

Tradition and the Individual Exegete

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IN HIS FAMOUS ERASMUS LECTURE, Joseph Ratzinger opposes an understanding of biblical studies that he attributes largely to the influence of Immanuel Kant.¹ This view sees tradition as antithetical to reason, which must proceed on objective lines without the influence of faith or any other personal commitment. Kant lays out his position with unusual force in his essay “What Is Enlightenment?”: “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another.”² The individual must think on his own, because tradition and the individual’s reason are absolutely opposed; any submission to tradition or authority is contrary to reason and to the dignity of the human person. But in the conclusion of his lecture, Ratzinger urges that reason and faith are not contrary to one another:

the exegete must recognize that he does not stand on neutral ground above or outside history and the Church. Such a sup-

¹ See Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *God’s Word: Scripture—Tradition—Office*, ed. Peter Hünermann and Thomas Söding, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 112: “The real philosophical presupposition of the whole system seems to me to lie in the change in philosophy brought about by Kant.”

² This famous essay is well worth reading to grasp how Kant’s “enlightenment” requires a kind of individualism. There are many translations on the Internet; the version I have cited is available at <http://theliterarylink.com/kant.html>.

posed direct apprehension of the purely historical can only lead to mistaken conclusions. . . . [Exegesis] must recognize . . . faith as a hermeneutic key, as a locus of understanding that does not do dogmatic violence to the Bible, but offers the only chance we have of allowing it to be itself.³

At the same time, Ratzinger concedes the need for objectivity in exegesis. For example, because the Fathers and the medievals did not habitually refer texts to their historical setting, he argues, their interpretation “easily fell into arbitrariness.”⁴ So on the one hand, the exegete must avoid false claims to objectivity; on the other hand, he must not give way to arbitrariness; between these extremes stands the individual exegete in the stream of Tradition.

In what follows, I want to explore this problem of how the individual exegete relates to tradition in dialogue with Ratzinger’s writings. There would not be enough space even to repeat all the marvelous things Ratzinger says toward a solution of the difficulty, much less to solve the problem definitively, so I will focus on offering two basic intuitions or mental orientations, one regarding Tradition and the other regarding Scripture.

Tradition

The first basic mental orientation I would like to offer is what Ratzinger argues in his essay, “The Anthropological Foundation of the Concept of Tradition,” namely, that “tradition . . . is constitutive of a humanity that is truly human, of the *humanitas hominis*.”⁵ That is to say, tradition is not opposed to human dignity, but is called for by it. The reason man is by nature tradition dependent is that “it is not good that man should be alone” (Gn 2:18): God made the human race to live in families, and families to live in societies. For man and woman to be together is good; for parents and children to be together is good; for man to live in society

³ Ratzinger, *God’s Word*, 125–26.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Sr. Mary Frances McCarthy, S.N.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 85–100, at 87.

is good. Just as God created hunger and thirst so we would pursue the goods of food and drink, so he has made man and woman each lacking, and parents and children each needy in their own way, and the different members of society dependent on one another, precisely to drive them to pursue their good. And just as man's bodily needs for food, clothing, and shelter cannot be conveniently met without the good of life together, so man's more important needs—the needs of the mind—cannot be met without intellectual society. It is good for man as man to have tradition, that collective intellectual wealth of a society that holds it together and gives it identity and continuity.

The faculty of speech encapsulates this close relation between reason and tradition. Human beings who never learn to speak are never capable of reasoning, either; speech brings with it the inner life of the mind. And yet speech is learned for the sake of communication and has as its proper goal the creation of society. So the inner life of the individual emerges on the way, so to speak, to society; the two are inherently related. Moreover, the language one learns is a patrimony of the ages, shaped by great authors of ages past and by countless unknown men and women who left their way of perceiving the world—their inner mental life—embodied in the speech they passed on to their children.

The Kantian view sees reason and tradition as inherently opposed, so that complete intellectual independence is man's true good while dependence on tradition is a necessary evil forced on him by the brevity of life. But the biblical view of man says just the opposite: to be in a tradition is good for man, and to break with tradition is sometimes a necessary result of evil. Of course, no society is perfect and many societies are evil—fathers are abusive, mothers manipulative, families dysfunctional—and as society goes, so goes tradition. As Ratzinger puts it, "Tradition, which is by nature the foundation of man's humanness, is everywhere mingled with those things that deprive him of his humanity."⁶ Sometimes it is even necessary to break family ties completely and abandon the old traditions; but the point is that to break with tradition, however necessary, is not a good in itself but an unfortunate result of evil.

There is something to be said for Kant's position: It would in fact be better to know independently of tradition, inasmuch as God's way

⁶ Ibid., 89.

of knowing is better than man's way of knowing. The problem with the Enlightenment view is that it understands independent rationality as a simple negation, namely rationality without tradition. To take a parallel case, to be immobile rather than mobile is better, in the way that God is immobile, but one must think of immobility positively, as a description of pure act; simply to be immobile, as a pure negation—to be frozen—would be an evil. It is better to be pure act than to be mobile, but it is better to be mobile than to be simply immobile.

The force of this comparison lies in the fact that truth is a common good. As such, the nature of truth is most clearly seen when it is possessed by many in common, that is, when a society forms around it. When Kant declares that we must discover things by our own reason, he means that we must grasp truth as an individual rather than as a member of a society: truth must be my private good. His traditionlessness is a simple negation rather than a positive essence. While it is true that to be God is better than to be man, and so to *be* the common good is better than to *participate* in the common good, it is equally true that to *participate* in the common good is better than *not* to participate in it. It is better to be Truth than to participate in a tradition, but it is better to participate in a tradition than to be a human intellectual island cut off from the mainland. It is not good for man to be alone; it is not good for man to think alone.⁷

This is the first basic mental orientation I would like to offer: Tradition is good for man as man. A corollary follows from it: Since every society by nature has its tradition, by which it hands on its innermost life to the next generation, and since grace does not destroy nature but elevates it, the Church must also have a tradition. But she must have a tradition commensurate with what she is: Since she is a supernatural society, the mystical body of Christ, she must have a supernatural Tradition by which she hands on to the next generation the very mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16); since she is an eternal society, she must have an incorruptible Tradition; since her members are bound to one another by the Holy Spirit as though by a single soul, her Tradition must be guided

⁷ Even the angels, St. Thomas argues, are taught by and teach one another. To be entirely self-sufficient in knowledge is proper to God alone, because he alone is himself Truth.

and developed by the Spirit. Here at last, in the Tradition founded by Truth itself, mankind finds a tradition one need never abandon, a society one need never leave. Outgrowths may need trimming, and human elements purged, but the necessity of a break with Tradition, inevitable in merely human contexts, will never arise here.

Canon

The second basic intuition I would like to offer has to do with the canon of Scripture: Because tradition is natural to man, a literary canon is also in a way natural to man. If every human society is held together by a common intellectual patrimony, and if this tradition is naturally expressed in language, it follows that when a society begins to write down its language, then it creates a set of texts that embody and transmit the tradition; and this is what I mean by a canon. This second basic intuition is borne out in the most ancient literate cultures, which used a set of normative texts not as ends in themselves, as though the production of texts were good in itself, but as instruments for inscribing their traditions word for word on the minds of the next generation.⁸

The Enlightenment view of humanity has obscured how natural and inevitable such a canon is. Because this view urges each individual to cut himself off from tradition and to reason everything out for himself, it disparages memorization as a slavish task. On this view, true freedom lies not in memory but in imagination, in the ability to create our own world free from every other man and even from nature; since the text is another man's creation, to memorize it is to submit oneself to another man's private good, which is servile.⁹ But in antiquity, to memorize the text was to participate in the common good, in the tradition, and so to become a full member of society. The ancestors are, literally, our *antecessores*, the ones who have gone before us, and by following them we enter into our inheritance and make it our own with them.¹⁰

⁸ David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8.

⁹ See the fascinating analysis by Mary J. Carruthers in *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), esp. 1–13.

¹⁰ Cf. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet*, 11: "Indeed, that past is never 'past' in the way we

In this traditional mindset, reading the text might be compared to living in the old family mansion: It is not a museum, with everything cordoned off, immovable and untouchable, but one's own family house, so one has to move in and live in it, which might require moving the couch; on the other hand, it is a family possession, not simply one's private thing, so one would not bulldoze it and build a new structure. Similarly, the ancient scribes felt free even to modify a text for new circumstances, but did not see themselves as fundamentally altering the thing.¹¹ When the scribe composed his own work and quoted the normative texts, he did so from memory and rather inexactly; this was not at all from lack of respect for the text, but because the text had moved beyond being an external object of thought to become an interior medium in which he thought, communicated, and expressed himself.¹² But even while he expressed his own thoughts through the medium of the canon, he knew that his writing did not have its meaning alone, but only in relation to the *antecessores*, the scribes and sages before him: Just as their work was not theirs individually but common and therefore his, so his work was not his individually but a common possession. T. S. Eliot described the poet and his work within a literary tradition this way: "What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."¹³

At this point it may be helpful to review what has been said. So far, I have followed a single thread across two basic mental orientations: Because man as a rational creature shares in a common good, he is by nature social; as a result, human reason is by nature dependent on society's communal intellectual wealth, which is tradition. This was my first conclusion, and from it I drew the corollary that the Church, a supernatural society, will necessarily have a supernatural Tradition. Because human

might conceive it but stands in the ancient world as a potentially realizable 'present' to which each generation seeks to return."

¹¹ See *ibid.*, 41.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36: "He was not 'exegeting' or 'citing' older works in the way a later biblical interpreter might do. Rather the scribe was trained from the outset to think by means of blocks of tradition and express himself through those tools."

¹³ T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *The Egoist* 6, no. 4 (September 1919): 54–55, at 55. The second part of the essay appeared in *The Egoist* 6, no. 5 (December 1919): 72–73.

reason is by nature dependent on tradition, a literate society naturally creates a canon, namely a set of writings that embody and transmit the tradition; and because a canon is the means of passing on a society's innermost life, the life of the mind, it also serves as a medium for that life as members of the society think via the canon, speak via the canon, and interpret the world via the canon. This was my second conclusion.

A corollary also follows from this second conclusion: Just as the Church needs a Tradition commensurate with what she is, so she needs a Canon commensurate with herself and her Tradition. Scripture is the supernatural Canon of the supernatural society, by which the mystical body of Christ passes on her inner life to the next generation, and a medium in which she lives that inner life of thought and speech. Ratzinger captures the point when he says that

Scripture is not a meteorite fallen from the sky, so that it would, with the strict otherness of a stone that comes from the sky and not from the earth, stand in contrast to all human words. Certainly, Scripture carries God's thoughts within it: that makes it unique and constitutes it an "authority." Yet it is transmitted by a human history. It carries within it the life and thought of a historical society that we call the "People of God," because they are brought together, and held together, by the coming of the divine Word. There is a reciprocal relationship: This society is the essential condition for the origin and growth of the biblical Word; and, conversely, this Word gives the society its identity and its continuity. Thus, the analysis of the structure of the biblical Word has brought to light an interwoven relationship between Church and Bible, between the People of God and the Word of God, which we had actually always known, somehow, in a theoretical way but had never before had so vividly set before us.¹⁴

It would be misleading to suggest that Scripture is the extent of the Church's literary canon. Just as she has both traditions with a small "t" and Tradition with a big "T," so she has both a literary canon with a small

¹⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, "What in Fact Is Theology?" in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 33.

“c” and a literary Canon with a big “C,” so to speak, and this distinction between “big letter” and “small letter” is true of Tradition and Canon for the same reason. The same dynamic that led to Tradition and to the embodiment of tradition in the Canon leads to new traditions and writings; the newer, lesser traditions are inspired by and, so to speak, ensouled by the Tradition itself, and in the same way the newer, lesser writings draw life from Scripture, interpreting it and receiving their meaning from it simultaneously. One thinks not only of the Church’s magisterium and the writings of the Fathers and Doctors, but of Dante and Shakespeare and the whole constellation of authors whose works have formed the culture of the Church. Scripture, as the Canon at the heart of the canon, not only has the power to inspire and sustain these new works but even draws into its ambit the writings of Homer, Plato, and Aristotle, just as the Catholic faith took over the insights of pagan antiquity. The process of tradition, writing, and re-reading that gave birth to Scripture itself continues with Scripture and Tradition as its life principle.

Exegesis

The basic intuitions I have shared concerning Tradition and Scripture orient exegesis in a fundamental way. To begin with, it makes no sense to set Scripture and Tradition in opposition, or Scripture and Church, because Scripture contains Tradition in its very notion, and Tradition is defined in terms of the Church. Moreover, it makes no sense to pit faith against biblical exegesis, because Scripture’s very essence is to be an instrument by which the Church passes on her inner life, which is a life of faith, and so any reading of Scripture that does not build up this faith is a bad one. Faith offers the only chance the exegete has of allowing Scripture to be itself.¹⁵

To complete this thought, we have to see that, as Ratzinger says, “for the New Testament faith means the same as the indwelling of Christ” (Eph 3:17).¹⁶ As the mystical body of Christ, the Church’s inner life of faith is nothing other than to have Christ dwelling in her, to be Christ’s presence in the world. If Scripture is the mirror in which the Church

¹⁵ This point looks back again to Ratzinger, *God’s Word*, 125–26.

¹⁶ Ratzinger, “The Question of the Concept of Tradition: A Provisional Response,” in *God’s Word*, 56–57.

sees herself and learns to be herself, a guide rail for the process of handing on her inner life, then Scripture also must in some sense be Christ, the very Word of God. It is a more remote sense, of course. Like every book, Scripture sits lifeless on the printed page, an assembly of inkblots, until the reader “reconstitutes” those blots into living words in a human heart. But there, in that hidden place where Scripture truly exists, not as lifeless blots but as actual words, Christ is formed; this formation of Christ in the heart is Tradition; and this Tradition constitutes the Church.

In this way we avoid a false objectivity, but how do we simultaneously steer away from the other extreme of arbitrariness? This is a difficult question, because Scripture’s role as Canon leads not only to “exegesis,” a reception from the text, but also to “eisegesis,” a reading into the text. While the Fathers and medievals often scandalize modern readers by their seemingly whimsical interpretation of even the smallest details of the biblical text, we have to recall that the monk’s practice of “chewing” the text by *lectio divina*, “ruminating” by meditation, and “digesting” it by theologizing is the Christian’s divinely graced experience of what was natural to ancient scribes. The modern reader, with his complete printed Bible and a concordance or perhaps good Bible software, has Scripture more than ever at his fingertips as a tool and an object of reflection, but our medieval monk had Scripture itself for fingers, no longer merely an object of thought but a medium for it. He thought his thoughts and communicated his thoughts by way of Scripture.

So for example, when the celibate male monk desired to work out and express his most personal interior experiences in writing, he often chose to do so by commenting word by word on the Song of Songs—and it is worth observing that, as subjective as these commentaries seem to us today, the fact remains that a centuries-long tradition of celibate male reflection resulted in an understanding of the spiritual life in terms of passionate marital love!¹⁷ The medium became a message. Moreover, grace perfects nature in this situation. As Augustine argues, since God is the primary author of Scripture, and since he knew from all eternity all the thoughts of all the readers of Scripture, any truth that Scripture

¹⁷ See Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995), esp. 17–23.

prompts a reader to see could arguably be what the primary author intended him to get from the text.¹⁸ A sign of this is the Church's use of patristic interpretations, even the eisegetical ones about the Song of Songs, in the liturgy, which is the privileged setting for hearing the word of God: If the Church has read and proclaimed a particular biblical passage in her liturgies as meaning a particular thing for over a thousand years, then the people of God have heard God say *this* through *that Scripture* consistently. Is this not an argument that God intended this text to be understood this way? What in a merely human context with a merely natural canon would be a creative departure from the original meaning can become in Scripture a discovery of something actually intended by the primary author. Eisegesis meets exegesis.

One can see therefore how difficult it is to separate authentic Catholic practices from arbitrary interpretation. However, even at its most "eisegetical," Catholic interpretation is not arbitrary. "Arbitrary" means that one does whatever one pleases: "Arbitrary" interpretation means that one says whatever one wants the text to mean, imposing one's will on the text, using its authoritative aura to the benefit of propaganda. This would be an exaltation of the individual's power over the text, which is not at all the spirit of the Fathers. In fact, as Ratzinger notes, such a spirit is actually characteristic of interpretations that abandon tradition in the name of scientific objectivity: "the daring constructions of many modern exegetes, right up to the materialistic interpretation of the Bible, show that the Word, if left alone as a book, is a helpless prey to manipulation through preexisting desires and opinions."¹⁹

In contrast, the Fathers saw their work as entering into the great edifice of the whole text of Scripture and all the interpretations that have come before them, so that their interpretations were not their own only but a common good. Above, I quoted T. S. Eliot as describing how the poet gives over what is merely his individually in order to gain what is even more his in the common good of a tradition: "What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress . . . is a continual self-sacrifice,

¹⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Frank Sheed, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), book XII, chaps. 31–32, p. 285.

¹⁹ Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 34.

a continual extinction of personality.”²⁰ This is more radically true of a Christian, who has joined not just a society but the mystical body of Christ. To quote Ratzinger:

It is a death event. In other words, it is an exchange of the old subject for another. The “I” ceases to be an autonomous subject standing in itself. It is snatched away from itself and fitted into a new subject. The “I” is not simply submerged, but it must really release its grip on itself in order then to receive itself anew in and together with a greater “I.”²¹

Because this new subject is, as Ratzinger puts it, “the precondition and foundation of all theology,”²² when the Fathers read their own thoughts into the text of Scripture they read into it nothing other than Scripture, having taken on the mind of Christ.²³ Each of them could adapt for himself the words of St. Paul: I read, no longer I only, but Christ who reads within me (cf. Gal 2:20).

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²⁰ Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 55.

²¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Approaches to Understanding Its Role in the Light of Present Controversy*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 51.

²² Ibid., 50.

²³ Michael Cahill, “Reader-Response Criticism and the Allegorizing Reader,” *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 94.

