

Joseph Ratzinger on Biblical Inerrancy

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AFTER ABOUT forty years of relative neglect, interest in the topic of biblical inerrancy has begun to enjoy a modest revival. As an indicator of this trend, one might point to the 2010 post-synodal exhortation *Verbum Domini*, which simultaneously affirms the doctrine of inerrancy (now presented positively as “truth”) and expresses perplexity as to its precise import:

Certainly theological reflection has always considered inspiration and truth as two key concepts for an ecclesial hermeneutic of the sacred Scriptures. Nonetheless, one must acknowledge the need today for a fuller and more adequate study of these realities, in order better to respond to the need to interpret the sacred texts in accordance with their nature. Here I would express my fervent hope that research in this field will progress and bear fruit both for biblical science and for the spiritual life of the faithful.¹

Not leaving the realization of this “fervent hope” to chance, Pope Benedict later proposed the “Inspiration and Truth of the Bible” as the topic for the annual meeting of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in May 2011.² Even certain sectors of the academic guild have begun to treat the

¹ *Verbum Domini* §19, available on the Vatican website. Though *Verbum Domini* generally prefers “truth” to “inerrancy,” it does not fail to cite in this connection *Dei Verbum* §11: the books of Scripture teach “firmly, faithfully and without error.”

² “Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Participants in the Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Biblical Commission” (May 2, 2011), available on the Vatican website.

question afresh,³ even if they do not always do so from Benedict's own perspective.⁴

As a contribution to the "fuller and more adequate study of these realities," this article aims to present Joseph Ratzinger's⁵ own thoughts on biblical inerrancy. These may prove useful on several counts. For one thing, there have been very few attempts—notwithstanding several worthy treatments of Ratzinger's approach to historical criticism⁶—to tease out Ratzinger's thoughts on the particular question of inerrancy. For another, one discovers in Ratzinger's treatment of inerrancy a theological style at once creative and traditional. As such, his thought may serve both as a pattern for and as a stimulus to further theological elaboration.

In the interest of clarity and completeness, we will present Ratzinger's understanding of inerrancy in three stages. We will first lay the groundwork by reviewing the neo-Thomist approach to inerrancy and analyzing Ratzinger's early critique of the same. In the second stage, we will describe how Ratzinger retools the neo-Thomist notion of intention in several important ways: by identifying the People of God as an intending "subject" internal to Scripture; by calling attention to the complex layers of this corporate intentionality; and by reimagining Scripture's mode of intending Christ as its final truth. In the last stage we will turn to the question of method. How does Ratzinger discern what Scripture properly intends and what, therefore, enjoys inerrant status? In this respect, Ratzinger shows himself to be an equal-opportunity "demythologizer":

³ The Center for Scriptural Exegesis, Philosophy, and Doctrine at the University of Dayton hosted, as recently as October 25–27, 2012, a conference entitled "*Dei Verbum* at 50: Toward a Clarification of the Inspiration of Scripture."

⁴ For a recent publication closer to Ratzinger's own approach, see esp. Denis M. Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation: A Theological Introduction to Sacred Scripture* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010). For approaches closer to neo-Thomist versions of inspiration and inerrancy, see Robert L. Fastiggi, "Communal or Social Inspiration: A Catholic Critique," *Letter and Spirit* 6 (2010): 247–63; Brian W. Harrison, "Restricted Inerrancy and the 'Hermeneutic of Discontinuity,'" *Letter and Spirit* 6 (2010): 225–46.

⁵ I mean here to distinguish between Joseph Ratzinger and Benedict XVI. The scope of this study includes the writings of Joseph Ratzinger as private theologian rather than Joseph Ratzinger as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) or Pope. This scope excludes official documents of the CDF or papal encyclicals but includes those commentaries on CDF documents and papal works that were written in a private capacity.

⁶ For book-length treatments, see especially Scott Hahn, *Covenant and Communion: The Biblical Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009); Dorothee Kaes, *Theologie im Anspruch von Geschichte und Wahrheit: Zur Hermeneutik Joseph Ratzingers* (St. Ottilien: EOS, 1997).

he refuses, as a matter of principle, to exclude any field of knowledge—whether scientific, historical, ethical or religious—from Scripture’s intentional horizon; neither does he automatically include any such field. Instead, he measures every claim materially contained in Scripture against the criterion of the substance of living faith. In order to depict his method more concretely, we will conclude by examining Ratzinger’s engagement of a biblical *quaestio disputata*—the existence of the Devil.

Critique of Neo-Scholastic Inerrancy

During the years of Ratzinger’s theological formation, defenders of biblical inerrancy found themselves “crosspressured,” that is, bound in conscience by the Church’s affirmations of Scripture’s total reliability, and bound in mind by contrary scholarly findings. When given the opportunity to speak, as we shall see, Ratzinger favored relaxing this tension by the use of a more supple model of inerrancy.

Instrumental Inspiration and Its Consequences

The conflict between conscience and scholarship was aggravated by certain inescapable implications of the instrumental model of inspiration, the schema then ascendant in academic theology and largely presupposed in the biblical encyclicals.⁷ According to this neo-Thomist model, God, acting as principal cause, employs the sacred authors as his living instrumental causes, thereby bringing it about that the authors both freely and faithfully compose the words that God desires. A consequence of this

⁷ Pierre Benoit, O.P., for example, defined inspiration as a species of divine instrumental causality, at least in a “broad and improper sense” (Paul Synave and Pierre Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration: A Commentary on the Summa Theologica II–II, Questions 171–178*, trans. Avery Dulles and Thomas L. Sheridan [New York: Desclee, 1961], 80). His formulation proved influential. Writing in 1969, James Burtchaell notes, “By and large, the position of Benoit rises as the classic theory of the years immediately after *Divino Afflante Spiritu*” (*Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration since 1810: A Review and Critique* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969], 244–45).

Divino Afflante Spiritu (1943) endorsed this model in a general way: “Catholic theologians, following the teaching of the holy Fathers and especially of the Angelic and Common Doctor, have examined and explained the nature and effects of biblical inspiration more exactly and more fully than was wont to be done in previous ages. For having begun by expounding minutely the principle that the inspired writer, in composing the sacred book, is the living and reasonable instrument (ὄργανον) of the Holy Spirit, they rightly observe that, impelled by the divine motion, he so uses his faculties and powers that from the book composed by him all may easily infer ‘the special character of each one and, as it were, his personal traits’ ” (§19; Dean P. Bechard, ed. and trans. *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002], 128).

highly intimate association between God and the sacred authors is the inadmissibility of error even in Scripture's "secular" (i.e., scientific, historical) judgments.⁸ This inadmissibility follows from a rather common-sense syllogism:

1. Inspiration, understood as God's instrumental use of sacred writers, requires that everything asserted by the sacred writers be asserted by the Spirit.
2. The Spirit, as both Creator and Sanctifier, can assert nothing false in any sphere of human knowledge.
3. Therefore, inspired writers cannot assert formal error according to any human science.

Compelled by this logic, the Church repeatedly condemned all attempts to restrict inerrancy to those portions or aspects of the Bible treating faith and morals. *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) merely reiterates a longstanding tradition when it censures "some Catholic writers" who "ventured to restrict the truth of Sacred Scripture solely to matters of faith and morals, and to regard other matters, whether in the domain of physical science or history, as 'obiter dicta' and—as they contended—in no wise connected with faith."⁹ As long as God was conceived as the principal cause of inspiration and the individual human authors as God's direct instruments, human error remained altogether inadmissible in Sacred Scripture.

The instrumental model of inspiration thus left but a single domain open wherein the exegete could qualify the inerrancy of Scripture without implicating God in falsehood: the domain of the individual author's judgment. Proponents of the instrumental model were quick to point out

⁸ Benoit, for instance, taught that inspiration was an "impulse which totally subjects the mind of a man to the divine influence . . . and which extends to the ultimate realization of the work 'ad verba.' With such a close and complete compenetration of divine and human causality it is impossible that the writer express anything whatever contrary to the divine pleasure" (*Prophecy and Inspiration*, 141).

⁹ *Divino Afflante Spiritu* §1; *The Scripture Documents*, 116. *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) had already condemned those who hold that "divine inspiration regards the things of faith and morals and nothing beyond" (§40; *ibid.*, 55). *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907) had upbraided the modernists for holding that "in the sacred Books there are many passages referring to science and history where manifest errors are to be found" (§118; *ibid.*, 74). *Spiritus Paraclitus* (1920) closed yet another loophole when it condemned the position that the "effects of inspiration—namely, absolute truth and immunity from error—are to be restricted to the primary or religious element" (§5; *ibid.*, 88).

that there can be no error, properly speaking, apart from an act of judgment; one errs not by seeing a mirage, but by judging the mirage to be real. According to neo-Thomist rational psychology, however, the scope and strength of any authorial judgment could be qualified in various ways. Without falling into error *sensu stricto*, an author might choose to consider a matter from a limited perspective, to record content without personally affirming it, or even to reshape events according to literary conventions.¹⁰ In short, whereas inspiration is coextensive with the whole of the author's writing, inerrancy is coextensive only with the region of the author's intentional affirmation.

Neo-Thomist inerrancy proved flexible and rigid in different respects. It was flexible inasmuch as it rendered the boundaries of Scripture's inerrant content as fluid as the boundaries of human intentionality. The identification of inerrant claims was consequently always a matter of conjecture and probability. Nonetheless, after all the likely mental qualifications were tallied, whatever the author did manage to assert was logically held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit. In this respect the theory was unyielding. Hence, whenever an author appeared to stumble into anachronism or to ascribe brutal acts to divine instigation, the exegete was obliged to suppose that the author did not genuinely "intend to affirm" what he in fact wrote.¹¹ Adherence to this strained method of "saving" biblical veracity continued to be strictly enforced up until the Second Vatican Council.

The Challenge of Critical Historiography

Ratzinger, as it turns out, had some part in putting an end to this tense situation. On the very eve of the Council's inauguration, Cardinal Josef Frings invited Ratzinger to address the assembled German-speaking bishops on the subject of *De Fontibus Revelationis* (1962), the draft schema for the Constitution on Divine Revelation. Ratzinger took the opportunity to warn his audience that *De Fontibus*, by prematurely "canonizing" a neo-Scholastic model of inerrancy, ran the risk of committing believers to

¹⁰ This sampling of qualifications roughly follows the threefold classification of Benoit. Writing in the years just after *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, he argues that the author's judgment could be qualified by the author's (1) *formal object*, (2) *degree of affirmation*, and (3) *communicative intention*. For their brief summary of these restrictions, with examples, see Synave and Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration*, 134–41.

¹¹ This strategy continues to have staunch proponents and remains, in the strict sense, logically impossible to disprove. Harrison, for instance, argues that unhistorical references to Nebuchadnezzar are compatible with inerrancy on the grounds that any Ancient Near Eastern author would have employed such names chiefly as "symbols and archetypes" ("Restricted Inerrancy and the 'Hermeneutic of Discontinuity,'" 245).

historical fideism. Perhaps even more importantly, he sketched an alternative approach that lay within the theological horizon of his neo-Scholastic contemporaries, explaining his position with reference to the then-familiar categories of “inerrancy,”¹² “intention,” and “affirmation.” The address thus provides a rare insight into how Ratzinger related the neo-Scholastic conceptual framework to his own.

In his evaluation of *De Fontibus*, Ratzinger shows particular sensitivity to the danger of divorcing theology from history. When reviewing “the topic of Holy Scripture’s inerrancy and historicity,” for instance, Ratzinger regrets that

the schema speaks very sharply . . . as it works out this deduction: God is supreme truth and cannot err; but God dictated the Scripture; therefore, the Scripture is precisely just as free of error as is God himself—“*in qualibet re religiosa vel profana*” Here however the dictation theory that is assumed, as just indicated, expresses no single thought that is specifically Christian.¹³

For Ratzinger, a “specifically Christian” theory would treat inspiration as a dialogue situated within history.¹⁴ By contrast, the neo-Thomist model—here referred to as “dictation theory”¹⁵—tends to conceive of inspiration as God’s unmediated instrumentalization of discrete mental faculties. In its extreme form, this led to a sort of ahistorical leveling of all scriptural affirmations: equally inspired authors should enjoy equal immunity from error in what they properly intend—irrespective of the subject matter they treat or their historical setting. Ratzinger, however, did not care to deny the

¹² To my knowledge, Ratzinger never uses the term “inerrancy” with respect to Scripture in his post-conciliar writings. He prefers instead to speak positively of the “truth” of Scripture.

¹³ Jared Wicks, “Six Texts by Prof. Joseph Ratzinger as *Peritus* before and during Vatican Council II,” *Gregorianum* 89:2 (2008): 233–311, at 280.

¹⁴ “The Bible differs from the holy books of Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam, precisely in this that these are taken to be timeless divine dictation, whereas the Bible is the result of God’s historical dialogue with human beings and only from this history does it have meaning and significance” (ibid., 278–79).

¹⁵ The neo-Thomists themselves would have disputed the justice of this characterization. Benoit, for instance, associates the “hegemony of dictation theory” with the *res et sententia* theory of Cardinal Franzelin, from whom he is at pains to distinguish himself (*Prophecy and Inspiration*, 116). Fr. Sebastian Tromp, S.J., who sat on the preparatory theological commission that produced *De Fontibus*, argues in his Latin “manual” that “*dictatio mechanica*” was heretical: “*Si talis dictatio excludit opus personale intellectuale auctoris sacri, est absolute theologicæ falsa. Homo non tantum non esset auctor, sed ne secretarius quidem; esset scribendi machina*” (*De Sacrae Scripturae Inspiratione*, 6th ed. [Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1962], 94).

existence of biblical *errata*: indeed, he cites as evidence Mark's confusion of the High Priest Abiathar and his father Achimelech (Mk 2:26), the historical discrepancies between Chronicles and Kings, and Daniel's unhistorical identification of Belshazzar as Nebuchadnezzar's son.¹⁶ For Ratzinger, the schema's inability either to incorporate history methodologically or to reckon with its scholarly findings exposed its lack of a truly Christian theological horizon.

The problem for the "dictation theorists" was clear enough: if the sacred author sincerely meant to affirm that Belshazzar was the son of Nebuchadnezzar, then to admit the contrary would make the Holy Spirit as much a liar as to admit that Christ was not the son of Mary.¹⁷ Yet, from Ratzinger's perspective, not to concede such historical infelicities was to baptize stubborn fideism and to consign the Church to an intellectual ghetto.¹⁸

Intention Reconceived

In attempts to reconcile both the strong magisterial affirmations of inerrancy and the contrary historical data, Ratzinger twice invokes authorial intention, the officially sanctioned criterion for determining the limits of biblical inerrancy, in a rather novel way:

¹⁶ Wicks, "Six Texts," 280. It is at least possible that Ratzinger's list of errors affected the course of the Council. It resembles the list of biblical "errors" offered by the Austrian Cardinal König, himself presumably in attendance at Ratzinger's address, from the council floor on Oct. 2, 1964. König lists, for example, both the false appellation in Mk 2:26 and the unhistorical claims of Daniel—though with respect to the date of Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem rather than to his paternity of Belshazzar; see *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* (hereafter *AS*), 6 vols., vols. 1–4 with multiple parts (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970–78), III/3, 275. Fr. Aloys Grillmeier, S.J., considered König's the "most important contribution" to the debate on inerrancy at the Council; see "The Divine Inspiration and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, trans. Glen-Doepl William, vol. 3 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 199–246, at 205.

¹⁷ It is worth noting that Ratzinger does not here engage the neo-Scholastic commonplace of accommodating such historical infelicities through genre criticism. Fr. Tromp, for instance, claimed that biblical authors often wrote in the "*genus antiquum vulgare*"—where sayings are often compressed and combined, chronology is altered for psychological or logical coherence, and "*minor est diligentia et cura in accidentalibus*" (*De Sacrae Scripturae Inspiratione*, 136–37).

¹⁸ In the same vein, Ratzinger commented retrospectively that, if *De Fontibus* had simply reiterated the prohibitions of earlier magisterial statements, this would have resulted "not in the rescue of the faith but in dooming it to sterility, by separating theology once and for all from modern science and confining it in an ivory tower where it would have gradually withered away"; see *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist, 1966), 99.

According to a practically irrefutable consensus of historians there definitely are mistakes and errors in the Bible in profane matters of no relevance for what *Scripture* properly *intends to affirm*.¹⁹

Scripture is and remains inerrant and beyond doubt in everything that *it properly intends to affirm*, but this is not necessarily so in that which accompanies the affirmation and is not part of it. As a result, in agreement with what no. 13 says quite well, the inerrancy of *Scripture* has to be limited to its *vere enuntiata* [what is really affirmed]. Otherwise historical reason will be led into what is really an inescapable conflict.²⁰

Two common features of these statements stand out. First, in restricting inerrancy by appeal to the categories of intention and affirmation, Ratzinger establishes a point of contact with the neo-Thomist theory. Second, and in subtle contrast to this theory, he transfers the locus of intention and affirmation from the human authors to *Scripture* itself. *Scripture* is the grammatical subject of the key verbs in both passages.²¹ This recasting of the neo-Thomist model raises important questions and, as we shall see, has important hermeneutical implications.

Intention As Christologically Differentiated

Soon after offering these clarifications on the problem of *Scripture*'s coherence with "historical reason," Ratzinger takes up the problem of *Scripture*'s self-coherence and, more specifically, of the relation between the Old and New Testaments. As Ratzinger sees it, the weakness of the instrumental model is its tendency to level the assertions of *Scripture* and abstract them from history. Only with difficulty could this approach be reconciled to the teaching that the books of the Old Testament are inspired "with all their parts."²² The cultic commands of the Old Testament, for instance, are

¹⁹ Wicks, "Six Texts," 280; italics mine.

²⁰ Ibid., 280. English italics mine. "No. 13" here refers to the paragraph of *De Fontibus* entitled *Quomodo inerrantia diiudicanda sit*—"How inerrancy is to be discerned"; see AS I/3, 18–19.

²¹ Nor is this personification of *Scripture* unique to Ratzinger's earliest writings. Speaking of abiding content of the Creation account, for example, Ratzinger claims that "*Scripture* would not wish to inform us about how the different species of plant life gradually appeared or how the sun and the moon and the stars were established. Its purpose ultimately would be to say one thing: *God* created the world"; see *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 5.

²² I am here supplying the phrase to which Ratzinger alludes. After listing all the books of *Scripture*, the Council of Trent concludes, "If . . . anyone should not accept as sacred and canonical these books in their entirety and with all their parts . . . let that one be anathema"; see Trent, sess. IV, decr. 1; *The Scripture Documents*, 4.

considered by no one to bind Christians, even though their perpetual observance seems to have been solemnly “intended” by the sacred authors. Since the “dictation theory” viewed truth in a timeless, propositional fashion, those under its sway tended to sort the Old Testament into the perennially true and the utterly defunct elements. Ratzinger also detects this tendency in *De Fontibus* no. 15,²³ inasmuch as it insinuated that “the authority of the Old Testament continues in force in those matters that are related to the founding of the Christian religion.”²⁴ For Ratzinger, this said “both too little and too much.”²⁵ It said too little because it suggested that some parts of the “inspired” Old Testament are consigned entirely to the past. It said too much because it implied that some parts of the Old Testament were already “directly Christian and as such continue in force.”²⁶

Ratzinger, for his part, insists that the “whole Old Testament . . . speaks of Christ, for its intention is Christological and as such it is the basis and foundation of the Christian religion.”²⁷ Every part of the Old Testament undergoes a “Christological transformation,” such that it comes to have “force not from itself but from Christ and in reference to Christ, who is the one who removes the veil that covered the face of Moses (2 Cor 3:12–18).”²⁸ Put another way, the Old Testament remains inspired in all its parts inasmuch as Christ remains its ultimate telos; however, the Old Testament remains distinct from the New inasmuch as the former proposes Christ only indirectly. Ratzinger thus hints that a genuinely Christian theory of inerrancy will account for different modalities of proposing this same Truth.

As Ratzinger saw things in 1962, then, the Church needed a theory of inerrancy that was both historically plausible and internally differentiated according to specifically Christian criteria. Though Ratzinger favored restricting the scope of inerrancy, it is noteworthy that he rejected the material division of Scripture into sacred and profane subjects or passages. He does, however, propose two other limiting principles: first, that Scripture be considered inerrant only *to the extent* that Scripture itself

²³ No. 15 of *De Fontibus* was the paragraph entitled *De auctoritate Veteris Testamenti in Ecclesia*—“On the Authority of the Old Testament in the Church.” The statement to which Ratzinger alludes reads as follows: “Itaque in iis praesertim quae ad Christianae religionis fundamenta sive in verbis sive in historiae rebus, ad finem usque temporis spectant, Veteris Testamenti vis, auctoritas et emolumentum minime enervata sunt.” See AS I/3, 20.

²⁴ Wicks, “Six Texts,” 282.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 283.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

intends; second, that inspiration and inerrancy be understood to extend to all parts of Scripture, but to vary in modality according as the parts stand in relation to Christ. These twin theses guide Ratzinger across the course of his theological career.

The Subject of Scripture and Its Implications

Before showing how Ratzinger uses these two hermeneutical principles to discern inerrant content, we do well to show how both flow from a single seminal insight: identifying the People of God as a “living subject” of Scripture. Even before addressing the German-speaking bishops on *De Fontibus*, Ratzinger had already discovered in his *Habilitation* on St. Bonaventure that medieval theology viewed Scripture differently than contemporary theology does. For the medievals,

“revelation” is always a concept denoting an act. The word refers to the act in which God shows himself, not to the objectified result of this act. And because this is so, the receiving subject is always also part of the concept of “revelation”. Where there is no one to perceive “revelation”, no re-*vel*-ation has occurred, because no *veil* has been removed. By definition, revelation requires a someone who apprehends it. Because, if Bonaventure is right, then revelation precedes Scripture and becomes deposited in Scripture but is not simply identical with it. This in turn means that revelation is always something greater than what is merely written down. And this again means that there can be no such thing as *sola scriptura* . . . because an essential element of Scripture is the Church as understanding subject.²⁹

For Ratzinger, then, revelation is not primarily a text but an act, an act that presupposes a living, believing, corporate subject. And Scripture *qua* revelation—that is, Scripture as it pertains to theology and issues of inerrancy—always bears an inner reference to that subject. On this basis, Ratzinger can ascribe to Scripture (*qua* revelation) an independent intentionality: much as an arrow may be said to “seek” a target by virtue of its archer, Scripture may be said to intend its content by virtue of its subject. Consequently, understanding the scope and modality of Scripture’s intention requires us to explore (1) the complex identity of Scripture’s subject and (2) the hermeneutical implications of that identity. Given its limited scope, this article can treat only the barest of essentials in this regard.

²⁹ *Milestones: Memoirs, 1927–1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998), 108–9. See also *ibid.*, 127.

Scripture's Complex Subject

As Ratzinger sees it, the subject of Scripture exhibits both extensive and intensive complexity. Extensively, Ratzinger depicts Scripture not as the text of a single subject, but as the text of three interlocking subjects of uneven authorial “depth”:

One could say that the books of Scripture involve three interacting subjects. First of all, there is the individual author or group of authors to whom we owe a particular scriptural text. But these authors are not autonomous authors in the modern sense; they form part of a collective subject, the “People of God,” from within whose heart and to whom they speak. Hence this subject is actually the deeper “author” of the Scriptures. And yet, likewise, this people does not exist alone; rather, it is led, and spoken to, by God himself, who—through men and their humanity—is at the deepest level the one speaking.³⁰

Three implications of Ratzinger’s depiction of the subjects of Scripture merit special mention. First, by listing the People of God as a true subject of Scripture, Ratzinger notably departs from the dyadic schema, consisting of God and the individual author, presupposed in the instrumental theory.³¹ Second, Ratzinger presents the interaction of three distinct subjects in such a way as to preclude the possibility of direct conflict. Both the individual author³² and the Church³³ become subjects of Scripture to

³⁰ *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian Walker, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007), xxi.

³¹ For Ratzinger’s anthropological argument that tradition is constitutive of humanity, and that the individual cannot arrive at truth apart from a community, see *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 86–89.

³² “The normative theologians are the authors of Holy Scripture. This statement is valid not only with reference to the objective written document they left behind but also with reference to their manner of speaking, in which it is God himself who speaks”; see *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 321.

³³ Ratzinger explains that the Bible is the Church’s book, “not through a statistical accident, but because the Spirit builds the Church and thereby equally builds her central and universal self-expression, in that the Church does not express herself, but him from whom she comes. This makes it once again evident why one cannot ultimately understand the Bible against the Church, [though] one is still in a position to recognize so many particulars without her”; see *Dogma und Verkündigung* (Munich: Erich Wewel, 1973), 41. All translations from this volume are mine. See also his claim that “the Church is in no wise a separate subject endowed with its own subsistence. The new subject is much rather ‘Christ’ himself, and the Church is nothing but the space of this new unitary subject . . .” in *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Essays to Orient Theology in Today’s Debates*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 54.

the degree that the one God has first become the subject of each. Finally, according to this model, the People of God functions more deeply as the subject of Scripture than does the individual author.

The greater authorial “depth” of the third subject, the People of God, accounts in turn for Scripture’s greater intensive complexity. For if individual authorship is embedded in a “deeper” corporate authorship, Scripture may carry a “deeper value” than that intended by any particular contributor.³⁴ Scripture’s meaning will reflect the “life and times” of a corporate author, which, as Ratzinger sees things, has traversed diverse historical “stages” and “modes” of existence without losing her identity. In this respect, he compares the Church to a

human being, who, by physiological and psychological norms, is but a succession of states yet who knows, for all that, that he is always himself. What constitutes the Church as a subject? What makes her what she is? If we recall that Paul formulated the concept of the Church as a subject that remains constant in the midst of change when he called her a “body” (a “self”), we can look to him also for the answers The Church is constituted a subject by him whom Paul names the Head, namely, Christ.³⁵

In broad strokes, this “succession of states” is nothing other than the People of God’s transition from Old Testament era, to New Testament era, to the age of the Church.³⁶ Despite the often dramatic transformations of the People of God over three millennia, Ratzinger still finds in the person of Christ, who is both the destiny of Israel and the head of the Church, a source of underlying unity.

To sum up, then, Ratzinger can meaningfully assert that Scripture intends its own contents because he conceives of Scripture (*qua* revelation) as text-plus-living-subject. But the living subject, as it turns out, is

³⁴ “[I]t is necessary to keep in mind that any human utterance of a certain weight contains more than the author may have been immediately aware of at the time. When a word transcends the moment in which it is spoken, it carries within itself a ‘deeper value.’ This ‘deeper value’ pertains most of all to words that have matured in the course of faith-history. For in this case the author is not simply speaking for himself or on his own authority. He is speaking from the perspective of a common history that sustains him and that already implicitly contains the possibilities of its future, of the further stages of its journey” (*Jesus of Nazareth*, xx).

³⁵ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 132.

³⁶ For an account of these stages and their corresponding “layers” of tradition, see “The Question of the Concept of Tradition: A Provisional Response,” in *God’s Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, ed. Peter Hünermann and Thomas Söding, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 41–83, at 60–62.

more like three interlocking subjects, one of whom possesses a corporate identity internally differentiated according to historical epochs. The task of interpretation, therefore, is far from straightforward.

*Scripture's Holistic Mode of Intending*³⁷

The complex identity of Scripture's subject is, of course, not without hermeneutical implications. Briefly stated, Ratzinger expects that Scripture's *modus significandi* will follow upon the *modus essendi* of its living subject. And just as the People of God, through union with Christ her head, has retained her identity across all her historical transformations, so will Scripture exhibit a Christological unity, according to which the "individual part derives its meaning from the whole, and the whole derives its meaning from its end—from Christ."³⁸ In light of the identity of its living subject, Scripture calls for a "Christological hermeneutic."³⁹

But Ratzinger's ontology of Scripture carries a further implication. Since the subject that produced Scripture lives on in the Church, it follows that Scripture (*qua* revelation) will overreach its own textual canon. The whole of Scripture comprises not only the Old and New Testaments but also the "living voice" of the Church expressed in her liturgy and doctrine.⁴⁰ Already in advance of the Second Vatican Council, Ratzinger was arguing that the "three realities, Scripture, Tradition and the Church's Magisterium are not static entities placed beside each other but have to be seen as one living organism of the word of God, which from Christ lives on in the Church."⁴¹ In his later writings, this vision is equally in evidence: "It is precisely in this profusion of the forms of faith in the unity of the Old and New Testaments, of the New Testament and early Church dogma, all of these elements together and the ongoing life of faith, which increases the excitement and fecundity of inquiry. To seek the inner unity and totality of truth in the grand historical structure of faith with its abundant contrasts is more stimulating and productive than to cut knots and to assert that this unity does not exist."⁴² Each part of the organism of the word of

³⁷ For a more detailed discussion of Ratzinger's general identification of truth with the whole, see Kaes, *Theologie im Anspruch von Geschichte und Wahrheit*, 46–49.

³⁸ *In the Beginning*, 9.

³⁹ *Jesus of Nazareth*, xix.

⁴⁰ "The teaching office of the apostles' successors does not represent a second authority alongside Scripture but is inwardly a part of it. This *viva vox* is not there to restrict the authority of Scripture . . ." See "What in Fact Is Theology?" in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, ed. Stephen Otto Horn and Vincent Pfnür, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 29–37, at 35.

⁴¹ Wicks, "Six Texts," 277.

⁴² *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 96–97.

God—Old Testament, New Testament, Dogma—retains its proper traits, its distinct mode of intending Christ; still, only as an ensemble do they begin to express the depth of the Christian mystery.⁴³ And it is only the attitude of faith that sees the whole in this welter of tensions and contrasts.

Yet the reverse is also true. Only a book whose internal perspectives are dialectical and mutually corrective can really point beyond itself to the ineffable truth of faith. For Ratzinger, the depth of Scripture is evident in its penchant for primordial images and untidy narratives: “The deeper human words penetrate into the essence of reality, the more insufficient they become. All of this emerges more clearly if we turn our attention to the concrete evidence of the language of faith, which is characterized by two immediately obvious facts. First, this speech consists of images, not concepts. Second, it presents itself in a historical succession of statements.”⁴⁴ The verbal icons of Scripture realize their true expressive potential only in synergy: “Scripture . . . never tolerates the monarchical supremacy of a single image. By utilizing many images, it keeps open a perspective on the Indescribable.”⁴⁵ Indeed, the very strain of reconciling these images pressures the reader toward a more searching encounter with Christ, who alone can “give back to us, renewed, the truth of the images.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Ratzinger also employs musical images to express the idea of organic unity: “*Symphonia* serves to express the unity of the Old and New Testaments—which is the unity of law and gospel, of prophets and apostles, but also the unity of the diverse writings of the New Testament among themselves. At issue here is the basic form of the expression of truth in the Church, a form which rests upon a structure enriched by manifold tensions. The truth of faith resonates not as a mono-phony but as sym-phony, not as a homophonic, but as a polyphonic melody composed of the many apparently quite discordant strains in the contrapuntal interplay of law, prophets, Gospels, and apostles” (ibid., 83–84). Again, “The Church was right to reject Tatian’s attempt to create a unified gospel: no such literal harmonization can be the Gospel itself. It is as a *choir of four* that the Gospel comes before the understanding of faith . . .”; see *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein and Aidan Nichols (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 41; italics mine.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 93–94. See also Ratzinger’s description of the twofold transcendence of revelation over Scripture in “The Question of the Concept of Tradition,” 53, as well as his explanation of the similar deficiencies of dogmatic language in *Das Problem der Dogmengeschichte in der Sicht der Katholischen Theologie* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1966), 25.

⁴⁵ *Eschatology*, 237. He remarks elsewhere, “In the Bible itself the images are free and they correct themselves ongoingly. In this they show, by means of a gradual and interactive process, that they are only images, which reveal something deeper and greater”; see *In the Beginning*, 15.

⁴⁶ *In the Beginning*, 16.

Through the self-effacement of its contrastive yet convergent elements, Scripture directs the reader beyond itself and toward Christ.

One might say, in summary, that Ratzinger's holistic model of inerrancy both simplifies and complicates the intention of Scripture. It simplifies Scripture's intention by furnishing metaphysical grounds for expecting an overarching biblical intentionality. These grounds are the organic interpenetration of Scripture's three subjects—God, the People of God, the human authors—and the underlying unity of the People of God across her historical pilgrimage.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Ratzinger's model also “complicates” matters because it presents Scripture's global intention—the mystery of Christ—as internally differentiated. Changing the metaphor, we might describe scriptural truth as a light refracted through the prism of human history into a spectrum of “successive states.” The pure light of Christ becomes visible again to the extent that one reverses this spectrification, bending the various bands—Old Testament, New Testament, and Church—back toward a common center. This is accomplished by marking how, according to each of her historical “phases,” the one People of God “intends” and “affirms” the language of her faith in diverse yet complementary ways.⁴⁸

Discerning the Intention of Scripture

Having explored Scripture's holistic *modus significandi*, we are finally in a position to explain Ratzinger's method for distinguishing Scripture's proper affirmations from what merely accompanies them. This is best presented in stages. First, we will first present Ratzinger's understanding of inerrancy with respect to scientific, historical, and ethical-religious matters. Then we will introduce the Catholic version of “demythologization” that

⁴⁷ Ratzinger remarks, “If one strikes out the continuity of a subject that which organically traverses the whole of history and which remains one with itself through its transformations, nothing is left beyond contradictory speech fragments which cannot subsequently be brought into any relation”; see *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 95.

⁴⁸ Apropos of this holistic biblical hermeneutic, it is useful to call attention to a passage that, despite falling outside the scope of the present study, serves to illustrate the continuity between Ratzinger and Benedict XVI on this score. In the same address in which he asked the Pontifical Biblical Commission for a renewed reflection on biblical inerrancy, Benedict XVI observed, “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” (“Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Participants in the Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Biblical Commission”).

Ratzinger develops in explicit conversation with Bultmann. Finally, we will examine a concrete *quaestio disputata* probed by Ratzinger: whether Scripture inerrantly teaches the existence of the Devil.

Historical, Scientific, Ethical-Religious Claims

On Ratzinger's view, Scripture intends to affirm its own expressions only as pointing beyond themselves, that is, as a material witness to the single complex truth that is God's self-disclosure in Christ. He does not, however, narrow the inerrancy of Scripture to matters of faith and morals. Rather, because Christ, the incarnate Logos, grounds all rationality, the intention of Scripture must also encompass scientific, historical and religious claims—though only to the extent that each bears upon faith in Christ.

With respect to science and history, Ratzinger makes this point clear in his article "Exegesis and the Magisterium of the Church" (2003). The relationship between the claims of scientific reason and the claims of the Scripture, he argues, "can never be settled once and for all, because the faith attested to by the Bible also involves the material world; the Bible still makes claims about this world—concerning its origin as a whole and man's origin in particular."⁴⁹ Given that the claims of faith and science do overlap, the value of Scripture's depictions of the cosmos cannot be denied a priori, but must be judged on a case-by-case basis.

After briefly affirming this basic relationship between scientific and biblical truth, Ratzinger—echoing the argumentation of *Providentissimus Deus*⁵⁰—goes on to affirm that "something analogous can be said with respect to history."⁵¹ If the Incarnation is taken seriously, then the relevance of historical data to faith cannot be precluded tout court:

The opinion that faith as such has nothing to do with historical facts and must leave their investigation to the historians is Gnosticism. It dis-

⁴⁹ "Exegesis and the Magisterium of the Church," in *Opening Up the Scriptures: Joseph Ratzinger and the Foundations of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Luis Sánchez Navarro (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 126–36, at 134.

⁵⁰ *Providentissimus Deus* taught that the Bible speaks inerrantly on scientific matters and—in an analogous way—on historical matters: "The Catholic interpreter, although he should show now that those facts of natural science that investigators affirm to be now quite certain are not contrary to the Scripture rightly explained, must nevertheless always bear in mind that much which has been held and proved as certain has afterwards been called into question and rejected The principles laid down here will apply to cognate sciences and especially to History" (§40; *The Scripture Documents*, 54).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

incarnates the faith and turns it into a pure idea. But precisely the ontological realism of historical events is intrinsically constitutive of the faith that originates from the Bible. A God that cannot intervene in history and show himself in it is not the God of the Bible. For this reason, the reality of Jesus' birth from the Virgin Mary, the real institution of the Last Supper by Jesus himself, his bodily Resurrection from the dead—the fact that the tomb was empty—are all an element of the faith itself that it can and must defend against supposedly better historical knowledge.⁵²

Still, despite his insistence upon the fundamental historicity of Scripture, Ratzinger does not show himself much exercised by the difficulty of harmonizing every historical detail. The presence of Christ reliably transmitted through tradition frees Christians from dependence on precarious reconstructions of Jesus' *ipsissima vox*.⁵³ Tensions in historical narratives may, in fact, serve to indicate that the truth intended lies on a higher plane than mere historical fact.⁵⁴

In various other writings, Ratzinger extends this analogy even to matters of religious observance and morality. He acknowledges, for instance, that contemporary historical awareness has rendered Scripture's authority problematic even in religious matters:

⁵² Ratzinger, "Exegesis and the Magisterium of the Church," 134. For Ratzinger's approval of "informed realism" with respect to the infancy narratives, an attitude shunning both "naïve realism" and "total capitulation to the thought patterns that arose from the Enlightenment," see his "Preface" in René Laurentin, *The Truth of Christmas Beyond the Myths: The Gospels of the Infancy of Christ* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's, 1986), xiii–xiv, at xiii. See also his flexible understanding of "historicity": "[I]n stressing the objective truth of the history of Jesus, it seems improper to list the infancy narrative, resurrection from the dead, and ascension beside each other on the same level" (Wicks, "Six Texts," 281). Finally, for a more detailed discussion of the diverse relationships to history suggested by the nature of these events, see his early debate with Walter Kasper in "Glaube, Geschichte, und Philosophie," *Hochland* 61 (1969): 533–43, at 539–40.

⁵³ "Over against such fragmentary authorities (*Teilautoritäten*) the vital power of Tradition has for me an incomparably greater weight. Therefore the fight over the *ipsissima vox* has no terribly great meaning for me"; see *Dogma und Verkündigung*, 140. Cf. his statement: "The Gospel does not confront the Church as a self-enclosed *Ding-an-sich*. Herein lies the fundamental methodological error of trying to reconstruct the *ipsissima vox Jesu* as a yardstick for Church and New Testament alike" (*Eschatology*, 41).

⁵⁴ With respect to the diverse narratives of the Last Supper, for example, Ratzinger posits that "each strand selects a different reference point. In this way all the essential covenant ideas flow together in the ensemble of utterances at the Last Supper and are fused into a new unity"; see *Many Religions, One Covenant: Israel, the Church, and the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999), 59.

[T]he Bible, venerated by faith as the word of God, has been disclosed to us, by historical-critical scholarship, as a thoroughly human book. Not only are its literary forms those of the world that produced it, but its manner of thought, even in respect to religious topics, has been determined by the world in which it arose.⁵⁵

Here the obsolescence of the Mosaic Law serves as an obvious example.⁵⁶ However, Ratzinger finds even certain New Testament ethical and religious directives so culture-bound as to be “purely of human right.”⁵⁷ As examples he cites *loci classici* already well known to the Fathers of Trent: “the stipulations of James, the veiling of women, marriage legislation of 1 Corinthians 7.”⁵⁸ As it turns out, ethical and religious directives are subject to the same methodological scrutiny as historical and scientific claims.

Worldview and Demythologization

In each domain, then—science, history, religion and morality—a similar problem surfaces regarding the relationship between the perennial truth of revelation and the transitory thought world in which it is mediated. Quite simply, the former must be held as inerrant and binding, whereas the latter, the “mythology” of Scripture’s cultural container, may be left behind. In an essay predating even his address to the German bishops, Ratzinger observed, “Catholic theology has always practiced the ‘demythologization’ of Scripture—that is, the spiritual translation of its social imaginary (*Bildwelt*) into the contemporary intellectual world (*Verständniswelt*) of the believer—and practices it still today to a high degree in the discrimination between expressive form and expressive content (*Aussageform und -inhalt*).”⁵⁹ As the word of God in a human *Bildwelt*, Scripture requires “demythologization” by its very nature.

Ratzinger has evoked the relationship between “truth” and “myth” in writings spanning the length of his career, usually through the guiding metaphor of center and periphery. Accordingly, one must distinguish “core” (*Kern*) and “shell” (*Schale*),⁶⁰ “revelation” (*Offenbarung*) and “shell” (*Schale*),⁶¹

⁵⁵ *Faith and the Future* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1971), 9.

⁵⁶ “Consequently the law of Moses, the rituals of purification, the regulations concerning food, and all other such things are not to be carried out by us; otherwise the biblical word would be senseless and meaningless” (*In the Beginning*, 16).

⁵⁷ *Church, Ecumenism, Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology*, trans. Robert Nowell (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 97.

⁵⁸ “The Question of the Concept of Tradition,” 78.

⁵⁹ “Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung des Neuen Testaments,” *Religionsunterricht an Höheren Schulen* 3 (1960): 2–11, at 8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

the “content of the expression” (*Aussageinhalt*) and the “form of the expression” (*Aussageform*),⁶² “faith” and “worldview” (*Weltbild*),⁶³ the “outward form of the message” and the “real message of the whole,”⁶⁴ the “form of portrayal” and the “content that is portrayed.”⁶⁵ Such discernment between the intended and accidental contents of Scripture becomes a perennial task for the Church and her theologians.

Though Ratzinger shows a surprising sympathy for “demythologization,” he also takes pains to distinguish his own version from the Marburg exegete’s. To Ratzinger’s thinking, Bultmann goes wrong not by attempting to separate truth from “myth,” but by making Scripture’s compatibility with existentialist philosophy the chief criterion for so doing. Academic philosophies inevitably offer “criteria alien to revelation” (*Offenbarungsfremde Kriterien*):⁶⁶

What is revelation and what is shell (*Schale*) can never be ascertained by the individual theologian—from his own perspective—on the basis of scholarly presuppositions (*wissenschaftlicher Vorgegebenheiten*); this, in the end, only the living community of faith can decide, which—as the Body of Christ—is the abiding presence of Christ, who does not let the disposal of his work slip from his grasp.⁶⁷

Given the origin and nature of the Scripture, only the “living substance of the living faith of the Church”⁶⁸ can serve as a suitable criterion for demythologization. Reliance on any other standard inevitably ends up strapping revelation to the Procrustean bed of intellectual fashions.

Case Study: Galileo and the Devil

This appeal to the criterion of communal faith, however, brings its own set of challenges. The Church’s faith, for instance, ordinarily reposes in an existential unity of sanctity, liturgy, and doctrine. Moreover, the internal variety and historical expansiveness of this community make her faith an unwieldy instrument for sifting the intended and accidental content of Scripture. Still, Ratzinger does attempt in a little-known piece, “*Abschied vom Teufel?*” (1973), to show how the Church’s living substance can be analyzed into more serviceable sub-criteria and then applied to a biblical *quaestio disputata*.

⁶² Ibid., 10.

⁶³ *Dogma und Verkündigung*, 228.

⁶⁴ “Exegesis and the Magisterium of the Church,” 134.

⁶⁵ *In the Beginning*, 5.

⁶⁶ Ratzinger, “Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung des Neuen Testaments,” 10.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

In “*Abschied*,” Ratzinger responds to Tübingen *Alttestamentler* Herbert Haag’s contention that the biblical motif of the “Devil” is nothing other than the concept of “sin” in mythological garb. Haag is arguing, in Ratzingerian terms, that the notion of personal evil represents a historically conditioned *Schale*, whose abiding *Kern* is reducible to personal and social sin.

Ratzinger disputes Haag’s conclusion. He replies, however, not by denying the legitimacy of demythologization as such, but by denying that Haag has applied the correct “tests” (*Maßstäbe*). Diagnosing the domain of Scripture’s true intention requires an investigation of four relationships: (1) the relationship between the two Testaments with respect to the affirmation in question, (2) the relationship of the affirmation to the inner shape of Christian existence, (3) the relationship of the affirmation to the Church, and (4) the relationship to right reason. Clarifying his position through contrast, Ratzinger submits to this diagnostic battery two ostensibly parallel cases: Galileo’s call for the demythologization of Scripture’s geocentrism, and Haag’s call for the demythologization of the Devil. He applies each of the four tests in turn.

According to Ratzinger, the first test, which turns on the relationship between the two Testaments, already begins to distance Galileo’s case from Haag’s. With respect to cosmology and creation, the scope of the biblical affirmation contracts considerably in the transition from Old to New Testament. “If one applies this test (*Maßstab*), it becomes evident that John 1:1 is the New Testament’s reception of the Genesis text and that it sums up its colorful depictions in a single expression: In the beginning was the Word. Everything else was thereby relegated to the world of images.” Whereas preoccupation with cosmology shows a “movement of contraction” from Old Testament to New, interest in the demonic shows a “movement of expansion.” “The representation of demonic powers enters only haltingly (*zögernd*) into the Old Testament; by contrast, it achieves in the life of Jesus an unheard of vehemence, which remains valid in Paul and in the last writings of the New Testament.” Since the two cases show contrary developmental trajectories, they cannot be equated.⁶⁹

The second test, the “relationship of an expression to the inner fullness of faith and the life of faith,” yields similar results. Ratzinger observes that Christ not only drives out demons but also hands this mission on to his disciples in such wise that it comes to belong to the way of discipleship itself. In other words, “The form of Jesus, its spiritual physiognomy, does not change, whether the sun revolves around the earth or the earth moves around the sun . . . but it changes decisively, if one cuts out of it the expe-

⁶⁹ For all references in this paragraph, see *Dogma und Verkündigung*, 229–30.

rience of struggle against the power of the demonic kingdom.” If we can no longer affirm a reality so central to the self-understanding of Christ and his followers, then we cannot claim to share in the same faith.⁷⁰

The third test represents an extension from the “spiritual physiognomy” of Christ to the spiritual physiognomy of the *totus Christus*, the Church. Here Ratzinger supposes that at the heart of the Church’s “fundamental form (*Grundform*) of prayer and life” lies the baptismal liturgy. The great doctrinal affirmations of the fourth century—the divinity of Christ, the divinity of the Spirit, the Trinity—were decided precisely so as to accord with the language and experience of Christian worship. St. Basil upheld the full divinity of the Holy Spirit principally on the grounds that one “must be able to take [the baptismal liturgy] at its word.” Yet this same baptismal liturgy takes the Devil so much in earnest that the “exorcism and the renunciation of the devil belong to the core event (*Kerngeschehen*) of baptism; the latter, together with profession of Jesus Christ, forms the indispensable entryway into the sacrament.” Among the signs related to the baptism, Ratzinger points also to the perfection of baptismal life—the witness of heroic sanctity. The fact that the Church’s exemplary believers, even to this day, evince an acute sensitivity to the demonic, indicates that belief in the Devil’s existence belongs to the Church’s living faith and thus to Scripture’s abiding content. Geocentrism, in contrast to the foregoing, touches only tangentially upon the Church’s liturgical life and her existential form.⁷¹

The final test in the “question of ‘worldview’” (*Frage des ‘Weltbildes’*) is an affirmation’s “compatibility with scientific knowledge.” Ratzinger heartily agrees that faith ultimately “cannot contradict established scientific knowledge.” The scientific proof of heliocentrism long ago revealed that geocentrism belongs to Scripture’s mythical shell. Ratzinger observes, however, that Haag argues for the irrationality of demons, not on the basis of scientific data, but on the basis of their incompatibility with “our worldview.” Ratzinger concedes that demons are incompatible with “a world functionally considered.” He denies, however, that this is the same as rational contradiction. Besides, within the horizon of “pure

⁷⁰ For all references in this paragraph, see *ibid.* 230–31.

⁷¹ For all references in this paragraph, see *ibid.* 231–32. For similar reasons, Ratzinger resists treating the categories of “sacrifice” (*Opfer*) and “atonement” (*Sühne*) as later New Testament theologoumena foreign to Christ’s self-understanding: “For then logically the whole tradition of the sacrificial words of the eucharistic celebration also becomes invalid” (*hinfällig*); see *Gespräch über Jesus: Papst Benedikt XVI im Dialog mit Martin Hengel, Peter Stuhlmacher und seinen Schülern in Castelgandolfo 2008* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 89.

functionalism,” he argues, “there is place neither for God nor for the human person as human person, but only for the human person as function; much more is at stake here than simply the idea of the ‘Devil.’” Any worldview incompatible with the “Devil” is also incompatible with God, with human interiority, and ultimately with “sin” in the Christian sense. Haag’s approach ends not in a subtle discrimination between *Kern* and *Schale*, but in a wholesale rejection of *Kern* and *Schale* alike.⁷²

Ratzinger’s and Haag’s brands of demythologization clearly yield different verdicts. Though both approaches relegate geocentrism to the realm of “myth,” Ratzinger’s differs from Haag’s in retaining the Devil as a core affirmation of Scripture. It is worth noting that Ratzinger’s four criteria for “Catholic” demythologization do not entail any a priori restriction of inerrancy to faith and morals. Methodologically speaking, scientific, historical, moral, and religious contents are treated alike as elements of *Weltbild*; calls for demythologization are countenanced in each field insofar as they prove compatible with the Church’s perennial faith.

Conclusion

Having reviewed Ratzinger’s version of demythologization, we are now in a position to conclude with some brief doctrinal observations. His approach to inerrancy, needless to say, does not align neatly with the approach taken by the biblical magisterium of the early twentieth century. Ratzinger is not unaware of this fact. In his commentary on *Donum Veritatis* (1990), the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of a Theologian*, he frankly concedes the need to discriminate among the magisterial decisions of the “antimodernist” era. Applying the now-familiar distinction between abiding center and transient periphery, Ratzinger accepts that

there are magisterial decisions which cannot be the final word in a given matter as such but, despite the permanent value of their principles, are chiefly also a signal for pastoral prudence, a sort of provisional policy. *Their kernel remains valid*, but the particulars determined by circumstances can stand in need of correction. In this connection, one

⁷² For all references in this paragraph, see *Dogma und Verkündigung*, 232–33. In defending the reservation of the priesthood to men, Ratzinger similarly rejects functionalist criteria as the true standard of justice or rationality: “Priesthood cannot be understood according to the criteria of functionality, decision-making power, and expediency, but only on the basis of the Christological criterion which gives it its nature as a sacrament.” See his “Introduction” in *From “Inter Insigniores” to “Ordinatio Sacerdotalis”*: *Documents and Commentaries*, ed. Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), 5–17, at 15.

will probably call to mind both the pontifical statements of the last century regarding freedom of religion and the antimodernist decisions of the beginning of this century, especially the decisions of the then Biblical Commission.⁷³

Hence, without offering a catalogue of particulars, Ratzinger affirms the presence of certain “mythical” features in the antimodernist biblical magisterium.

On the basis of Ratzinger’s own practice of biblical interpretation, however, we are better positioned to infer at least a partial catalogue. On the side of the core “principles” of “permanent value,” Ratzinger would keep the prohibition against restricting inerrancy aprioristically to matters of faith and morals. Inasmuch as the historical and scientific impinge upon the faith, they cannot be excluded generically. Moreover, Ratzinger would continue to uphold a leading hermeneutical principle of the early biblical encyclicals—namely, that the inerrancy of Scripture extends only as far as the intention of its subject. He himself uses a variety of this pattern of reasoning to argue that the Devil is ineligible for “demythologization.”

To the side of the corrigible “particulars determined by circumstances,” on the other hand, Ratzinger would probably consign certain background assumptions of the biblical magisterium. These would include, first of all, the instrumental model of inspiration with its dyadic model of authorship. Ratzinger explicitly opts for a triadic model of authorship, where God and the human author interact through the medium of corporate personality—the People of God. A hermeneutical domino-effect ensues. Ratzinger can now present the People of God as the primary created “intender” of Scripture, and the Truth of Christ as what Scripture primarily “intends.” This arrangement calls in turn for a “holistic” model of Truth and an ecclesial hermeneutic. Hence, Ratzinger would not equate Scripture’s inerrant content (*pace* the antimodernist biblical encyclicals) with what individual, historical authors “intended to affirm,” but instead with the requirements of the Church’s faith in Christ. One could see these modifications as Ratzinger’s attempt to transpose a hermeneutic of individual authorship, the core tenets of which were given in the biblical encyclicals, into a hermeneutic of (predominantly) corporate authorship. In this sense, he furnishes a pattern of creative fidelity.

Is Ratzinger’s proposal the final word on inerrancy? Judging by his own call (as Benedict XVI) for further theological reflection, not even he thinks so. One might wonder, for example, whether Ratzinger’s fluid “tests” would

⁷³ *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 106; italics mine.

render such a clean verdict when applied to other disputed questions of *Weltbild*, such as New Testament teachings on gender roles or slavery. Quite apart from the questions of ecclesial discernment, moreover, there remains the question of the coherence of the ecclesial model of inspiration/authorship that undergirds Ratzinger's model of inerrancy. It has recently been argued, for instance, that a corporate model of inspiration is ultimately incompatible with the notion of a "deposit" of faith, since it presents the Church not as Scripture's servant and guardian, but as its ongoing author.⁷⁴ A thorough appraisal of Ratzinger's hermeneutic would require a deeper exploration of both the necessity and the exact nature of the distinction between inspired authorship and infallible preservation.⁷⁵

These open questions notwithstanding, Ratzinger's model does offer certain advantages. First, it is sufficiently flexible to accommodate a variety of exegetical conclusions. It commits the Catholic exegete neither to vindicating every doubtful historical detail of Scripture nor to supposing that the historical author did not really intend what he wrote. Second, and despite the fluidity of his criteria, Ratzinger does not present Scripture as totally—or even largely—without inerrant content. Indeed, he insists that Scripture makes definite claims, and that these claims can be adjudicated by the faith of the Church. Finally, by putting truth and "worldview" in a *tantum-quantum* relationship and by making the substance of ecclesial faith the touchstone for distinguishing them, Ratzinger manages to present an account of inerrancy at once hermeneutically sophisticated and metaphysically integrated. The canonical books emerge as inerrant "with all their parts," but only to the extent that they bear upon the intention of the whole—the mystery of Christ. N-V

⁷⁴ Fastiggi, "Communal or Social Inspiration," 260–62. Fastiggi treats in detail only the theories of Karl Rahner, S.J., Dennis McCarthy, S.J., and John McKenzie, S.J., but concludes that any social theory of inspiration would labor under similar difficulties.

⁷⁵ This question deserves a separate treatment, one detailing Ratzinger's creative appropriation of St. Bonaventure's theology of revelation and history, the subject of his *Habilitation* (1955). For the English translation, see *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, trans. Zachary Hayes, O.F.M. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1971), 77–80.