

Violence Is Incompatible with the Nature of God: Benedict, Aquinas, and Method C Exegesis of the “Dark” Passages of the Bible

MATTHEW J. RAMAGE
Benedictine College
Atchison, KS

FOLLOWING THE LEAD of then-Cardinal Ratzinger’s 1988 Erasmus lecture, this article offers principles needed to illumine some of the Bible’s “dark” texts, particularly those in which God apparently contradicts his own nature by approving, rewarding, or even commanding violence. This problem is crucial as Christians who hold divergent opinions vis-à-vis what the Bible intends to teach in matters of science and history typically agree in their expectation that the Bible gets it right when it comes to matters directly concerning faith and morals. The texts in question here, however, present believers with apparent errors precisely in this domain.¹

To this end, this article attempts to instantiate Benedict’s “Method C” hermeneutical proposal in which he called upon exegetes to develop a new, fuller hermeneutical method (Method C) that makes the truth of Scripture more evident by synthesizing the best of patristic-medie-

¹ There certainly exist other formidable problems concerning faith and morals in Scripture. I have treated those dealing with apparent contradictions in the Bible’s treatment of God’s nature and the afterlife in the volume *Dark Passages of the Bible: Engaging Scripture with Benedict XVI and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013). Much of the material condensed in this essay can be found at various points within this larger text.

val exegesis (Method A) and historical-critical exegesis (Method B).² In particular, I will tease out four points of contact between Aquinas and Benedict implied by the latter's suggestion that Thomas's exegesis offers a "counter-model" to deconstructive forms of modern exegesis: (1) the importance of having an "open philosophy" concerning the interplay of the divine and human in the world; (2) interpreting problematic texts in light of the divine pedagogy intelligible in the whole of Scripture; (3) ascertaining the essential message the sacred authors intend to convey in passages that ostensibly seem to contradict God's nature by directly implicating him in evil; and (4) attending to the spiritual sense of such passages to see their relevance for the lives of believers of all ages.³

² "You can call the patristic-medieval exegetical approach Method A. The historical-critical approach, the modern approach . . . is Method B. What I am calling for is not a return to Method A, but a development of a Method C, taking advantage of the strengths of both Method A and Method B, but cognizant of the shortcomings of both." Benedict's words are taken from a summary and transcript of the discussion following his 1988 Erasmus Lecture. See Paul T. Stallsworth, "The Story of an Encounter," in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 107–8. Benedict's lecture, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today" was originally printed in *ibid.*, 1–23. As Gregory Vall observes, "Strictly speaking, we are dealing not with two specific 'methods' but two general approaches. A series of basic principles unites the work of exegetes as diverse as Origen and Chrysostom, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Thomas Aquinas, so that we may speak of a single dominant patristic-medieval approach to exegesis, which Cardinal Ratzinger has labeled 'Method A.' When we turn to consider those biblical commentators whose work falls under the umbrella of 'historical-critical' exegesis, the diversity of specific methodologies is perhaps even greater. But in this case, too, fundamental principles of exegesis shared by these scholars may be identified, justifying the label 'Method B.'" Gregory Vall, "Psalm 22: *Vox Christi* or Israelite Temple Liturgy?" *The Thomist* 66 (2002): 175–200.

³ Note that I have opted for the convention of referring to the one man Ratzinger/Benedict as "Benedict" throughout this article even in writings antedating his pontificate. Likewise, note that I will be referring to the version of the Erasmus Lecture entitled "Biblical Interpretation in Conflict: On the Foundations and the Itinerary for Exegesis Today," in *Opening Up the Scriptures: Joseph Ratzinger and the Foundations of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. José Granados, Carlos Granados, and Luis Sánchez-Navarro (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). This version of Benedict's text (there are three different published editions of the lecture in the English language alone) reveals more explicit connections with Aquinas than the original English version published in the volume *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*.

The Problem

First it is necessary to elucidate the particular problem this article will address with the help of Benedict and Aquinas. "Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul . . . Not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature." Benedict famously took this claim as the starting point for his reflections at Regensburg in 2006. The words he cited came from the mouth of a Byzantine Christian emperor challenging his Muslim interlocutor to justify Islam's violent self-propagation, but Muslims do not stand alone in their need to render an account for having spread religion by the sword. One month after Regensburg, some one hundred influential Muslim leaders countered the pope with an open letter that included this argument:

Moreover, it is noteworthy that Manuel II Paleologus says that "violence" goes against God's nature, since Christ himself used violence against the money-changers in the temple, and said "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34–36). When God drowned Pharaoh, was He going against His own Nature?⁴

At Regensburg the pontiff observed that Christianity made itself vulnerable to such criticisms when Duns Scotus broke from Augustine and Aquinas by maintaining a position that "might even lead to the image of a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness."⁵

But did the danger of fashioning for ourselves a capricious God really arise with late medieval voluntarism? Are the Muslims not correct in their assertion that the Bible itself often depicts a bloodthirsty God who not only allows evil but even commands and rewards it?⁶ In a brief

⁴ See <http://www.theislamicmonthly.com/open-letter-to-pope-benedict-xvi/>

⁵ See http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html.

⁶ The gravity of this claim cannot be seen if we limit ourselves to addressing individual "dark" texts as they come to our attention from time to time. It is fully recognizable by following the inspiration of Newman in his *Grammar of Assent* and taking account of the "cumulation of probabilities" that points to a real problem in this area. It is for this reason that scholars ultimately need to continue the present work by dwelling at length on problems like the ones treated here.

article such as this, I can only give a few indications to this effect, but the evidence is overwhelming. Just seven chapters into the Bible, God “blotted out every living thing that was upon the face of the ground” (Gn 7:23).⁷ In the next book, he seeks to kill the man whom he had called to lead his people out of slavery to the Egyptians (Ex 4:24) and slays all the first born in Egypt, including children (Ex 12:29). Later he proceeds to slay 185,000 Assyrians in one night (2 Kgs 19:35). This same God commands his people to act violently, to “utterly destroy” their enemies, showing “no mercy” and saving alive “nothing that breathes” when conquering them (Dt 7:1–2; 20:16–17). And the word of God reports that the people did just this: “[We] utterly destroyed every city, men, women, and children; we left none remaining” (Dt 2:33–34; cf. 3:6; Jo 6:21).” In fact, when King Saul does *not* “utterly destroy” the Amalekites, God de-thrones him (1 Sm 15:8–9).

Perhaps the violence of some of these texts can be accounted for by the fact that the “victims” in question were actually guilty and therefore not victims at all. For example, even by today’s standards the people of Israel may have been well within the bounds of law when employing lethal means of self-defense against the Assyrians, assuming such violence was *per se* ordered to that end. As for those times when the Bible indicates that God himself directly kills men, Aquinas argues that God operates perfectly in accord with his nature by directly punishing sinners with death:

All men alike, both guilty and innocent, die the death of nature: which death of nature is inflicted by the power of God on account of original sin, according to 1 Samuel 2:6: “The Lord killeth and maketh alive. Consequently, by the command of God, death can be inflicted on any man, guilty or innocent, without any injustice whatever.”⁸

This logic would seem to exculpate God when he takes people’s lives for various reasons and through various means, whether that be a flood, a plague, or his people Israel. However, many moderns find it unthinkable

⁷ All biblical citations in this essay will be taken from the RSV.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (ST) I-II, q. 94, a. 5, ad 2.

one could apply this principle so as to justify the slaughter of infant children on account of original sin and the collective sins of their people. Nor can they tolerate the fact that God, by remaining silent, apparently approves of the Psalmist when he revels in the thought of bashing Babylonian children against rocks (Ps 137:8–9; cf. Hos 13:16). It is likewise difficult to see how this accounts for times when God not only kills apparently innocent people but kills them after having set them up to fail, giving his people “statutes that were not good” and “defil[ing] them through their very gifts in making them offer by fire all their first-born” (Ez 20:23–26). He hardens hearts only in order to destroy the hardened (Ex 4:21; cf. 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8; Jos 11:20; Rom 9:18; 11:7–8). What is more, he goes so far as to send “evil” and “lying” spirits into individuals in order that they might fail (1 Sm 16:14; cf. 18:10; 19:9; 1 Kgs 22:19–22; cf. 2 Chr 18:21ff; Jgs 9:23). Perhaps a somewhat satisfactory answer could be made to each of these texts on a case-by-case basis, but to my mind the cumulative force of biblical evidence implicating God in evil clearly demands a more profound explanation.⁹

Benedict and Aquinas’s “Open Philosophy”

In response to our problem, I would like to begin by recalling a relatively recent example demonstrating Benedict’s conviction concerning the significance of Aquinas for implementing his exegetical proposal. After explaining that his *Jesus of Nazareth* is not a “Life of Jesus” or a “Christology,” he explicitly states that Aquinas’s treatise on the life of Christ in the *Summa* is “closer to my intention” and that with this work “my book

⁹ Given the presence of these texts, history’s long pedigree of polemics against the authority of Scripture comes as no surprise. In the nineteenth century, Nietzsche famously reviled the Bible in his *Genealogy of Morals*, boasting that the priestly people who authored Sacred Scripture were the most vengeful “haters” in history. Today’s New Atheists carry on Nietzsche’s legacy: “we ought to be glad that none of the religious myths has any truth to it, or in it. The Bible may, indeed does, contain a warrant for trafficking in humans, for ethnic cleansing, for slavery, for bride-price, and for indiscriminate massacre, but we are not bound by any of it because it was put together by crude, uncultured human mammals.” Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 106. “One could go through the Old Testament book by book, here pausing to notice a lapidary phrase . . . and there a fine verse, but always encountering the same difficulties.” *Ibid.*, 107.

has many points of contact.”¹⁰ Though privy to modern scholarly tools in a way Aquinas was not, Benedict identifies with the latter in his patient attentiveness to God’s word and his desire to put believers in touch with the mystery of Jesus, his “figure and message.”¹¹

In the section of his Erasmus Lecture entitled “Basic Elements of a New Synthesis,” Benedict expounds at greater length on the importance of Thomas’s thought for helping believers encounter Christ through his word. In contrast with a Kantian “ready-made philosophy,” Aquinas’s “open philosophy” is “capable of accepting the biblical phenomenon in all its radicalism” by admitting that a real encounter of God and man is witnessed in history—and made possible today—by the Scriptures.¹² For Benedict, a “critique of the critique” requires a rejection of the false presuppositions of those who would exclude a priori God’s ability to speak through human words. Aquinas’s exegesis, deeply rooted in the Catholic Tradition with its conviction that the boundary of time and eternity is permeable, allows for the Bible to be what the Church has always claimed it to be: the word of God in human words.

Divine Pedagogy

Following these remarks Benedict reveals a second point of contact with Aquinas: the recognition of how essential it is to grasp the Christological teleology of salvation history. Thomas serves as a salutary counter-model in the field of exegesis today, for he presupposes the action of divine providence guiding salvation history to its destination in Christ. Christ is thus for Benedict “the unifying principle” of history “which alone confers sense on it,” and God’s action gradually leading his people toward Christ is “the principle of the intelligibility of history.”¹³

The centrality of this principle comes into full relief if one steps back

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, *Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, trans. Philip J. Whitmore (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), xvi.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Benedict XVI, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict,” 23.

¹³ Ibid., 24, no. 37. Benedict is citing here Maximino Arias Reyero, *Thomas von Aquin als Exeget: Die Prinzipien seiner Schriftdeutung und seine Lehre von den Schriftsinnen* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1971), 106; cf. “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict,” 23, no. 35.

to observe how Benedict has articulated his Method C proposal over the past two decades. His *Verbum Domini* is particularly significant because it has a section entitled "The 'Dark' Passages of the Bible," in which the pontiff does this, though without precisely the same vocabulary. Benedict states that instances of violence and immorality in the Bible can be adequately addressed only if Catholics take seriously the fact that "God's plan is manifested *progressively* and it is accomplished slowly, *in successive stages* and despite human resistance." He explains that God patiently and gradually revealed himself in order to "guide and educate . . . training his people in preparation for the Gospel." Because "revelation is suited to the cultural and moral level of distant times," it narrates certain things "without explicitly denouncing the immorality of such things," a fact that "can cause the modern reader to be taken aback." What is needed for correct interpretation, therefore, is "a training that interprets the texts in their historical-literary context [another way of saying Method B] and within the Christian perspective [Method A] which has as its ultimate hermeneutical key 'the Gospel and the new commandment of Jesus Christ brought about in the paschal mystery.'" ¹⁴

The above text echoes the words of *Dei Verbum* and the later *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which eloquently states: "The divine plan of revelation . . . involves a specific divine pedagogy: God communicates himself to man gradually. He prepares him to welcome by stages the supernatural revelation that is to culminate in the person and mission of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ."¹⁵ This patristically based hermeneutic of divine pedagogy articulated by Benedict and the Catechism is precisely the bridge that enables one to reconcile the unity of Scripture traditionally emphasized by Christian exegetes with the development, diversity, and apparent contradictions observed by modern scholars. For the hermeneutic of divine pedagogy affirms that Scripture has a unity in light of the fact that it proceeds from God's one wise educational

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, §42 (emphasis Benedict's); cf. nos. 11 and 20 for Benedict's use of the term "divine pedagogy."

¹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §53. I have cited the Catechism here because of its clarity and conciseness, but the Catechism itself is summarizing the Second Vatican Council constitution *Dei Verbum* §15. For other magisterial statements of the divine pedagogy, see Pius XI, *Mit Brennender Sorge* §15 and *Lumen Gentium* §9, which explains Israel's relationship with God in terms of gradual instruction."

plan for mankind and communicates God himself to man. At the same time, this hermeneutic is comfortable with diversity and apparent contradictions in Scripture since it sees these within the greater context of its progression toward Christ.¹⁶

To draw out the implications of this suggestion, I would like to sample some more texts that illustrate the importance Benedict places on a hermeneutic that takes seriously the divine pedagogy. In his *In the Beginning*, he describes the Bible as the story of a twofold struggle: God's struggle to "make himself understandable to them over the course of time," and the people of God's struggle to "seize hold of God over the course of time." This familiarization between God and man was a journey of faith, and "only in the process of this journeying was the Bible's real way of declaring itself formed, step by step." The message of the Bible becomes clearer as salvation history progresses and man acquires an increasing ability to penetrate the divine mysteries. Ultimately, however, the whole Old Testament is "an advance toward Christ," and as such its real meaning becomes clear only in light of him who is its end. Benedict therefore argues that exegetes interpret individual texts correctly only when they "see in the text where this way is tending and what its inner direction is."¹⁷

Benedict's revealing interview *God and the World* is also illuminating, especially given our question concerning how the Christian Scriptures apparently implicate God in evil in a way that seems comparable with the Koran's portrait of God. It is noteworthy that in this work Benedict treats precisely on the issue of whether the Scriptures exhibit development. Contrasting Islam's belief that the Koran was dictated directly to Muhammad by God, he observes that the books of the Bible

¹⁶ "The Bible is the condensation of a *process of revelation* which is much greater and inexhaustible . . . It is then part of a living organism which, through the vicissitudes of history, nonetheless *conserves its identity*." Benedict XVI, "Sources and Transmission of the Faith," *Communio* 10 (1983): 28.

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 10–11. See also Benedict's *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), where he explains that the process of the Bible's formation was "not linear . . . but when you watch it unfold in light of Jesus Christ, you can see it moving in a single overall direction." According to Benedict and his "Christological hermeneutic," Christ is "the key to the whole" of Scripture. *Ibid.*, xix.

"bear the impression of a history that [God] has been guiding," since they were composed and developed over a thousand years, mediated by "quite different stages of history and of civilization."¹⁸ As in the two texts just discussed, so here he explains, "The Bible is not a textbook about God and divine matters but contains images with perceptions and *insights in the course of development, and through these images, slowly and step by step, a historical reality is coming into existence.*"¹⁹ If the Christian cannot turn to a given page of the Bible for the fullness of revealed truth, then where can he find it? "The level on which I perceive the Bible as God's Word is that of the unity of God's history . . . In our Christian reading of it, we are more than ever convinced, as we said, that the New Testament offers us the key to understanding the Old."²⁰ The idea I wish to convey by sampling these works of Benedict on the importance of a divine pedagogy hermeneutic is summarized well in a fourth work, *Introduction to Christianity*, in which he states quite simply, "Anyone who wishes to understand the biblical belief in God must follow its historical development from its origins with the patriarchs of Israel right up to the last books of the New Testament."²¹

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, *God and the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 151–52 (emphasis added).

¹⁹ "Let us compare Holy Scripture with the Koran, for example. Moslems believe that the Koran was directly dictated by God. It is not mediated by any history; no human intermediary was needed; it is a message direct from God. The Bible, on the other hand, is quite different. *It is mediated to us by a history, and even as a book it extends over a period of more than a thousand years.* The question of whether or not Moses may have been a writer is one we can happily leave to one side. It is still true that the biblical literature grew up over a thousand-year history and thus moves through quite different stages of history and of civilization, which are all reflected in it. In the first three chapters of Genesis, for instance, we meet with a quite different form of culture from what came later, in the exilic literature, or in the wisdom literature, and then finally in the literature of the New Testament. It becomes clear that God did not just dictate these words but rather that *they bear the impression of a history that he has been guiding; they have come into being as a witness to that history.*" Ibid. (emphasis added).

²⁰ Ibid., 153 (emphasis added). Benedict again goes on to speak of the "process of collective development" and the "many stages of mediation" by which the biblical books gradually were able to "bring the history of God's people and of God's guidance to verbal expression."

²¹ Benedict XVI, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 116. It is illuminating to read the entire chapter from which this citation is taken, as in it Benedict traces the roots of Israel's monotheism such as it developed

I now would like to illustrate briefly how one may implement this first principle concerning the necessity of a divine pedagogy hermeneutic for tackling “dark” texts. The step-by-step process by which God led his people to the fullness of truth is evident in the well-known changes made by the postexilic Chronicler to the Books of Samuel. In 2 Samuel 24:1, God incites David to sin by numbering the people, whereas in 1 Chronicles 21:1 the blame shifts away from God and on to Satan: “Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to number Israel.” A Method B approach without the light of faith may view this solely as a piece of political propaganda to make David look better.²² For a Method C approach, however, it is not propaganda but providence that is the main force at work here. Following Benedict’s principle that Catholics need to look at the Scriptures as a whole, the Method C exegete might even admit that the Chronicler himself was at least partly motivated by political reasons here. Still, the fact that he attributed the instigation of an evil deed to Satan—a figure whose name appears as a proper noun in this text alone among all the books of the Old Testament—shows that he and his audience were beginning to suspect that Yahweh was not the direct cause of man’s evil actions. The picture painted in 1 Chronicles much more resembles that which Christians typically have in mind when considering God’s role in evil. It is not God but Satan who “incites” humans to evil and is, along with our own free will, the cause of evil actions.

If this explanation is correct, it helps demonstrate the presence of a substantial unity in the Bible’s developing grasp of God’s relationship with evil; for, earlier and later texts shared in common a clear understanding that Yahweh was in charge of the entire cosmic order. Earlier authors were aware that Yahweh’s omnipotence meant that he was ultimately, in some mysterious way, the “cause” of man’s evil deeds. However, these authors explained reality in such a manner because they were operating on the premise that God is the direct cause of both good and evil. They were not fully privy to the distinction between God’s active and permissive will that was made later in the tradition. This distinction is at the heart of what is required to reconcile God’s omnipotence with

throughout the Old Testament period.

²² For a helpful discussion of this problem, see Kenton Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

his omnibenevolence in texts that appear to have God causing evil.²³ This is where Satan, later in the tradition, eventually comes into play. In Chronicles as in the New Testament, God *allows* Satan to exercise his free will in tempting humans, and he *allows* individuals to consent to or reject Satan.

Asserting “the Essential Point”

A third point of contact between Aquinas and Benedict is not explicated by the emeritus pontiff himself but is nonetheless observable in the way he instantiates his own principles by attempting to determine the “essential point” asserted in concrete biblical texts. Benedict demonstrates keen awareness that certain texts seem plainly to contradict what is stated in other texts:

It is because faith is not set before us as a complete and finished system that the Bible contains contradictory texts, or at least ones that stand in tension to each other.²⁴

It follows straightaway that neither the criterion of inspiration nor that of infallibility can be applied mechanically. It is quite impossible to pick out one single sentence and say, right, you find this sentence in God’s great book, so it must simply be true in itself.²⁵

²³ Cf. ST I, q. 19, a. 9, ad 3; a. 12.

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *God and the World*, 152; cf. “The problem of dating Jesus’s Last Supper arises from the contradiction on this point between the Synoptic Gospels, on the one hand, and Saint John’s Gospel, on the other.” Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*, 106.

²⁵ Benedict XVI, *God and the World*, 153; cf. Benedict XVI, Address to Participants in the Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (May 2, 2011): “Lastly, I would only like to mention the fact that in a good hermeneutic it is not possible to apply mechanically the criterion of inspiration, or indeed of absolute truth by extrapolating a single sentence or expression. The plan in which it is possible to perceive Sacred Scripture as a Word of God is that of the unity of God, in a totality in which the individual elements are illuminated reciprocally and are opened to understanding.” See also this thought-provoking text from James Tunstead Burtchell, *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration since 1810: A Review and Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 299, 303–4: “Both by those who accept these claims [of inerrancy and infallibility] and by those who reject them, they have been imagined as some sort of flawless, eternal ownership of the truth, expressed in formulas that might from time to time need a little translating, but never need re-

The problem of admitting the presence of contradictory biblical texts, of course, lies in squaring it with the doctrine of inerrancy such as it is articulated in *Dei Verbum*: “everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit.”²⁶

As Germain Grisez has noted in a helpful essay, it is a great mistake to read the above sentence as saying that everything in Scripture is asserted by the Holy Spirit: “Scripture contains not only many sentences expressing no proposition, but many sentences that express propositions not asserted by their human authors.”²⁷ In a helpful footnote in which he offers illustrations from Aquinas to support his claim, Grisez adds that the council fathers would have been well aware of the difference between a mere statement on the one hand and an assertion or teaching on the other.²⁸

Brian Harrison, O.S., in an essay that critiques a view similar to that advanced by Grisez, offers a further helpful specification. According to the Council *relator* of *Dei Verbum* 11, Harrison notes, the word teach (*docere*) refers to those things that are truly affirmed (*asseruntur*) in

placing. In this sense, there has probably never been an inerrant declaration uttered or book written, nor need we look forward to one. But if inerrancy involve wild, and sometimes even frightening movement, if it mean being pulled to the right and to the left, being tempted constantly to deviate, yet always managing somehow to regain the road, then it begins to sound rather like what the Church has been about . . . In sum, the Church does find inerrancy in the Bible, if we can agree to take that term in its dynamic sense, and not a static one. Inerrancy must be the ability, not to avoid all mistakes, but to cope with them, remedy them, survive them, and eventually even profit from them. In a distinct selection of faith-leavings from a distinct epoch of faith-history, we have the archives of the process by which our ancestral faith began from nothing, involved itself in countless frustrating errors, but made its way, lurching and swerving, ‘reeling but erect,’ somehow though never losing the way, to climax in Christ.”

²⁶ *Dei Verbum* §11. The text continues: “it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.”

²⁷ Germain Grisez, “The Inspiration and Inerrancy of Scripture,” in *For the Sake of Our Salvation: The Truth and Humility of God’s Word* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2010), 186.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 186n15. Grisez states that “the distinction between what is asserted and what is said without being asserted is one that Thomas uses regularly.” Examples he provides from the *ST* include II-II, q. 110, a. 3, ad 1; I, q. 77, a. 5, ad 3; q. 100, a.2, ad 2.

Scripture.²⁹ Harrison cites an important text from Raúl Cardinal Silva Herínquez to clarify:

the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is better expressed by the formal criterion of teaching, since it is according to that criterion that no error can be found. For in another sense, that is, the material sense, it is possible for expressions to be used by the sacred writer which are erroneous in themselves, but which, however, he does not wish to teach.³⁰

As Harrison proceeds to observe, the *relator* informed the council fathers that Herínquez’s above proposal had been accepted “substantially” by the doctrinal commission. Thus Harrison affirms Herínquez’s clarification as “a guide to what the Council means.”³¹

In contrast with Grisez, Harrison argues that the key distinction in the cardinal’s text is not between “affirmations” and “teachings” on the

²⁹ *Acta synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* (Rome: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970–), vol. 4, pt. 5, 709; Brian Harrison, “Restricted Inerrancy and the ‘Hermeneutic of Discontinuity,’” in *For the Sake of Our Salvation*, 244. In another piece, Harrison pointedly criticizes certain “recent Catholic authors” who “have tried to reconcile [the teaching of *Dei Verbum* 11] with the supposed occurrence of errors in Scripture by charging that the errors they have in mind are never in fact *affirmed* by either the divine or human authors.” Harrison describes such a maneuver as a “contorted hermeneutic” that “unreasonably attempts to determine what is being affirmed in a given text in Scripture by appealing to content rather than form—subject matter rather than syntax . . . but this procedure—trying to identify an author’s assertions by looking at *what* he is talking instead of *how* he talks about it—violates basic, common-sense principles of verbal communication. Brian Harrison, “Does Vatican Council II Allow for Errors in Sacred Scripture?” *Divinitas* 52, no. 3 (2009): 279–304. The text cited here is from an updated version of the article available at <http://www.rtforum.org/lt/lt145-6.html>. This is a helpful critique, but it does not negate the importance of distinguishing statements from assertions as Grisez does. This fundamental endeavor to distinguish nonaffirmed statements from core assertions in the biblical text can be seen in the exegesis of Joseph Ratzinger throughout his career. But unlike the unnamed authors whom Harrison critiques, Ratzinger’s exegesis by no means neglects the syntax or *how* a biblical author wishes to assert his point. On the contrary, his patient attentiveness to this reality is what makes his hermeneutic so powerful.

³⁰ *Acta Vaticani II*, vol. 3, pt. 3, 799.

³¹ Harrison, “Restricted Inerrancy,” 245.

one hand and “statements” on the other.³² Rather, for him the dichotomy is to be found in contrasting what is formally taught from what is merely “used” (*adhiberi*) by the sacred writers in view of making their assertions. The category of what is merely used, Harrison concludes, may include expressions (*locutiones*) that are “materially” erroneous.³³ It is worth noting that here we have a Thomistically inspired distinction between material and formal error leveraged in order to make sense of the Scriptures.

Paul Synave and Pierre Benoit make a similar distinction following the contours of Aquinas’s discussion of prophecy in the *Summa*:

Truth is the *adequatio rei et intellectus*. It exists only in the judgment. And by “judgment” we obviously do not mean every proposition made up of subject, verb, and predicate, but the formal act by which the intellect affirms its conformity (*adequatio*) to the object of knowledge . . . An [inspired] author does not speak of everything in an absolute way . . . He tells the truth or he is mistaken only within the limits of the field of vision which he has established for himself and in which he forms his judgment . . . We must therefore respect the varying degrees of his assent, rather than take all his sentences as categorical affirmations.³⁴

³² It is helpful to compare what Harrison writes in the above piece to another work in which he provides a helpful clarification of his view: “some biblical affirmations—above all, those that are *per se* less directly concerned with salvation—may be only approximations, or it may be that they express certain truths only in simple, popular language rather than in precise or technical terminology. For since the formal object of Sacred Scripture is to teach us God’s plan of salvation for the human race, and not profane history, natural science, or other forms of merely worldly knowledge *for their own sakes*, one should not expect or demand, as a condition of the Bible’s freedom from error, when it touches upon these subjects, the same standards of accuracy and clarity in description and terminology as we would expect and demand in works (especially modern academic works) whose formal object is these ‘secular’ branches of knowledge . . . we should not set the bar unreasonably high in deciding what is *to count* as truth, as opposed to error, when the sacred writers make statements about secondary matters that are only indirectly linked to the Bible’s principal and overall purpose.” “Does Vatican Council II Allow for Errors in Sacred Scripture?” <http://www.rtforum.org/lt/lt145-6.html>

³³ Harrison, “Restricted Inerrancy,” 245. On the distinction between the existence of material error or imperfection in contrast with formal errors in Scripture, see Matthew Ramage, *Dark Passages of the Bible*, 131–46.

³⁴ Paul Synave and Pierre Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration* (New York: Desclee, 1961), 134–35. Cf. *ibid.*, 142: “[God] certainly cannot prevent [the sacred author] from using

Abbot Denis Farkasfalvy speaks in similar terms:

Divine inspiration does not imply that each passage and sentence of the biblical text must be found free of error from every conceivable point of view . . . But such a realization does not prove that God's word *asserts* error. Rather, it only means that God's message is expressed, at one or another point of salvation history, with the imperfections characteristic of human existence.³⁵

One might expand upon Farkasfalvy's point by explaining that any apparent errors in Scripture are in reality material imperfections rather than formal errors since the biblical text still conveys "the human author's concretely defined purpose and its divine author's salvific purpose," in such a way that "every passage expresses the truth which it is supposed to express according to God's salvific will."³⁶

Matthew Lamb, in his translation and notes on Aquinas's *Commentary on Ephesians*, makes a similar point from an angle that also accounts for the divine pedagogy discussed above:

We tend to regard a truth as either clearly and explicitly revealed or not revealed at all. But for St. Thomas man's knowledge of the faith grows; truths are revealed slowly over a period of time. The Bible communicates this organic development

in one way or another these erroneous views and, consequently, from letting them show through in his text. For example, no one will deny that the biblical authors had now outmoded cosmological ideas in which they believed, and that they employed them in their writings because they were unable to think apart from contemporary categories. But they do not claim to be teaching them *for their own sakes*; they speak of them for a different purpose, e.g. to illustrate creation and divine providence."

³⁵ Denis Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation: A Theological Introduction to Sacred Scripture* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 232. Farkasfalvy's explanation has many resonances with the following of C. S. Lewis. Writing on the subject of the Psalms, C. S. Lewis observes: "The human qualities of the raw materials show through. Naiveté, error, contradiction, even (as in the cursing psalms) wickedness are not removed. The total result is not 'the word of God' in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the word of God; and we . . . receive that word from it not by using it as an encyclopedia or an encyclical but by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message." *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Harvest Books, 1964), 111–12.

³⁶ Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation*, 232.

of salvation-history to men up to its definitive apex in the revelation of the Word Incarnate himself. The whole of the Bible must be approached with faith; this does not mean that every sentence is a definable dogma.³⁷

As Lamb relates, it is not as if one can find a definable dogma in every sentence of Scripture; indeed, Scripture never claims this about itself. The reason for this is that the authors of Scripture understood and taught revealed truth with varying degrees of clarity depending on their place within the course of salvation history. To discern dogmatic content within Scripture thus requires careful attention to the intentions of its authors and to the broader role of a particular text within the development of the canon as a whole. This also requires overcoming the assumption that something is “revealed” only if it is perfectly reflective of God’s own knowledge, or else it is not revealed at all.

For his part, Benedict assesses concrete problems in a way that is compatible with and builds on the above understanding of inspiration and revelation. Throughout his corpus the emeritus pontiff often seeks to reconcile apparently erroneous biblical texts by inquiring into their “substance” or “essential point,” that is to say by asking what message the human and divine authors intend to teach or assert in a given text. He extends this principle even to the New Testament and Jesus’s own thought. For instance, in his treatment of the parable of Lazarus in Luke 16 he suggests that Jesus often employed images of the afterlife current in his day without “formally incorporating them into his teaching about the next life,” that is to say without intending to assert their conformity to reality. While Jesus did “unequivocally affirm the *substance* of the images,” the images themselves do not constitute “the principal message the Lord wants to convey in this parable.” Agreeing with Joachim Jeremias, the pope proposes that the “main point” of this parable concerns the rich man’s request for a sign rather than the nature of the afterlife, which may or may not be accurately conveyed through the imagery employed by Jesus.³⁸ Benedict’s work here thus provides the exegete with

³⁷ Ibid., 256n17. See also Ramage, *Dark Passages of the Bible*, 133–34.

³⁸ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 215–16; cf. *God and the World*, 45, where he describes “what is actually meant” by Jesus’s promise that the man of faith can move mountains.

an example of how he is to go about his work of reconciling apparently contradictory texts with Catholic teaching on biblical inspiration and inerrancy. He certainly does not go so far as to allow that Jesus himself held imperfect ideas about the afterlife, but his exegesis at least implies that an inspired author need not formally assert every last problematic statement that issues from his pen.

God and the World contains a number of other examples of this type of move that are germane to our present question concerning violence and the nature of God. For example, interviewer Peter Seewald challenges him with the Levites' slaughter of three thousand men at the command of God uttered through Moses's mouth: "So, basically, the story of the Ten Commandments began with an enormous violation of commandment number five: Thou shalt not kill. Moses really ought to have known better."³⁹ Benedict's first move in response is a characteristically honest acceptance of his interlocutor's observation, namely that this account "does sound terribly bloodthirsty." His next is an instantiation of one of the principles he professed to hold in common with Aquinas, namely to observe that if the episode is to make sense, "we have to look forward, toward Christ," that is to see Scripture as a whole. Third, rather than simply saying what the passage *cannot* mean, he offers a suggestion for what God in his pedagogy intended it to mean: "*What happens expresses the truth* that anyone who turns from God not only departs from the Covenant but from the sphere of life; they ruin their own life and, in doing so, enter into the realm of death."⁴⁰

Moreover, perhaps to the discomfort of the Christian, Benedict notes that "whether there really were any stone tablets is another question."⁴¹ Even if it were the case that one could disprove the existence of these physical artifacts, it would not change "the essential point" of the Sinai narrative, namely "that God, through the agency of his friend, really makes himself known in an authoritative way." This is the substance of the narrative, the author's principle concern. For Benedict, there is no need for the Christian to worry about whether the account perfectly

³⁹ Benedict XVI, *God and the World*, 167.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 168 (emphasis added).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 166 (emphasis added). See also his attempt to ascertain the essential point in the passages concerning creation in *ibid.*, 75ff.

conforms to contemporary Western standards of historiography. Many details Christians consider essential today are in truth accidental features of the text. They were a part of the author's presentation but not his principal concern, and in light of the above principles are not to be deemed formal "errors." Indeed, it is doubtful that the redactors and compilers of the canon would have been unaware of the problems people raise today: they deliberately left ambiguities in Scripture perhaps in part so that later generations could "struggle with God" as they had done and perhaps build on the tradition they were blessed to receive from their ancestors.⁴²

One finds the same *modus operandi* in Benedict's discussion of whether the events that unfolded on Sinai were myth or history. Here he concretely applies the principle he praised in Aquinas concerning his "open philosophy" that is capable of accounting for a God who enters history and speaks through human words. He does not deny that the episode is imbued with a certain mythological flare (thunder, lightning, clouds, trumpets, flames, quaking, God's hand writing on stone, etc.), but affirms that it "refers to a real event, a real entering into history by God, to a real meeting between God and his people," and through them to a meeting with mankind. This, according to Benedict, is the "essence of the event."⁴³

As a last example, it is instructive to observe how our author responds when faced with passages that describe God as jealous, wrathful, and violent in his punishments:

⁴² While beyond the scope of this article, it is worth calling attention to the fact that Benedict's understanding of corporate biblical authorship is capable of accounting for the phenomenon of redaction in light of the doctrine of biblical inspiration. Throughout his corpus, Benedict is able to achieve this by considering biblical authorship not merely in the individual human authors and God as divine author, but in light of "the collective subject" of Scripture, the People of God. For a discussion of the "interlocking subjects" of Scripture, see his *Jesus of Nazareth*, xx–xxi. As Aaron Pidel, S.J., rightly observes, Benedict "transfers the locus of intention and affirmation from the human authors of Scripture to Scripture itself." "Joseph Ratzinger and Biblical Inerrancy," *Nova et Vetera* 12, no. 1 (2014): 314. He considers all individual biblical texts in light of their place within the entire plan of salvation revealed in Scripture and culminating in Christ. Thus for Benedict the canonical books are inerrant, "but only to the extent that they bear upon the intention of the whole—the mystery of Christ." *Ibid.*, 330.

⁴³ Benedict XVI, *God and the World*, 165 (emphasis added).

The wrath of God *is a way of saying* that I have been living in a way that is contrary to the love that is God. Anyone who begins to live and grow away from God, who lives away from what is good, is turning his life toward wrath . . . When God inflicts punishment, this is not punishment in the sense that God has, as it were, drawn up a system of fines and penalties and is wanting to pin one on you. "The punishment of God" is in fact an expression for having missed the right road and then experiencing the consequences that follow from taking the wrong track and wandering away from the right way of living.⁴⁴

Without employing the same vocabulary as he did above, Benedict does not shy away from raising the tough question here: Is God actually wrathful, as the text evidently states? This need not be admitted if one understands that, while Old Testament authors may have held or stated that the "wrath" of the all-powerful God was the direct cause of all evil, the main point they *affirmed* or *taught* when speaking this way was that turning away from God's love brings about disastrous consequences for man. In other words, in the sacred author's mind the *mechanism* by which man gets punished for turning against God was subordinate to his teaching about the reality of *the punishment itself*.⁴⁵

One could apply this same line of reasoning to all of the problematic texts mentioned at the beginning of the article, but here I will give only a couple examples. With respect to times when God apparently sets people up to fail, I observed above that the later tradition associated such causality not with God but Satan. If I may hazard my own application of Benedict's principle here, the "essential point" of such passages perhaps lies in an assertion of God's omnipotence and of man's sinfulness in the concrete cases in question. In other words, the text's narration that God was directly responsible for Pharaoh's hard heart may be accidental to the more central assertions that Pharaoh closed his heart and that the whole affair falls within the scope of divine providence. When it comes to examples of God commanding the death of seemingly innocent children, might the "essential point" of God's command not have been to

⁴⁴ Ibid., 104 (emphasis added).

⁴⁵ Synave and Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration*, 142.

kill the children but rather to defend the people against idolatrous aggressors who habitually made God's people fall into the same idolatry?

The Spiritual Sense

This leads to a fourth and final connection between Benedict and Aquinas: their agreement concerning the need for a rich doctrine of the senses of Scripture. While I believe that the principles already articulated are sufficient to account for certain troublesome biblical texts from an apologetics perspective, Benedict also identifies spiritual exegesis as an essential component of his program. Indeed, it is here that the word of God achieves its end of taking flesh in our human lives and becoming truly a "living" word. In *Verbum Domini*, Benedict draws on Aquinas, himself citing Augustine, to emphasize the importance of the spiritual sense. In reality "it is impossible for anyone to attain to knowledge of that truth unless he first have infused faith in Christ" since "the letter, even that of the Gospel, would kill, were there not the inward grace of healing faith."⁴⁶ In the Erasmus Lecture Benedict speaks to this at greater length:

To discover how each given historical word intrinsically transcends itself, and thus to recognize the intrinsic rightness of the rereadings by which the Bible progressively interweaves event and sense, is one of the tasks of objective interpretation. It is a task for which suitable methods can and must be found. In this sense, the exegetical maxim of Thomas Aquinas is much to the point: "The task of the good interpreter is not to consider words, but sense."⁴⁷

In contrast with those whose methodologies focus solely on the "words" of Scripture, Benedict shares with Aquinas the conviction that the words of Scripture were meant to be "reread" over time, to point beyond themselves to a reality revealed through them but that transcends them.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Verbum Domini*, §29; cf. *ST* I-II, q. 106, a. 2.

⁴⁷ Benedict XVI, "Biblical Interpretation in Conflict," 26 (emphasis added), citing Thomas Aquinas, *In Matthaeum*, XXVII, no. 2321, ed. R. Cai (Turin: Marietti, 1951), 358. Cf. *Verbum Domini*, §37. He cites Aquinas three times in this work.

⁴⁸ For the reality of revelation being broader than the Bible, see Benedict XVI, "Biblical Interpretation in Conflict," 26, and *Verbum Domini*, §16.

In this way, their rich teaching on the senses of Scripture, while giving due attention to its words, also points beyond the words so as to show that even Scripture's "darkest" and most problematic passages may put believers in touch with Christ. The text in its wholeness, Benedict says, must become *Rabbenu*, "our teacher."⁴⁹ Method A exegesis indicates that the texts of Scripture signify something in addition to their human authors' original intended meaning: realities in the lives of believers of all ages who meditate on these texts in order to gain the knowledge and strength they need to live a life in Christ. As Benedict indicates, Christians may be privy to the fullness of revelation in a way our Old Testament forefathers were not, but the ancient truths taught therein "are of course valid for the whole of history, for all places and times" and "always need to be relearned."⁵⁰

The logic of the divine pedagogy is thus revealed when Christians discover that their encounter with Christ through a spiritual reading of Scripture's "dark" passages is not merely one among many possible readings but rather the purpose for which the literal sense was composed in the first place. The following is an apt summary of Benedict's twofold approach to the divine pedagogy and his attitude toward how the believer ought to approach Scripture's "dark" passages:

If I only read the Bible in order to see what horrible bits I can find in it, or to count up the bloodthirsty bits, then of course it won't heal me. For one thing, the Bible reflects a certain history, but it is also a kind of path that leads us in a quite personal way and sets us in the right light. If, therefore, I read the Bible in the spirit

⁴⁹ Benedict XVI, "Biblical Interpretation in Conflict," 27. The Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue eloquently describes this dimension of the divine pedagogy: "[The Church] takes her lead from divine pedagogy. This means learning from Jesus himself, and observing the times and seasons as prompted by the Spirit. Jesus only progressively revealed to his hearers the meaning of the Kingdom, God's plan of salvation realized in his own mystery. Only gradually, and with infinite care, did he unveil for them the implications of his message, his identity as the Son of God, the scandal of the Cross. Even his closest disciples, as the Gospels testify, reached full faith in their Master only through their Easter experience and the gift of the Spirit. *Those who wish to become disciples of Jesus today will pass through the same process of discovery and commitment.*" *Dialogue and Proclamation*, §69 (emphasis added).

⁵⁰ Benedict XVI, *God and the World*, 154.

in which it was written, from Christ . . . in faith, then indeed it has the power to transform me. It leads me into the attitude of Christ; it interprets my life to me and changes me personally.⁵¹

Method C exegesis therefore does not deny the importance of the literal sense, but in light of the divine pedagogy it shows how the literal sense opens up into spiritual senses that touch the lives of believers in every age. For example, what reflective Christian would not find wisdom for life in Origen's spiritual exegesis of Psalm 137, where he exhorts Christians to "dash" our nascent sins before they spawn and grow into unbreakable vices?⁵² Or, to take up an example already mentioned, who would not be inspired with holy fear when seriously pondering the punishments associated with God's "wrath"? While it may not be possible to find such a fitting spiritual interpretation of every problematic biblical text, our emeritus pontiff believes that this is precisely the sort of exegesis that makes a difference in our lives and represents the Bible's ultimate *raison d'être*.

Conclusion

This article has touched on four points of contact between Benedict and Aquinas that offer fruitful avenues for reconciling Benedict's conviction that violence is incompatible with the nature of God with some of Scripture's darkest texts. I first observed the necessity of an "open philosophy" that welcomes the entry of the divine into man's life. Then I illustrated how such a position opens our eyes to see in the Scriptures the divine pedagogy by which God worked to progressively lead his people to the fullness of revelation in Christ. I then surveyed a number of occasions in which we witness Benedict endeavoring to ascertain "the essential point" of biblical texts that when taken at face value appear to contradict God's nature or otherwise contain errors. Finally, I indicated that, while the aforementioned principles may provide a rational basis on which to account for the problem at hand, the most important part of Scripture is that God teaches believers today through its darkest texts when Christians read them according to their spiritual sense. In sum, I believe

⁵¹ Ibid., 155.

⁵² Origen, *Against Celsus*, 7.22.

that these avenues, while obviously not exhaustive, go a long way both toward reconciling problematic biblical texts *and* toward facilitating a spiritual encounter between the faithful and Christ in the "dark" texts of Scripture.



