

# JESUS OF NAZARETH AND THE RENEWAL OF NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

• Denis Farkasfalvy •

“Pope Benedict wants to help modern Gospel studies reset their focus not just on Christology but on the sonship of Jesus as the ultimate reality on which the validity of every statement in the Gospels—in fact, in all the New Testament—depends.”



As he mentions, Pope Benedict XVI began the project of his book *Jesus of Nazareth* the two summers (2003 and 2004) preceding his election in April of 2005. Only a superficial reader would think that this is another “Jesus Book” in the vein of those remarkable publications that shaped many young intellectuals in the middle of the twentieth century, such as Giovanni Papini’s *Story of Jesus*<sup>1</sup> or Karl Adam’s *Jesus Christus*,<sup>2</sup> or, somewhat later, Romano Guardini’s *The Lord*<sup>3</sup> and Daniel-Rops’s *Jesus and His Time*.<sup>4</sup> Although the Pope even names these books as works which significantly influenced his formation, his work is no mere reiteration of them. Nor can his book be compared to those other “Jesus Books,” which have tried

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<sup>1</sup>First published in Italian in 1921.

<sup>2</sup>The German original was published in 1933.

<sup>3</sup>*Der Herr*, first published in 1937.

<sup>4</sup>In French, *Jésus en son temps*, first published in 1944. All these books were translated and published several times.

to harmonize the canonical Gospels while explicitly and consciously confronting the issues raised by the historical-critical method.<sup>5</sup> What Pope Benedict has authored is truly a first, calling for a fresh look and a careful examination. It represents a very serious assessment, partly positive and partly quite critical, of the impact critical exegesis of the Gospels had on the forty years of Catholic theology following the Second Vatican Council. Without exaggeration one can say that in these pages an extraordinary theologian confronts the enormous problems Catholic theology faces today as an aftermath of its almost unlimited and often uncritical consumption of modern biblical scholarship. These problems may be summarized in the following points: (1) a gap—sometimes an abyss—separating exegesis and theology; (2) a growing alienation between modern research on Jesus and Christology; and (3) the collapse of pre-conciliar apologetics followed by the mostly unsuccessful efforts to construct the new discipline of fundamental theology.

The book's success among students of the Bible and theologians will chiefly depend on the way its introductory twenty-four pages (i–xxiv) are received and evaluated.

The readership addressed, however, seems to consist of a public much wider than a scholarly audience of specialists. In its style and approach, the book appears to be what the French used to call *haute vulgarisation*, addressing “college-educated” Catholics with an intellectual bent. But by the assumptions it makes about the reader's acquaintance with the subject matter and by the depth of its argument, it is also bound to attract and challenge a readership of theologians, religious men and women with an intellectual formation trying to look beyond the fences surrounding their trade, philosophers of all sorts, cultural historians, and the essayists and lecturers whose thoughts feed the major articles in leading magazines. On the one hand, then, the appeal of this book extends beyond the confines of biblical scholarship, yet it remains capable of seriously influencing intelligent people in this broader realm. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine a biblical scholar casually running his fingers across its pages without taking the Pope's arguments quite seriously and realizing that, in the long run, the whole future of his *métier* depends on this book's impact.

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<sup>5</sup>One of the best known works of this type is Giuseppe Riciotti's *Life of Jesus Christ*, first published in Italian in 1941.

### I. The method

This book is the work of a systematic theologian. Therefore its methodology as laid out in its short first section is of much greater importance than is the case with comparable publications about biblical topics. One might also say that the ultimate issue of the book is the legitimacy, the limitations, and the usefulness of the historical critical method. One might, therefore, profit a great deal from reading only the book's first chapter. In it, Pope Benedict makes the following points:

1. The historical-critical method is not only allowed by the Catholic Christian faith, but it is essential and therefore compulsory. For biblical faith the historicity—and thus the “facticity”—of the Incarnation is indispensable. Faith demands that we consider Jesus as approachable by historical research.

2. But the historical method entails limitations that must be recognized. Most importantly it approaches its subject as belonging to the past. It may make it approximate the present, and it can try to apply its findings to present-day situations, but it cannot make its subject part of the present.

3. Furthermore, the historical method assumes “the uniformity of the context in which the events of history unfold.” The German text is indeed a challenge,<sup>6</sup> but we must not give up on paraphrasing it more accurately; it seems to me that we are dealing here with an exceptionally deep and pertinent insight. The historical method *a priori* assumes that history is homogeneous: events happen in the same way today as they did yesterday and will tomorrow. By assumption, history constitutes a closed system and, to borrow a metaphor from mathematics, the unfolding of events is like a continuous function: no matter how thin a slice we take of it and how precisely we deconstruct it, the causal links are of the same nature. Such a method excludes by definition the possibility of divine intervention: salvation history is a *contradictio in terminis*. History must be thought of as entirely and exclusively human.

4. The Pope next attempts to lead us out of the narrow confines of the historical method by sketching in a few pages his theology of inspiration. That theology can be summarized under two headings:

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<sup>6</sup>“Gleichmässigkeit des Geschehenszusammenhangs der Geschichte.”

a) Experience teaches us that human utterances express and signify more than what their speakers or writers intend. Thus the biblical world which the historical method projects as something closed is in fact known to be open to transcendental intervention. In view of the transcendence of the human word in personal exchange, the historical method must recognize and spell out its own limits. It must declare that it cannot claim to have the last word on the essence and meaning of history. As far as ultimate beginnings and ends are concerned, either in large or in small dimensions, it cannot claim to determine what ultimately moves and determines the process of history.

b) When applied to the Bible, the historical-critical method itself uncovers a dynamic of “remembering and retelling” as well as anticipation and prophetic interpretation, a framework in which texts point beyond themselves both back into the past and forward into the future, a process held together by the sameness of God’s People marching through history toward its fullness in Christ. It is through this process that Scripture comes about and the Canon is shaped: scriptural texts become Scripture (“*Schrifte*” become “*Schrift*”). At this point Pope Benedict mentions “the project of canonical exegesis” undertaken some thirty years ago by “a group of American exegetes.”<sup>7</sup> He uses the French term “*re-lecture*,” and Rahner’s word “*Schriftwerdung*,” made popular some fifty years ago. He also evokes the patristic concept of “the unity of the Bible” and the patristic-medieval theory of the four scriptural senses re-discovered for modern theology by Henri de Lubac.

One may regret the brevity and succinctness of the presentation, but Pope Benedict does not fail to demonstrate that his exegetical system is the one that made Vatican II happen. Almost each paragraph on these pages is closely connected with insights coming from Rahner, de Lubac, Congar, and Daniélou, even if he does not quote them extensively.<sup>8</sup> But the exegetical system outlined

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<sup>7</sup>Without mentioning by name he is referring to Brevard Childs whose followers have just recently convened in Rome at the Pontifical Biblical Institute.

<sup>8</sup>He explicitly quotes only Daniélou (four times) and de Lubac (twice), but we know from his commentary on *Dei Verbum* (on which he explicitly relies) that he attributed its synthesis to the genius of Yves Congar. His statement that “Scripture emerged from within the heart of a living subject—the pilgrim People of God—and keeps on living in the same subject” summarizes Rahner’s theology of inspiration in a more accessible language than Rahner himself was able to do it.

by Pope Benedict is based on further presuppositions which he does not explain in this book, but which are fairly well known from other publications. He assumes a certain theological anthropology in which he connects man's historical existence with his capability for transcendence. He also presupposes a certain concept of history which he applies to the concept of revelation: revelation is itself history, and Scripture comes about in a cumulative series of re-readings, conditioned by the interplay of both divine illumination of chosen individuals and the communal appropriation of the meanings assigned to events and experiences. He assumes an ecclesiology of "the pilgrim People of God" walking through all human history, an understanding which "alone can guarantee that the words of the Bible are always in the present" (xxi). This system is aimed at saving both the openness of history to transcendence and the unfading actuality of the biblical word.

I cannot help seeing in this book a grand balancing act of an aged but uncommonly talented and trained acrobat as he walks on a tightrope from exegesis to theology, crossing over an immense abyss of doubts and uncertainties about the historical reliability of the Gospels and the capacity of fallen man's power of reasoning. In the full publicity of the Church—indeed of the whole Christian world—the Pope probes issue by issue the main exegetical problems that have kept open the gap between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, and he asserts that the two converge so that Faith and Reason can jointly embrace the one Jesus Christ. None of the chapters seems intended to say the "last word" on any given issue. In fact, the Pope challenges his readers to ponder and re-evaluate his arguments. What he intends to demonstrate is that faith and history can be practiced in a mutually constructive relationship.

## *II. The program and its execution*

### *(a) Jesus' ministry and teaching*

The program of the book is certainly neither timid nor understated. The author does not dwell on those issues on which a consensus could be easily reached. On the contrary, from chapter to chapter he selects those topics in which scripture studies and theology have been brought to an impasse by the efforts of the most important exegetes of the recent past. This tendency to concentrate

on the controversial topics and those which paralyze the theological discussion makes the book particularly fascinating. Obviously, the author is not a career biblicist, but he clearly shows his familiarity with the most important literature on every thorny question; the bibliography in the back presents the “tips of icebergs” sticking out of a mostly frozen ocean of learning, for the positions formed and cherished by the various schools only rarely and slowly melt. It is not surprising that the majority of the Pope’s sources are German biblicists: Schnackenburg and Hengel for John, Gnllka for Matthew, Rudolph Pesch for Mark. For the parables of the Kingdom, he predictably uses the triplet Jühlicher, Dodd, and Jeremias. He uses French New Testament Theology less often and then for particular themes: Grelot, Feuillet, Léon-Dufour, Cazelles. He skillfully chooses more recent authors to shed light on crucial issues that can be resolved with an original insight: Harmuth Gese on the Transfiguration, Boismard and Cazelles on a possible reconstruction of the background of Zebedee’s sons as a priestly family, or the young French exegete Artus for his categorization of Mosaic laws into apodictic and casuistic legislation.

The program of the book is almost linear: after it begins with the Baptism (ch. 1), it continues with the Temptation (ch. 2), the Kingdom (ch. 3), the Our Father (ch. 5), the disciples (ch. 6), and the Parables (ch. 7), followed by the Johannine Gospel’s portrait of Jesus (ch. 8), the confession of Peter and the Transfiguration (ch. 9), and finally the last chapter (ch. 10), on “Jesus’ identity” under the three headings of (a) the Son, (b) the Son of Man, and (c) “I Am.”

In the chapter on the Baptism, the Pope focuses on Mt 3:15 with its enigmatic phrase, “Fulfilling all righteousness.” The author interprets this passage as expressing nothing less than that Jesus shoulders mankind’s guilt by bowing to the Father’s will through his full immersion into humiliation and suffering—an anticipation of the Cross. This theme is unfolded in four ways: (a) by using Gnllka’s references to pre-Christian Jewish baptism, (b) by quoting the Qumran scrolls on the symbolism of ablutions, (c) by evoking Paul’s teaching on baptism as a participation in Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection, and (d) by following Joachim Jeremias’s reading of Jn 1:29 on the “Lamb” and/or servant of the LORD, a meaning that the Aramaic word “*talijah*” may signify. Finally, Benedict quotes a liturgical text of the Eastern Church that speaks of Jesus’ immersion at his baptism as a descent into his “liquid tomb.”

In the light of these references the “fulfillment of all righteousness” means that the Torah as the Will of the Father is radically and perfectly observed when Jesus fully delivers himself to his mission and the human being is inserted through him into the Life of the Triune God. One might well ask how much each individual part of this interpretation reads into the text. But the validity of the interpretation is based on the convergence of the various linguistic, historical, and theological insights which canonical ties hold together in such a way that the exegete can read beyond separate textual witnesses to the corporate witness of the “tetramorphous” Gospel. Benedict does not leave the topic without confronting the “broad current of liberal scholarship” demythologizing the scene of baptism into a “vocation story” of the young carpenter coming from Galilee to the Jordan to meet John and “discover” (i.e., “fictitiously projecting”) his special relationship with God. He correctly points out that psychologizing the story is itself an imposition on the texts that do not even hint at a “psychological event.” While the evangelists completely lack interest in Jesus’ “psyche,” they consistently and firmly declare “the intrinsic unity of the trajectory stretching from the first moment of his [public] life to the Cross and the resurrection” (24).

Chapter 3 unfolds in basically the same way, but with a somewhat freer style, first assessing the expectations people raise in regard to Jesus’ power to “turn stones into bread,” and then treating the general topic of Jesus’ “exegetical dialogue” with the devil (cf. Ps 91:4; Dt 6:13–16; 8:3). The Pope assembles the broad tableau of this section not only by treating the three synoptic accounts side-by-side, but further by connecting them with Peter’s “satanic attempt” to dissuade Jesus from accepting the Cross; thus he closely associates the temptation stories with both the baptism and the drama of the Cross.

It is after this chapter that the book faces some of its greatest challenges. An exegete trained in the historical-critical method could easily lose sight of the “big picture” and begin dealing with the uncertainties of the various source theories, such as Markan priority and Q, or the original meaning of the “Kingdom of God” in Jesus’ proclamation. What saves this book from becoming just another “Life of Jesus” is its presentation of Jesus’ teaching in strictly personalistic terms.

The Pope begins by evaluating the various modern presentations of the theology of the Kingdom. First, he quotes the sarcastic

quip of the French modernist, Alfred Loisy, “Jesus preached the Kingdom and what came about was the Church,” and then Adolph von Harnack’s claim, “Jesus’ Kingdom is a double revolution against the Judaism of his time, replacing the collective by the individual and the external and ritual by the internal and moral,” a claim that not only became the classical formula for liberal Protestantism but was adopted in the 1930s by most Catholic intellectuals as well. Then the Pope presents Bultmann’s interpretation of the Kingdom as Jesus’ radical eschatological message, resulting in New Testament theologies turning “ecclesiocentrism” into “christocentrism,” then into “theocentrism,” and finally into “regnocentrism,” coming in the end to the whole-scale abandonment of Christianity’s missionary task and acquiescence to all other religions, letting them offer salvation to man in their own terms.

Pope Benedict’s understanding of the Kingdom is a very different one. It means the proclamation of God’s actual sovereignty within history: the living God acts in the world past, present, and future. He asserts both the interiority of the Kingdom and its proximity, its imminent arrival (“*Naheerwartung*”). In this latter sense the Kingdom signifies the hidden but real action of God’s Spirit in man’s inmost realm and, at the same time, a new closeness of God to man in all dimensions of his existence, a closeness found in Jesus himself. The Kingdom is God’s new presence in and through the Son’s presence in the world: speaking, loving, suffering, and being glorified. The center of the New Testament is God summoning the world to sonship.

The Pope’s vision is justified by his insistence that the three foundational synoptic passages—Mk 1:15 (“This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand: repent, and believe in the Gospel”), Mt 12:28 (“If it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you”), and Lk 17:21 (“God is among you”)—must be understood as convergent, complementary texts rather than competing, alternative versions of what Jesus preached.

On this basis the Pope begins his presentation of the Sermon on the Mount as a new convocation of Israel, a fulfillment of Dt 18:15, the promise of a new Moses to renew the covenant not by revoking the old but by stepping beyond it into a new domain of universality offered to all mankind. In Jesus we have among us in the full and definitive way the One linked to God by complete intimacy: through him he speaks to us and we speak to him “as one man to

another.” The Torah of the Messiah fulfills the Torah of Moses. In fact, this claim can be made in the canonical language of Deuteronomy, the language of neither leaving out nor adding anything, as Neusner shows in his dialogue, which the Pope quotes: “‘What did he leave out?’ ‘Nothing.’ ‘What did he add to it?’ ‘Himself’” (105). At this point Pope Benedict makes his most lapidary statements and brilliant observations as he interprets the sayings on the Sabbath (Mt 12:5–8) and the messianic jubilation (Mt 12:28) within the context of this same Christology. The statements that the Sabbath is “for the human being” and that Jesus’ “yoke is easy” are not to be understood as a liberalization of morality; in fact, they should not be understood in a moralizing vein at all. Rather, “the Son of Man is Israel’s Sabbath giving man the grace of completed creation: imitation of God and introduction into God’s rest” (110). That he who is “here” is “greater than the Temple” means no supersessionist rejection of rite and ritual but the realization that Jesus is himself Israel’s Temple and Torah in person.

The long chapter 5 about the Lord’s Prayer is likely to be considered peripheral by those who consider the figure of “Jesus at prayer” as a devotional insertion found in the Gospels, especially in the Gospel of Luke, who has a “special interest” in Jesus’ praying. But this word-by-word commentary on the Our Father (136–168) clearly reveals that Ratzinger’s search for the authentic Jesus transcends historical curiosity or satisfaction with a merely “plausible” image. Rather he forces us to combine the search for history with the search for interiority, the search to understand Jesus as a human being with the search of joining him as Son in his relationship with the Father.

Chapter 6 is the shortest (169–182). It is built on Mk 3:13–19 but its exegesis is closely linked with two Matthean parallels (5:1 and 10:1), which signal that Jesus begins his ministry by summoning his disciples; therefore, the recipients of his teachings throughout the ages are all human beings. This understanding of the Church as an extended and renewed Israel gathering into Jesus’ sonship shows that the Pope’s reading of the Synoptics is based on a certain “Matthean priority” in a theological sense: his christological reading of the Gospels is interspersed with ecclesiological references which are integral parts of the earthly Jesus correctly understood, not only of the post-resurrection Christ of Easter faith.

When dealing with Jesus’ parables (ch. 7), Pope Benedict revisits the most significant developments of the last one hundred

years, beginning with Jülicher's distinction between allegory and parable, the important correctives by Joachim Jeremias and C. H. Dodd, and the critique of the latter's "realized eschatology." He finally comes to focus on Mt 4:12 with its reference to Is 6:10, raising the question whether veiled language is necessary for the prophetic message, for "it is only through failure that their word becomes efficacious" (189). It is again by its simplicity that the Pope's presentation considerably enlightens the matter. Just as the quintessential parable is that of the seed, so its allegorical handling in Jn 12:24 ("Unless the grain of seed dies"—a reference to Jesus and his destiny) is the ultimate answer to the question of its interpretation: Jesus' failure on the Cross is "the way which leads from the few to the many, to all: 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself (Jn 12:32)'" (190). After this, of course, Ratzinger easily delivers his christological interpretation of several parables from Luke, skillfully combining the comments of modern exegetes with ancient patristic thought. To those trained in modern exegesis but unacquainted with the early history of interpretation, the use of patristic texts might appear as a hodge-podge of christological ramblings. In fact, Pope Benedict applies here the principle of the Church fathers adopted even by St. Thomas: scriptural meanings generate further meanings which, in the case of scriptures dealing with God's self-disclosure, must also be explored. Thus, the Pope fully illustrates what he previously said in criticizing Jülicher: the extension and penetration of a parable naturally and legitimately leads to all sorts of other veiled language, since in Jesus' mouth the parable is a tool for expressing the ineffable mystery of his own being as the only Son sent into the world by the Father. The chapter ends with a general statement which expands the study of the parables into a broader question about "signs and wonders" in Jesus' life and activities, and leads to the conclusion: "One thing is sure: God's sign for man is the Son of Man, it is Jesus himself" (217).

(b) *The Johannine Gospel*

At this point the reader feels that a well-organized and homogeneous survey of Jesus' ministry and teaching has come to a conclusion. One can hardly claim that the inquiry excluded John's Gospel; in each chapter much of the "synthesis" was achieved by implicit or explicit use of the Fourth Gospel. Certainly, the quota-

tion of Jn 12:28 and 32 was explicit, and it was essential for resolving the dilemma of Mk 4:12 about Jesus' intentionally "veiled language" in the parables. But even without the Johannine references, statements such as the one that Jesus *is* the Torah or *is* the Temple, as well as the Pope's interpretation of the Sabbath, come from a clear and conscious appropriation of many Johannine texts. Because of this already rather significant use of John, the appearance here of a chapter on "The Johannine Question" raises suspicions about the flow of the book's argument and creates the impression of discontinuity.

I wonder whether this chapter could have been avoided or done differently and with greater success. The first part of chapter 8 raises a twofold question: "Who is the author of this Gospel? How reliable is it historically?" (222). Recall that such questions were never raised about the synoptic Gospels: we did not ask who wrote each one of them, we did not investigate the rather intricate questions concerning the identity of Mark and Luke, the tradition of an Aramaic original for Matthew, the apostolic authorship of the first Gospel, the various possible answers to the synoptic question, the existence of Q (the "Quelle"). In fact, it appeared rather refreshing that the Pope was able to march into the heart of the "Frage nach Jesus" without talking about Markan priority, the Logia collections, the Gospel of Thomas, and a host of other issues that would have otherwise consumed an immense amount of time before we even started to speak about Jesus. So why is there this excursion into "the Johannine Question"? Are we not wandering into "alien turf" and running the risk of losing some of the gain accumulated in the first seven chapters?

It is not that I regret the Pope's tough words about Bultmann; they are well deserved, and, unfortunately, Bultmann's fame has outlived the usefulness of his ideas. Especially his commentary on John has exercised an influence far beyond its merits. But Hengel's case is very different. In taking issue with his book *The Johannine Question*, the Pope goes far too deep into a territory of specialists, and he does so without tools sufficient for the journey. The incorrect dating of Papias (230 in both the German and the English edition) may be just a misprint, but it may be an oversight. In either case, the more widely accepted date of 130 is also debatable. Following so readily the judgment of Eusebius about Papias is also quite misleading. Both Hengel and Ratzinger follow a long German tradition that uncritically accepts Eusebius' position of the "two

Johns” in Ephesus, one the Apostle and son of Zebedee, the other “John the Presbyter” and author of the Second and Third Johannine letters. They forget that this whole reconstruction was used by Eusebius to fight millenarism and the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation, for Eusebius himself never doubted that the Fourth Gospel was authored by the apostle John. By accepting Eusebius’ theory of the “two Johns,” Pope Benedict first concedes too much to his opponent and then has a hard time disproving his opponent’s conclusions.<sup>9</sup> To prove the historical reliability of John’s Gospel, one would need a number of more carefully crafted qualifications, mostly regarding the peculiar literary genre of the Fourth Gospel. Disproving a few ill-chosen paragraphs by Hengel, such as the rightly criticized statement about “changing and even violating history” (229), does not convincingly settle the issue of the kind of inspired “remembering” that takes place in John’s Gospel. When Pope Benedict sides with Stuhlmacher and Rückstuhl (226) on the historicity of John’s Gospel, the reader is not quite sure of the kind of historicity that the Pope is discussing. Ultimately, we do not receive an explanation why the figure of Jesus as presented in John’s Gospel appears to be so different from the one portrayed in the Synoptics. His brief and unsubstantiated remark that the author of the Fourth Gospel knew the Synoptics (230) is certainly worth considering, but it needs to be formulated in a more nuanced and careful way. By being inserted as an off-the-cuff remark in parentheses, it does not help the clarity of the argument.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>There are much more critical readings of Eusebius’ comments on Papias. See for example, R. H. Gundry, *Mark, A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 1027–1035. Although agreeing with Eusebius and with Hengel about the “two Johns,” R. Bauckham’s recent book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), with a long chapter on Papias and the Gospel of John (412–468), documents well—mostly by his extremely complex theories—that the historical and critical questions about the authorship of John are unresolved.

<sup>10</sup>“[N]o doubt he [John] was familiar with the Synoptic Gospels in one or another version” (230). It would have been better to speak only of the “synoptic tradition” rather than the “Gospels”; moreover, one must not make an obscure reference to “one or another version,” for it is rather unclear what kind of different versions the written Gospels had. Of course, if we just assume that John knew the Synoptics (meaning the books!), then the whole “Johannine Question” changes meaning and dimension. These thoughts seem to indicate that leaving out the treatment of the “Johannine Question” would have helped the book.

The second half of the chapter on John, analyzing “Johannine themes,” is in fact much less rigid: it is compatible with various concepts of historicity for the Johannine discourses. Each theme is presented as a key theological concept authentically derived from Jesus, but without pressing for the exact degree of historicity of the various revelatory discourses in which they are embedded. Personal recollection and memory, meditative reflection on scriptural texts, light obtained from the Holy Spirit in personal encounters with the risen Christ—all such factors must be claimed as essential ingredients in the way the Fourth Gospel came about. But neither the present state of critical research nor Pope Benedict’s reading of the texts seems to suggest more specific insights into the workings of the Johannine tradition and the genesis of the Fourth Gospel.

*(c) The last chapters: Jesus’ identity*

The ninth chapter of the book takes the reader back to two “milestones” of the synoptic Gospels: Peter’s confession and the Transfiguration. Regarding the former, Pope Benedict engages in a dispute with the French exegete Pierre Grelot, who argued that the Markan version of Peter’s confession was rejected by Jesus as tied to a false messianism, while the Matthean version fuses this same story in Jesus’ earthly life with a resurrection appearance of the same genre as mentioned by St. Paul in Gal 1:11–17. Others in disagreement with Grelot would point out that his exegesis is one of many simplistic applications of the Two-Source Theory according to which Mark is credited with “the real story” and Matthew with the revision of history in the light of a post-resurrection and ecclesiological perspective combined with a Pauline theology of revelation. But the Pope avoids even mentioning the synoptic problem or Markan priority here or anywhere else in the book. Instead, he points out that the texts do not give any support to the claim that Peter’s original confession was rebuffed by Jesus or was based on false messianism. Peter’s confession is not only “verbal” (assigning the title of “Son of the Living God”) but “substantive” (recognizing what Jesus really is). As far as the Pauline analogy is concerned, the confession must be read against the background of Phil 2:6, in which a clear reference to the “suffering Messiah” is combined with the equally clear conception of the Son of God as pre-existent. Were we to neglect to regard Jesus as truly and

eternally the Son of the living God, the Pauline statement about his self-emptying and voluntary humiliation would lack its fullness of meaning. This confrontation with Grelot illustrates an important feature of this book. Although the Pope's apologetical zeal frequently carries him far and deep into the territory of historical-critical biblical scholarship, he does best when he functions as a dogmatic theologian. For in the latter capacity, he can point out with sharp precision the demands of consistency and coherence; thus he can aim beyond the relatively petty issues of historical or linguistic ambiguities and focus on the ultimate theological issues that are at stake in a scriptural passage.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the revelatory significance of the Transfiguration obtains sharp contours in the book. Using recent studies on the Jewish calendar of the first century, he brilliantly connects "the Feast of the Tabernacles" with Peter's demand to build three houses for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah: on the one hand, he points out the connection of this scene with the great visionary experiences of Moses and Elijah on Mount Horeb, while on the other hand he puts it in contrast to the scene of Gethsemane. Thus, the Transfiguration introduces the three chosen apostles experientially into the identity of Jesus as one who speaks with God "as one man to another" in the full intimacy of the divine glory.

From here the Pope moves to a last chapter fully dedicated to the question of Jesus' identity as conveyed by three titles: the Son of Man, the Son, and the Son of God. The brief section on the Son of Man contains the book's most brilliant pages. The explanation of the title, as Benedict states, prompted a flood of publications which constitute "a graveyard of mutually contradictory hypotheses" (322). With a sure hand, he introduces the reader into the intricacies of the argument. He promptly identifies that minimal portion of the texts that practically all experts recognize as authentic: in all, only two passages, Lk 12:8 and Lk 17:24, and these only because they admit of an interpretation by which the Son of Man and Jesus are *different* persons. Then he shows that their parallels in Mk (8:38 and 10:32) clearly indicate that the Son of Man is identical to Jesus. So, one must at least admit, he says, that according to the earliest interpretation we have of these two quotations, the Son of Man is being identified with Jesus. But then he moves on to show that this "early interpretation" of the saying in Mark is the same meaning that the title "Son of Man" has in the two Lukan texts. The argument is simple: the speaker points to himself in the third person: "And I tell

you, every one who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God,” and “For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day.” Confessing “the Son of Man” and denying *me* constitute antithetical parallelism, therefore the direct objects of the antithetical verbs are the same person; Jesus *is* the Son of Man both functionally and ontologically. After this, Benedict points out that Jesus uses the term “Son of Man” to designate himself in his prophecies of his Passion and when testifying before the Sanhedrin. The reader is now expected to see the point: he can choose between dismembering the Gospels into innumerable layers and assigning to the term at the various layers a host of different meanings, or he can opt for coherence and consistency coming from a single source, namely Jesus himself, whose words were remembered by living witnesses and were understood in a gradual yet unified process of ever deeper penetration. He spoke of himself as the Son of Man who is Lord over the Sabbath, the one having power to forgive sins, the Judge to come at the end of times, and the one who identifies with the hungry, the thirsty, and each of our fellow human beings in need, and the one to be crucified and glorified when he gives away his life in ransom for the many (cf. Mk 10:45).

### III. Concluding remarks

1. The last two sections treating the title of “the Son” and the expression “I Am” we will not treat here in detail; they follow naturally from the whole of the book. In these last pages the Pope concludes succinctly to what he wanted to demonstrate in his work: Jesus’ teaching is not the product of human learning of whatever kind. It originates from immediate contact with the Father, from a face-to-face dialogue.

2. In his book Pope Benedict wants to help modern Gospel studies reset their focus not just on Christology but on the sonship of Jesus as the ultimate reality on which the validity of every statement in the Gospels—in fact, in all the New Testament—depends. Some years ago I tried in the pages of *Communio* to reopen a question pursued half a century ago by many New Testament theologians but then abandoned for decades: what is the center of New Testament theology? Maybe too boldly, maybe too specifically,

I pointed to Mt 11:25–27 (and its Lukan parallel) and tried to link it to all the important elements of the New Testament Canon.<sup>11</sup> At the end of his book, the Pope does something quite similar: he points out this text, which he calls the *Jubelruf* (in earlier scholarship it was called the “*locus Joannaeus*” or “Johannine passage” of the Synoptics), and he observes that it links Matthew and Luke with the Fourth Gospel and, in fact, with all the “high Christology” of the New Testament. I think the Pope demonstrates in his book that the unity of the New Testament is not a forced ideological framework superimposed on divergent tendencies, trends, and trajectories, but is rather an emanation from the Son’s pre-existent identity and oneness with the Father.

3. I can summarize in two statements what I personally learned from Pope Benedict’s book:

a) He proves in this book the importance, the necessity, the indispensable value and constructive force, of the historical-critical method when used competently and responsibly.

b) New Testament exegesis is immensely enriched by this method, but only if the exegete is rooted in his faith and is equally educated in critical scholarship and the various theological disciplines, and thus staying in conversation with the whole Christian Tradition.

4. Lastly, one should promote and urge theologians, especially New Testament scholars, professors of Christology, and persons in charge of priestly formation, to read this book and respond to the challenge it poses. □

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<sup>11</sup>Denis Farkasfalvy, “Jesus Reveals the Father: The Center of New Testament Theology,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 235–257.