference, the signifying function of written words, and how readers access the things presented by words are philosophical ones and need to be addressed at the "meta-level."¹²⁵

The Christian claim that God has acted and revealed himself in the course of human events does require that the historical realism of those

¹²³ Cf. Johnson, "What's Catholic about Catholic Biblical Scholarship?" 17–19.

¹²⁴ Alvin Plantinga highlights the hypothetical character of much historical-critical analysis and its weak argumentative force in his "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *"Behind" the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. C. Bartholomew, C. S. Evans, M. Healy, and M. Rae; Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 19–57; reprinted from *Modern Theology* 14 (1998): 243–77.

¹²⁵ While space prohibits further discussion, I suggest Robert Sokolowski's phenomenological analysis of words and things as a helpful resource for thinking about these questions. See Robert Sokolowski, *Presence and Absence: A Philosophical Investigation of Language and Being* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 99–115; idem, *Pictures, Quotations, and Distinctions: Fourteen Essays in Phenomenology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 187–209, 213–25; idem, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 77–87, 108–11, 157–59. Sokolowski has brought his analysis to bear on biblical exegesis in his theological writings. See Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 119–32; idem, *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 138–58. For a secondary discussion, see Wright, "Theology of Disclosure and Biblical Exegesis," 396–404.

events, such as the Incarnation, be affirmed and taken seriously. But I do not see why text, source, form, and redaction criticisms are the necessary or preferred way for doing this. Ratzinger is clearly aware that historical-critical exegesis is not a philosophically and theologically neutral method. He points out many of its methodological shortcomings, and his constructive modifications aim at refitting the method for a theologically robust Christian hermeneutic. Perhaps further consideration is due to alternative ways of taking seriously the historical reality of the Incarnation. For example, one may consider the critical realism proposed by N. T. Wright's historical Jesus work, which does not make far reaching use of conventional historical-critical methods.¹²⁶ Also, As Ayres and Fowl have indicated, the premodern Christian exegetical tradition provides many examples of interpreters who staunchly affirmed the humanity of the Incarnate Word but without the rationale or methods employed by later modern exegetes.¹²⁷

In light of these alternatives, a more spacious category, like "historical method," may be more appropriate for the argument that Ratzinger wants to make about historical realism.¹²⁸ This category creates the space for affirming the integrity of historical realities and the historical contexts of biblical compositions while not unduly locking Christian exegesis into a foundation of text, source, form, and redaction criticism.

A second area for further consideration is Ratzinger's use of faith-knowledge as a legitimate epistemological resource for exegesis. This may very well prove to be the most controversial (but also the most fruitful) component of Ratzinger's project. For Ratzinger, the structures of Christian faith require that it make truth claims regarding specific historical and material realities. To deny this capacity to Christian faith would be a Gnostic move, for "this opinion [that is, Gnosis] disembodies the faith and reduces it to pure idea."¹²⁹ Ratzinger's appropriation of faith-knowledge

¹²⁶ See N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 3–144. However, Wright's historical method of critical realism is itself not above critique. For a trenchant critique of Wright's historical method, see Luke Timothy Johnson, "A Historiographical Response to Wright's Jesus," in *Jesus & the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's "Jesus and the Victory of God,"* ed. C. C. Newman (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 206–24.

¹²⁷ Ayres and Fowl, "(Mis)reading the Face of God," 521–27. If one were to press the issue, admission of historical-critical exegesis as the necessary, *sine qua non*, starting point for Christian exegesis would implicitly render the entire Christian exegetical tradition (prior to the historical-critical method) as incarnationally inadequate.

¹²⁸ See the slight different take in Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 7–10.

¹²⁹ Ratzinger, "Relationship between Magisterium and Exegetes."

as an interpretive resource must be seen within his larger argument about the scope of human rationality and the undue restrictions placed on it in modernity. According to Ratzinger, faith-knowledge and accurate historical reasoning, while distinct, are nevertheless fundamentally compatible. In some ways, Ratzinger can be read as applying to the domain of historical reasoning what Aquinas prescribed as the relationship between *sacra doctrina* and other *scientiae*.¹³⁰

Ratzinger's use of faith-knowledge to shape historical reasoning immediately raises the question of disciplinary boundaries. Ratzinger seems well aware of this point. In a 2003 address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, he cites the example of Galileo and the early twentieth century statements of the Pontifical Biblical Commission as instances which prompted the rethinking of the nature of faith claims about particular historical and material matters.¹³¹ In the same address, Ratzinger envisions the relationship between historical reasoning and faith-knowledge as somewhat dialectical, with the tension between them perhaps never being completely resolved. Ratzinger wants to provide historical reasoning with a space to operate under its own principles, but he does not want to exclude the things known by faith from the reasoning process.¹³² Ratzinger's incorporation of faith-knowledge as an epistemological resource should prompt Christian biblical interpreters, especially those within an ecclesial context, to consider carefully the relationship of faith and reason in interpretation.

A third point for future consideration deals with the relationship between theological studies and exegesis. In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Ratzinger has provided a model of a possible future direction for the theological enterprise. With virtually every academic discipline (including theology) becoming hyper-specialized, Ratzinger's program is a substantive effort at reintegrating different theological disciplines. The integrative character of

¹³⁰ Aquinas affirms the capacity of *sacra doctrina* to judge the truth claims of other *scientiae*: "[T]he knowledge proper to this science [*sacra doctrina*] comes through revelation, and not through natural reason. Therefore it has no concern to prove the principles of the other sciences, but only to judge them. Whatsoever is found in other sciences contrary to any truth of this science, must be condemned as false." *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 2; cited from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 3 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947–1948), 1:4.

¹³¹ Ratzinger, "Relationship between Magisterium and Exegetes."

¹³² Similar to Gilson and the issue of a "Christian philosophy," the question arises as to what is the appropriate categorization for historical reasoning done in light of Christian faith. Does history cease to be history if it incorporates things known by revelation? I owe this observation to a conversation with Bogdan Bucur.

Ratzinger's program points both biblical scholars and theologians to the sometimes dangerous practice of interdisciplinary work. There is always a risk of dilettantism when one crosses boundaries into intellectual areas in which one is not a trained specialist. But if theology is to be practiced as a holistic discipline and is to avoid further fragmentation into a state of virtual incoherence, its practitioners must be willing to cross disciplinary boundaries.¹³³

Jesus of Nazareth is an integration of philosophical thinking, attention to the Tradition's authorities, liturgical practice, ecclesial identity, moral living, and spirituality, all of which are centered on a reading of Scripture. Moreover, this theological interpretation aims at the continuing transformation of human beings through a contemplative exploration of the mystery of God. In this way, Ratzinger has articulated a veritable neo-Patristic vision of theology, which speaks to contemporary situations without nostalgic retreat. It is a genuine exercise in *ressourcement* theology.

In light of these points, I do not think that Ratzinger wrote this book primarily for an academic audience. While he does touch on some academic matters (such as the history of exegesis), Ratzinger does not engage in extensive theological debate with other scholars in this book. There are no footnotes, nor much technical discussion, a noticeable departure from his other theological writings. Rather, the implied reader of the book seems to be any reader who desires to foster a relationship with Christ. Ratzinger's *Jesus of Nazareth* does have implications for scholarship, but its most important contribution will lie in transformed lives of its readers. Given his stated intentions and purpose in writing this book, the real measure of success for Ratzinger's project will not be determined by scholarly peers as much as by the ordinary readers, who grow in their relationships with Christ as a result of sharing in Ratzinger's search for the face of the Lord.

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¹³³ As another example of positive strides being made at integrating theology and exegesis, one may cite the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible Series, edited by R. R. Reno et al., which features biblical commentary written by theologians.