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The Authority of Mystery: The Biblical Theology of Benedict XVI

Scott W. Hahn

St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology

Never before in the history of the Catholic Church has a world-class biblical theologian been elevated to the papacy. The election of Pope Benedict XVI, on April 19, 2005, brought to the Chair of St. Peter one of the world's finest theological minds, a public intellectual long engaged in dialogue over the crucial issues of the modern period, especially the relationship between freedom and truth.

The former Joseph Ratzinger was a young academic theologian with a very bright future when, in 1977, he was chosen to be archbishop of the historic Bavarian diocese of Munich and Freising. At the time, he expressly identified a continuity between his scholarly work and his new service in the hierarchy of the Church, taking for his episcopal motto a biblical expression: "cooperators in the truth."[1]

In practical terms, however, his election to the episcopacy brought to an end his promising career as an academic theologian. He would seldom again have the opportunity for sustained scholarly research and writing, a situation about which he occasionally expresses regret.[2] Nonetheless, in the last quarter-century, Benedict has produced a substantial body of biblical-theological work—articles, speeches, homilies, and more—that reflect the wide range of his study and interests, and the keen, systematic nature of his thought.

Close study of this body of writings suggests that, had Professor Ratzinger been left alone to pursue his scholarly interests and ambitions, his achievements would have rivaled or surpassed those of the greatest Catholic theologians of the last century—figures such as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner. That said, I believe this paper will help us to appreciate that there has been no other Catholic

1 In explaining his episcopal motto, which is found in 3 John 8, he has said that "it seemed to be the connection between my previous task as teacher and my new mission. Despite all the differences in modality, what is involved was and remains the same: to follow the truth, to be at its service. And, because in today's world the theme of truth has all but disappeared, because truth appears to be too great for man and yet everything falls apart if there is no truth; for these reasons, this motto also seemed timely in the good sense of the word." Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Milestones: Memoirs, 1927–1977, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merkiakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998), 153.

2 In forewords or afterwords to collections of his articles and talks, he sometimes expresses disappointment that his professional obligations make it impossible to develop his ideas as systematically or with the depth and precision that he would like. See, for example, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Approaches to Understanding Its Role in the Light of Present Controversy*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995 [Original German publication, 1993]), 8.

theologian in the last century, if ever, whose theology is as highly developed and integrated in explicitly biblical terms. We would be hard pressed to find another thinker who has so allowed sacred Scripture to shape and direct his theologizing.

Benedict's command of the biblical texts, the patristic interpretive tradition, and the findings of historical and literary scholarship, represents the full flowering of the Catholic biblical renewal promoted by the popes and culminating in *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council's constitution on divine revelation. If the first half of the twentieth century was marked by the *emergence* of three renewal movements—the biblical, the patristic, and the liturgical, we see the *convergence* of these movements in *Dei Verbum*; and in the theology of Benedict we see their integration and coordination. As the result, perhaps more than any other theologian in his time, Benedict has articulated a biblical theology that synthesizes modern scientific methods with the theological hermeneutic of spiritual exegesis that began in the New Testament writers and patristic commentators and has continued throughout the Church's tradition.[3]

His pontificate has thus far borne the distinctive stamp of his biblical theology. For Benedict, the Church lives, moves, and takes its being from the Word of God—through whom all things were created in the beginning, through whom the face of God was revealed in the flesh of Jesus Christ, and through whom God's new covenant is witnessed to in the inspired texts of Scripture and made present in the divine liturgy.

In the context of the liturgy, Benedict has spoken of "the authority of mystery."[4] But this is also an evocative expression for describing his integral vision of the Church as the handmaiden of the Word of God. The Church, as he sees it, lives under the authority of mystery—in dialogue with the Word that revealed the mystery of God's saving plan in history, and in obedient service to the Word as it seeks final accomplishment of God's plan in the life and age of the Church.

In what follows, I will explore the foundations and essential principles of Benedict's biblical vision. After a brief overview of his academic and ecclesial career, I will consider Benedict's critique of the methods and presumptions of historical and literary criticism of the Bible. I will then consider the key elements of what he calls a "hermeneutic of faith"— which restores theology and exegesis to their original ecclesial and liturgical locus. Finally, I will sketch in broad outlines the

3 For the purposes of this paper, I will be considering almost exclusively the theological opinions and insights that Benedict articulated prior to his pontificate. I will restrict myself to articles and addresses authored under his own name and will not consider decisions or other writings issued in his official capacity as prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The theological and exegetical judgments and conclusions discussed herein, while reflective of and in accord with Catholic dogma and teaching, are not necessarily considered binding on Catholics.

4 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord: Faith in Christ and Liturgy Today*, trans. Martha M. Matesich (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1997 [1995]), 32.

biblical theology that grows out of Benedict's new hermeneutic, before concluding with a consideration of its implications and promise for exegesis and theology.

A Brief Theological and Ecclesial Résumé

While most popes in the modern era have hailed from the Vatican's diplomatic corps, Benedict, like his immediate predecessor Pope John Paul II, was an influential scholar and university professor before being named a bishop. As John Paul continued to make important scholarly contributions to the field of philosophy throughout his career as a Church official, Benedict, too, has been arguably among the seminal thinkers in theology and biblical interpretation in the last half-century.

It is beyond my scope here to provide a complete résumé of Benedict's career, but I should note a few highlights.[5] He received his doctorate in theology from the University of Munich in 1953, writing his dissertation on Augustine's exegesis and ecclesiology. He lectured in fundamental theology at several German universities before assuming the chair in dogmatic theology at the University of Tübingen in 1966. He was an expert theological adviser at the Second Vatican Council (1963–1965) and contributed to the council's document on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum*. In addition to hundreds of articles published in academic and ecclesial journals, he is the author of books of enduring importance and influence on patristic theology and exegesis,[6] ecclesiology,[7] dogmatic theology,[8] and the Christian symbol of faith.[9] He was the co-founder of an important theological journal, *Communio*, in collaboration with some of the last century's most influential theologians, including Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

As the highest ranking doctrinal official in the Catholic Church for nearly 20 years, he helped oversee the teaching of the faith in Catholic universities and seminaries throughout the world and played an important role in the work of the International Theological Commission and the Pontifical Biblical Commission. He was a decisive intellectual force in the development of the *Catechism of the*

5 For a good overview, especially of his early academic writings, see Aidan Nichols, *The Thought of Benedict XVI: An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger* (London: Burns & Oates, 2005). For comprehensive bibliographies, see Nichols, 297–330, and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, ed. Stephan Otto Horn and Vinzenz Pfnür, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005 [2002]), 299–379.

6 Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, trans. Zachary Hayes (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1971). Unless otherwise noted, all Benedict's titles were authored under his name, Joseph Ratzinger.

7 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993 [1960]).

8 Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1988 [1977]).

9 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990 [1968]).

Catholic Church, the first comprehensive statement of Catholic belief and practice to be published in more than 450 years.

Benedict's theological training and career were shaped by his encounter with the historical-critical method, which by the late 1940s had become the dominant theoretical model in the academy.[10] In autobiographical reflections, he has related how confident scholars then were that the method gave them "the last word" on the meaning of biblical texts. He relates a story, for instance, about a leading Tübingen exegete who announced he would no longer entertain dissertation proposals because "everything in the New Testament had already been researched."[11]

Well schooled in its techniques and findings, Benedict has nonetheless emerged as a forceful critic of what he describes as the theoretical hubris and practical limitations of historical criticism. For him, the issues involved are far from academic. Indeed, the stakes in the debate could hardly be more grave. How we read and interpret the Bible has a direct implication for what we believe about Christ, the Church, the sacraments, and the liturgy, about the ways and means of salvation.[12]

He knows and often quotes the solemn truth expressed memorably by St. Jerome: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ."[13] And he has gone so far as to suggest that a near exclusive reliance on the historical-critical method has resulted in widespread ignorance about the true nature, identity, and mission of Christ: "The crisis of faith in Christ in recent times began with a modified way of reading sacred Scripture—seemingly the sole scientific way."[14]

This perhaps explains why Benedict took the unprecedented step of devoting a key passage in his inaugural homily as Bishop of Rome to the insufficiency of "science alone" in biblical interpretation. Only the "voice of the living Church," he affirmed, can deliver "a definitive and binding interpretation … that certainty with which we can live and for which we can even die."[15]

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10 *Eschatology,* 271–272.

11 *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith,* 27.

12 "The historical Jesus can only be a non-Christ, a non-Son [of God]… . As a result, the Church falls apart all by herself; now she can only be an organization made by humans that tries, more or less skillfully and more or less benevolently, to put this Jesus to use. The sacraments, of course, fall by the wayside—how could there be a real presence of this 'historical Jesus' in the Eucharist?" *A New Song for the Lord,* 30.

13 Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah 1:1,* quoted in Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum,* Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, (November 18, 1965), 25, in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings,* ed. Dean P. Béchard, S.J. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 19–31, at 30. For an example of Benedict's use of Jerome, see his Address to the Participants in the International Congress Organized to Commemorate the Fortieth Anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation "Dei Verbum," (September 16, 2005), in *L'Osservatore Romano,* Weekly Edition in English (September 21, 2005), 7.

14 Joseph Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ,* trans. Michael Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005 [2004]), 9.

15 Homily. Mass of Possession of the Chair of the Bishop of Rome. (May 7, 2005), in *L'Osservatore*

The Critique of Criticism

Benedict's own theological writings, as we will see, are deeply informed by historical and critical research. Indeed, one of the distinctive features of his thought is its appreciation for the "historicity" of Christian revelation.[16] God has revealed himself in human history, and the vehicle for this revelation has been the Scriptures of the Church. Hence, Benedict insists that the historical context and literary form in which revelation comes to us must be attended to in order for us to grasp its meaning and appropriate that meaning for ourselves. The insights of historical criticism, Benedict argues, are invaluable and even indispensable for helping us understand how biblical texts came to be written and what these texts might have meant to their original audience.[17]

His work demonstrates a commanding grasp of New Testament exegesis, especially scholarship on the Gospel of John and exegetical study of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. He frequently employs or assumes scholarly hypotheses concerning the dating, compositional form, and original setting of biblical texts. Often he will find insightful clues to meaning in philology or in the text's interpretive history, especially in rabbinic and liturgical traditions. He avails himself of such contextualizations as ancient Near Eastern notions of covenant and kinship, concepts in Greek philosophy, and definitions in Roman law; he has even been known to bring anthropological studies to bear on his subjects.[18]

Benedict, then, does not at all seek to invalidate the historical-critical method, only to "purify" it through self-examination, so that it can truly serve its proper function in the search for the truth. He observes that, while they freely submit

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Romano, Weekly Edition in English (May 11, 2005), 3. Frequently in his teaching Benedict appears to be in "dialogue" with the ideas of influential exegetes, sometimes even referring to them by name. See, for instance, his criticism of Adolf von Harnack and the "the individualism of liberal theology," during the course of his General Audience of March 15, 2006, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (March 22, 2006), 11.

16 Nichols, *The Thought of Benedict XVI*, 292.

17 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986 [1984]), 43–44.

18 See, for instance, his discussion of the "anthropological basis" of tradition in Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987 [1982]), 86–88. See also, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), 117. This natural deployment of the findings of historical and literary study has become a signature of even his minor catechetical works as pope. For example, in a homily on the meaning of the priesthood, he considers not only the use of royal and shepherd imagery in Oriental cultures, but also the use of this imagery in the biblical portraits of Moses and David, and the "exilic" context of Ezekiel's famous prophecy against Israel's shepherds (Ezek. 34). See Pope Benedict XVI, Homily. Holy Mass for the Ordination to the Priesthood of Fifteen Deacons of the Diocese of Rome (May 7, 2006), in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (May 10, 2006), 3.

the biblical text to all manner of probing and analysis, biblical scholars have been remarkably unreflective about their own methods and preunderstandings.[19]

His critique shows him to be conversant not only with the long history of biblical interpretation, but also with the broader currents in the post-Reformation history of ideas. He roots what he calls the "crisis" in modern biblical interpretation in philosophical, epistemological, and historical assumptions inherited from the Enlightenment. His most basic criticism of criticism is that it is far from what it purports to be—a value-neutral science akin to the natural sciences, the findings of which are objective and rendered with a high degree of certitude.

Invoking the Heisenberg principle of uncertainty or indeterminacy, he notes that even experiments in the natural sciences have been found to be influenced by researchers' own involvement and presuppositions. It should be no surprise, then, that in "scientific" biblical criticism, no less than in any other area of human inquiry, researchers' own subjectivity shapes the object of their study, including the questions they pose, the methods they develop to seek answers, and the eventual outcome of their study.

In the case of biblical criticism, Benedict pinpoints several deep-seated, yet unquestioned presuppositions that scholars bring to their work. The first they inherit from the natural sciences which they seem so anxious to emulate—the evolutionary model of natural development.

Evolution posits that later, more complex life-forms evolve from earlier, simpler forms. Applied to Scripture study, this has led exegetes to suppose that, in Benedict's words, "the more theologically considered and sophisticated a text is, the more recent it is, and the simpler something is, the easier it is to reckon it original."[20]

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19 "The historico-critical method is essentially a tool, and its usefulness depends on the way in which it is used, that is, on the hermeneutical and philosophical presuppositions one adopts in applying it. In fact there is no such thing as a pure historical method; it is always carried on in a hermeneutical or philosophical context, even when people are not aware of it or expressly deny it." *Behold the Pierced One*, 43. See further his gentle rebuke of the early-twentieth century Catholic scholar, Friedrich Wilhelm Maier: "He did not ask himself to what extent the outlook of the questioner determines access to the text, making it necessary to clarify, above all, the correct way to ask and how best to purify one's own questioning." Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Relationship between Magisterium and Exegetes," Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (July 23, 2003), 8.

20 *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis*, 10. It is not difficult to see how this evolutionary hypothesis has influenced such articles of modern exegetical faith as the priority of Mark's shorter, narratively more skeletal Gospel, or the presumed existence of a more primitive "Q" source supposedly relied upon by Matthew and Luke's Gospels. For his part, Benedict sees the evolutionary theory underlying the penchant for distinguishing between "Jewish" elements in the Gospel—which are presumably original and historical because Jesus was a Jew—and supposedly later interpolations from "Hellenistic" or Greek thought. This latter example perhaps explains why modern scholars for many years could not see clearly what centuries of earlier Church interpreters had been able to see, namely the deep Old Testament substratum to the New Testament. Elements that scholars for much of the modern period have confidently asserted to be Hellenistic imports,

Benedict is not out to score points by identifying discarded scholarly opinions. He wants us to see something more fundamental—how the findings of modern exegesis are shaped by the prior hermeneutical and philosophical positions of the exegetes. He questions why modern scholarship would even presume that religious and spiritual texts and ideas develop along the same lines, or according to the same rules, as organisms are observed to develop in nature. Such a conjecture is hardly self-evident and, as Benedict points out, there are many contrary examples in the history of Christian spirituality, and more generally in the history of ideas.

> First and foremost, one must challenge that basic notion dependent upon a simplistic transferal of science's evolutionary model to spiritual history. Spiritual processes do not follow the rule of zoological genealogies.[21]

Indeed, studying the historical development of the *symbol*, or the Christian confession of faith, reveals a diametrically opposite process, one that might even be described as anti-evolutionary. As Benedict notes, the early Church's beliefs about the identity of Jesus started from an original multiplicity of complex names and concepts found in Scripture and in the early liturgical and creedal tradition—Jesus as Prophet, Priest, Paraclete, Angel, Lord, and Son of Man. Finally, through a process of what Benedict calls "increasing simplification and concentration," Church authorities settled on the three titles found in the earliest creeds—Christ, Lord, and Son of God.[22]

This historical footnote is intriguing on a number of levels. First, it decisively disproves the assumption of some original, primitive simplicity in Christian faith and belief. Also, it challenges the modern exegetical presumption that creeds and liturgical formulas are later "ecclesial" additions that are "discontinuous" with and distort Jesus' original witness. As Benedict shows in this brief example, the earliest Christian witness was decidedly more complex and theologically layered, while the later work of Church authorities was one of articulating the core or heart of the Gospel witness. This not only calls into question the evolutionary hypothesis that underlies modern exegesis, it also raises interesting questions about the central importance of ecclesial tradition in the formation and redaction of biblical texts.

Separation of Church and Scripture

This brings us to Benedict's second major criticism of criticism: the assumed neces-

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such as the "Logos" theology in John's prologue, or cultic and mystery language, and notions of divine sonship, are now widely recognized to reflect deep Old Testament themes. *Behold the Pierced One*, 33; see also Joseph Ratzinger, *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism: Sidelights on* The Catechism of the Catholic Church, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997 [1995]), 75.

21 *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis*, 10.

22 *Behold the Pierced One*, 15–17.

sity of studying the biblical texts apart from their original ecclesial and liturgical context. Here Benedict sees the critical method laboring under mistaken assumptions rooted in the Enlightenment's anticlerical wing, and perhaps even earlier, in the French encyclopedists' critique of organized religion.[23]

There is more at work here than the methodological operation of isolating the texts for study.

There is a prior question: Why would students of the Bible establish, as a methodological principle, the necessity of deliberately excluding reference to the texts' original and living "habitats" in the faith communities that gave rise to these texts and still regard them to be sacred and authoritative? A natural scientist, by comparison, would never presume to study an animal or plant without considering its surrounding environment or ecosystem. Yet this is precisely the *modus operandi* of "scientific" exegesis.

Moreover, the "scientific" exegete adopts a hermeneutic of suspicion toward the larger ecclesial and liturgical tradition. It is presumed that we cannot trust the plain sense of the biblical texts. The Church's traditional use of texts in its dogmas, moral teachings, and liturgical rituals comes to be seen as an impediment to a true understanding of their original meanings. While seldom stated in such stark terms, it is implicit in the basic operation of biblical "science" that the received biblical texts are a species of ideology, part of ecclesiastical machinery used to legitimate and consolidate power and control by religious elites.[24]

The root of the problem is a refusal, on methodological grounds, to engage the divine nature of the religious text. Benedict traces this to the epistemological agnosticism of the German Enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who believed it was impossible for human reason to know the truth and reality of "things in themselves," especially God. As Kant believed we can never know things that transcend our sensory perceptions, historical criticism starts with the supposition that it can only analyze the "human element" in Scripture, defined as those things that conform to the evidence of our senses and our understanding of natural laws.[25] This philosophical starting point, Benedict believes, is of "great consequence."

23 See the sources assembled in *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 92, n. 5.

24 In fact, as Benedict notes, the earliest attempts to study the historical Jesus had an explicitly anticlerical aim, "the aim of using history to correct dogma, setting up a purely human, historical Jesus against the Christ of faith." *Behold the Pierced One*, 43. See also, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985), 74–76; Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Introduction" in Romano Guardini, *The Lord*, (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1996 [1954]) xi–xii.

25 Again, for Benedict, the roots of this suspicion of Church dogma run deep and are tied to an anti-ecclesiastical agenda. "For [Hermann] Reimarus, the Church's faith was no longer the way to find Jesus but a mythical smokescreen that concealed the historical reality. Jesus was to be sought, not *through* dogma, but *against* it, if one wanted to arrive at historical knowledge of him. Historical reason became the corrective of dogma; critical reason became the antipode of traditional faith." *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 92.

> [I]t is assumed that history is fundamentally and always uniform and that therefore nothing can take place in history but what is possible as a result of causes known to us in nature and in human activity. Aberrations from that, for instance, divine interventions that go beyond the constant interaction of natural and human causes, therefore cannot be historical… . According to this assumption, it is not possible for a man really to be God and to perform deeds that require divine power—actions that would disrupt the general complex of causes. Accordingly, words attributed to Jesus in which he makes divine claims and the corresponding deeds must be "explained" … . [E]verything in the figure of Jesus that transcends mere humanity is … thus not really historical … [26]

Because of this prior assumption, the method is compelled to bracket off as pious exaggerations or legends every claim made in the texts about miracles, or about God's work in the world and in history. This puts historical critics in the position of having to explain away rather than to explicate the plain sense of many biblical texts, such as those of Christ walking on water, multiplying loaves and fishes, healing the sick, and raising persons from the dead.[27] Again, the question is why such a posture towards the texts would be considered necessary or even desirable. Why would we want to study religious texts in such a way as to exclude in advance any reference to divine or supernatural phenomena?

The Hermeneutic of Faith

The power of Benedict's critique lies in its insistence that we evaluate the merits of modern exegesis purely on "scientific" methodological grounds. As a scholar, he invites us to consider whether the method is capable of really explaining as much as it claims to explain. At the most basic level, he suggests, to study a religious text and not be able to explain its religious meaning is to have failed, or at least to have completed only half the task.

> From a purely scientific point of view, the legitimacy of an interpretation depends on its power to explain things. In other words, the less it needs to interfere with the sources, the more it respects the corpus as given and is able to show it to be intel-

26 *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 61–62. "Modern exegesis … completely relegated God to the incomprehensible in order to be able to treat the biblical text as an entirely worldly reality according to natural-scientific methods." *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis*, 17.

27 *A New Song for the Lord*, 30.

> ligible from within, by its own logic, the more apposite such an interpretation is. Conversely, the more it interferes with the sources, the more it feels obliged to excise and throw doubt on things found there, the more alien to the subject it is. To that extent, its explanatory power is also its ability to maintain the inner unity of the corpus in question. It involves the ability to unify, to achieve a synthesis, which is the reverse of superficial harmonization. Indeed, only faith's hermeneutic is sufficient to measure up to these criteria.[28]

On the simple measure of its "power to explain things," the historical-critical method is found to be sorely deficient. The hermeneutic of suspicion vis-à-vis the Church, the presumed "evolution" of individual texts, the excising of reference to supernatural phenomena—all of these methodological assumptions represent a high degree of interference with the texts as they have been given to us. Nor do the operations of the method preserve or identify any inner unity or inner logic in the texts.

For Benedict, another fatal defect in the method is its severing of the bond that unites the Bible and the Church. This, he suggests, may represent one of the polemical legacies of the Reformation and its influence, especially on modern Protestant biblical interpreters. Whatever the origin, however, Benedict insightfully sees that in studying biblical texts in isolation—with no reference to the way these texts have been and continue to be used in the Church's liturgy, preaching, and practice—this approach makes the Bible a dead letter, an artifact from a long extinct, if nonetheless exotic, culture. The process of biblical exegesis becomes an exercise in "antiquarianism" or "archaeology" or even "necrophilia."[29]

In the end, Benedict notes the fact that "the history of exegesis is a history of contradictions"— a constantly shifting succession of competing hypotheses

28 *Behold the Pierced One*, 44–45.

29 *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 65, 95. "We cannot reach Christ through historical reconstruction. It may be helpful, but it is not sufficient and, on its own, becomes necrophilia." Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986 [1981]), 28. Benedict believes, too, there are lessons to be learned from the fourth-century debate between the Church father, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and a rationalist interlocutor, Eunomius, who believed he could develop an accurate understanding of God by using exclusively rational and scientific means. Gregory demurred, charging that his opponent's scientific approach "transforms each mystery into a 'thing.'" Gregory called this approach, *physiologein*, that is, "to treat in a scientific way." Benedict sees the same transforming of mysteries into "things" going on in modern academic exegesis. "Is there not too much physiologein in our exegesis and our modern way of dealing with Scripture? Are we not in fact treating it as we treat matter in the laboratory … [as] a dead thing that we assemble and disassemble at our pleasure?" *A New Song for the Lord*, 50–51; see also *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis*, 17.

concerning the meaning of texts. And the method, as he sees it, cannot yield much more unless yoked to a faith perspective.

> By its very nature, historical interpretation can never take us beyond hypotheses. After all, none of us was there when it happened; only physical science can repeat events in the laboratory. Faith makes us Jesus' contemporaries. It can and must integrate all true historical discoveries, and it becomes richer for doing so. But faith gives us knowledge of something more than a hypothesis; it gives us the right to trust the revealed Word as such.[30]

Hence, he calls for a "hermeneutic of faith,"[31] one in which historical and critical methods are subordinated to, and harnessed by, the living faith of the Church. In his own theological writing, we see him unfolding such a hermeneutic, always making use of contemporary exegesis, but refusing to abide by the artificial limits the method imposes on inquiry. In his writing we see the full explanatory power of the hermeneutic of faith, which respects the biblical texts as they are given in the Church, and is able to show their inner unity and logic. He insists forcefully that faith itself is a legitimate source of knowledge and inquiry. To reduce all human knowledge to the realm of the subjective and empirical, as the critical method presumes to do, marks a distortion of reason.

> Faith has a contribution to make with regard to the interpretation of Scripture… . To reduce all of reality as we meet it to pure material causes, to confine the Creator Spirit to the sphere of mere subjectivity, is irreconcilable with the fundamental message of the Bible. This involves, however, a debate on the very nature of true rationality; since, if a purely materialistic explanation of reality is presented as the only possible expression of reason, then reason itself is falsely understood… . *Faith itself is a way of knowing.* Wanting to set it aside does not produce pure objectivity, but comprises a point of view which excludes a particular perspective while not wanting to take into account the accompanying conditions of the chosen point of view. If one takes into account, however, that the sacred Scriptures come from God through a subject which lives continually—the pilgrim people of God—then it becomes clear rationally as well that this subject has something to say about the understanding of the book.[32]

30 *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism*, 67–68; *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 152.

31 *Eschatology*, 272.

32 "Relationship between Magisterium and Exegetes." Emphasis added.

We see here the fundamentals of Benedict's approach to the biblical text—the avowal that the Word of God cannot be separated from the people of God in which the Scriptures are given and revered; the assertion that God is active not only in the creation of these texts but also in the life of the Church that reveres these texts; and, finally, that faith is required for a full understanding of the texts, which in their most literal sense speak of things and realities that transcend human experience. There is, then, an "absolute necessity" for the exegete to have recourse to the historical method—it is "an indispensable part of the exegetical effort."[33] But because the sacred texts are more than human words, this historical study is not enough. The text must be read in light of the living faith of the Church.

> Of course, exegesis can and must also investigate the internal history of the texts in order to trace their development and thought patterns. We all know that there is much to learn from such work. But it must not lead us to neglect the principal task, which is to understand the text as it now stands, as a totality in itself with its own particular message. Whoever reads Scripture in faith as a Bible must make a further step.[34]

The Ecclesial Locus of Theology and Exegesis

Benedict does not base his hermeneutic of faith and biblical theology on philosophical or methodological preconceptions of his own. Indeed, his approach to the biblical text grows organically from the historical structure of revelation, that is, from the actual manner in which the Word of God was created and handed on. The recognition of the structure of revelation is, in fact, one of the important findings of modern form and redaction criticism. However, due to its philosophical prejudices, modern exegesis, unfortunately, in practice has chosen to turn a blind eye to its own findings.

As Benedict notes, the clear finding of critical exegesis is that Scripture is the product of the Church, that its contents originated in an ecclesial context and were shaped over long years by the Church's proclamation, confession, catechesis, and liturgical worship. Considered historically, then, there is an obvious and undeniable "interwoven relationship between Church and Bible, between the people of God and the Word of God."[35]

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33 "Relationship between Magisterium and Exegetes."

34 *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism*, 67.

35 "Two things have above all become clear about the nature of the biblical Word in the process of critical exegesis. First of all, that the Word of the Bible, at the moment it was set down in writing, already had behind it a more or less long process of shaping by oral tradition and that it was not frozen at the moment it was written down, but entered into new processes of interpretation—'relectures'—that further develop its hidden potential. Thus, the extent of the Word's meaning cannot be reduced to the thoughts of a single author in a specific historical moment; it is not

Benedict bids us to pay close attention to the history of the early Church and the original inner unity of Word, sacrament, and Church order and authority. That history demonstrates that the institutions and practices of the Church are not artificial or arbitrary later constructs, but organic developments of the people of God's encounter with the Word of God. Put another way, the structure of revelation and of the faith—how the early Church heard the Word and responded to it—is itself the source of the Church's sacramental worship, its teaching office, and its principles of governance.

Benedict notes the interdependence of three critical "establishments" in the early Church— *apostolic succession*, the means by which responsibility and authority for bearing witness to the Word is handed on in the Church; the *canon* of Scriptures determined to be authoritative written expressions of that Word; and the "rule of faith" (*regula fidei*) established to guarantee the integrity and orthodoxy of that witness.[36] Establishment of the canon acknowledged the "sovereignty of the Word," and the Church as servant of the Word. At the same time it fixed the form of that Word, establishing the New Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures as "a single Scripture" and the "master text." Word and witness cannot be separated, and the continuity of that witness through history is guaranteed by the establishment of apostolic succession and the episcopal ministry. Finally, the truth of that witness is guaranteed by the rule of faith which becomes "a key for interpretation."[37]

From this "reciprocal compenetration"[38] of Word, witness, and rule of faith, come the distinctive characteristics of the Bible. Scripture, as "Scripture," is entrusted to and enacted by the Church.[39] The Bible—the canon of scriptural texts that make up the Old and New Testaments—is composed, edited, and organized

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the property of a single author at all; rather, it lives in a history that is ever moving onward and, thus, has dimensions and depths of meaning in past and future that ultimately pass into the realm of the unforeseen … . Certainly, Scripture carries God's thoughts within it: that makes it unique and constitutes it an 'authority.' Yet it is transmitted by a human history. It carries within it the life and thought of a historical society that we call the 'People of God,' because they are brought together, and held together, by the coming of the divine Word. There is a reciprocal relationship: This society is the essential condition for the origin and the growth of the biblical Word; and conversely, this Word gives the society its identity and continuity. Thus, the analysis of the structure of the biblical Word has brought to light an interwoven relationship between Church and Bible, between the People of God and the Word of God." *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 32–33.

36 Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Ecumenical Meeting at the Archbishopric of Cologne (August 19, 2005), in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (August 24, 2005), 8–9.

37 Address to Ecumenical Meeting at the Archbishopric of Cologne; *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 148–149.

38 Address to Ecumenical Meeting at the Archbishopric of Cologne.

39 In this regard, Benedict quotes Heinrich Schlier, the student of Rudolf Bultmann and courageous member of the Christian opposition to Hitler: "It is unlikely that any sensible Christian would contest that the care for the Word of God among men is entrusted to the Church alone." *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 45.

in furtherance of the Church's mission to proclaim "the presence of the Word in the world."[40] As Benedict notes, the criteria for determining which books were truly the Word of God were primarily liturgical:

> A book was recognized as "canonical" if it was sanctioned by the Church for use in public worship… . In the ancient Church, the reading of Scripture and the confession of faith were primarily liturgical acts of the whole assembly gathered around the risen Lord.[41]

The Church, then, from the beginning, was understood as the *viva vox*, the living voice of Scripture, proclaiming the Word but also protecting the Word from manipulation and distortion.[42] As the confessional and sacramental life of the Church were the criterion by which the canon was formed, the Scriptures were intended from the beginning to be interpreted according to the rule of faith or the Creed, under the authority of the apostles' successors. And again, historically speaking, the Church's proclamation and interpretation of the Word was ordered to a liturgical or sacramental end—the profession of faith and baptism.

> The original sphere of existence of the Christian profession of faith … was the sacramental life of the Church. It is by this criterion that the canon was shaped, and that is why the Creed is the primary authority for the interpretation of the Bible… . Thus the authority of the Church that speaks out, the authority of apostolic succession, is written into Scripture through the Creed and is indivisible from it. The teaching office of the apostles' successors does not represent a secondary authority alongside Scripture but is inwardly a part of it. This *viva vox* is not there to restrict the authority of Scripture or to limit it or even replace it by the existence of another—on the contrary, it is its task to ensure that Scripture is not disposable, cannot be manipulated, to preserve its proper *perspicuitas*, its clear meaning, from the conflict of hypotheses. Thus, there is a secret relationship of reciprocity. Scripture sets limits and a standard for the *viva vox*; the living voice guarantees that it cannot be manipulated.[43]

40 "The establishment of the canon and the establishment of the early Church are one and the same process but viewed from different perspectives." *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 148.

41 *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 148, 150.

42 *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 35.

43 *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 35.

Memoria Ecclesiae

This original interwoven unity of the Word of God and the people of God forms the foundation for Benedict's reflections on the nature of Scripture and the function and mission of theology and exegesis in the Church. Basing himself on the historical record of early Christianity, Benedict describes the Church as called into being by Christ's Gospel and the salvation-historical event of his death and resurrection.

He speaks of "the *memoria Ecclesiae* … the Church as memory."[44] It is the memory of Christ's saving actions—preserved in the written testimony of Scripture and renewed in the Church's sacramental liturgy—that gives the Church its "common identity as God's family."[45] As the "living, historical subject" of God's Word,[46] the Church lives by and for the Word, bearing witness to the Word that others might experience its saving power.

The notion of the Church as living voice and memory distinguishes Benedict's ideas about Church tradition. Benedict holds to the Church's ancient understanding that divine revelation is not reserved only to the written Word of God, but includes the sacred tradition handed on in the Church's teachings, sacramental worship, and life of faith.[47] However, Benedict identifies a deeper, dialogic dynamic as characteristic of the relationship between Word and Church.

Tradition, he argues, cannot be reduced to a treasure chest, a static collection of ancient texts, legislations, and venerable practices. Rather, it is a living dialogue in which the Church constantly listens to the Word addressed to her and responds to the claims the Word makes on her life. The Church's response to the Word—its preaching and proclamation, its teachings and liturgical life—forms the "stuff" of tradition. But tradition is more than these things. Tradition is nothing other than

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44 "Christian faith, by its very nature, includes the act of remembering; in this way, it brings about the unity of history and the unity of man before God, or rather: it can bring about the unity of history because God has given it memory. The seat of all faith is, then, the *memoria Ecclesiae*, the memory of the Church, the Church as memory. It exists through all ages, waxing and waning but never ceasing to be the common situs of faith." *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 23.

45 *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism*, 63.

46 *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 168. "The faith of the Church does not exist as an ensemble of texts, rather, the texts—the words—exist because there is a corresponding subject which gives them their basis and their inner coherence. Empirically speaking, the preaching of the apostles called into existence the social organization 'Church' as a kind of historical subject. One becomes a believer by joining this community of tradition, thought, and life, by living personally from its continuity of life throughout history, and by acquiring a share in its way of understanding, its speech and its thought." *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 94.

47 For a classical treatment of the relationship between Scripture and tradition, see *Dei Verbum*, 7–10.

the fulfillment of Christ's promise to be with his Church until the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). It is Christ's permanent, living, and saving presence in the Church.

Benedict describes this presence using the biblical imagery of the river of life, which he associates with the blood and water that flowed from the side of the Crucified.[48]

> Tradition is the living Gospel… . Thanks to tradition … the water of life that flowed from Christ's side and his saving blood reach the women and men of all times… . Tradition is the living river that links us to the origins, the living river in which the origins are ever present, the great river that leads us to the gates of eternity.[49]

Tradition, therefore, is a sort of ongoing divine intervention in history that ensures that every succeeding generation may have the same contact with the risen Christ experienced by the first disciples. This experience, a true and personal encounter with the saving presence of Christ, forms the "content" of the Church's tradition, as bringing about this encounter constitutes the mission of the Church.

In the Church's proclamation and liturgical celebration, the Word of salvation spoken 2,000 years ago is always "a present reality."[50] In the sacramental liturgy of the Church we have "contemporaneity with Christ."[51] Indeed, the Church's identity is defined by its liturgical remembrance in the Eucharist of the salvific event that the Word speaks of. This liturgical remembrance, of course, was mandated by Christ himself at the Last Supper. As Benedict points out: "The universalism of salvation … requires that the Easter memorial be celebrated in history without interruption until Christ's glorious return (1 Cor. 11:26)."[52] In this "solemn remembrance, *the means of salvation history*—the death and resurrection of the Lord—is truly present."[53]

"A Word about the Word"

We see, then, that in Benedict's historical reconstruction of primitive Christianity,

48 See John 7:38; 19:34; Rev. 21:6; 22:1, 17.

49 Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience (April 26, 2006), in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (May 3, 2006), 11.

50 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996 [1991]), 19.

51 *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 60; *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 88, 100.

52 General Audience (April 26, 2006).

53 *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 2. Emphasis added. See also, Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 8.

the Church's missionary, liturgical, juridical, and organizational aspects are integrally related. We see, further, that his reconstruction recognizes the early Church's belief that it was guided, even "in-dwelt," by the presence or Spirit of Christ. And we see that the Church's original mission and tradition, again under the presence and tutelage of the Spirit, are ordered to liturgy—to the entrance of the believer into the family of God through Word and sacrament.

Benedict's historical study also draws out the original work of the Word in the Church's missionary, catechetical, and confessional efforts. He notices that the faith itself is not simply an intellectual assent to a set of principles or texts. The faith requires from each believer "a word about the Word"—a personal profession of faith in the Word that he or she has heard.[54] "The faith that comes to us as a Word must also become a word in us, a word that is simultaneously the expression of our life."[55]

As the Word cannot be heard unless it is heard *from* the Church, the confession of faith is likewise an ecclesial-liturgical action and saving event that takes place only *in* the Church. One does not confess faith in the Gospel by oneself, but in the presence of the community of those already living this faith; this confession takes place in the ritual context or form of the sacrament.[56] The communal celebration of baptism recognizes the historical and ecclesial character of conversion, that the faith of the Church precedes every individual believer's faith and is the instrument by which individuals come to the faith.

Benedict notes further that the confession of faith itself, the *symbol* or the Creed, is an interpretive synthesis of the biblical testimony by which the Church determined "what actually constituted Christianity."[57] Profession of the Creed, from the start, was preceded by a period of *catechumenate*, or instruction in the

54 *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism*, 30–31.

55 "We do not think up faith on our own. It does not come *from* us as an idea of ours but *to* us as a word from outside. It is, as it were, a word about the Word; we are 'handed over' *into* this Word … that precedes us through an immersion in water symbolizing death … We cannot receive his Word as a theory in the same way that we learn, say, mathematical formulas or philosophical opinions. We can learn it only in accepting a share in Christ's destiny. But we can become sharers in Christ's destiny only where he has permanently committed himself to sharing in man's destiny: in the Church. In the language of the Church we call this event a 'sacrament.' The act of faith is unthinkable without the sacramental component… . That is, the faith that comes to us as a Word must also become a word in us, a word that is simultaneously the expression of our life." *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism*, 30–31. See also, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 26: "The life embraced the Word, and the Word formed the life. Indeed, it is only to one who has entered into the community of faith that the Word of faith reveals itself."

56 *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 52.

57 *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 149.

truths of the faith.[58] The Church's catechesis—during the course of which many of its doctrines and dogmas originally arose[59]—was fundamentally scriptural, premised on a canonical belief in the unity of the Old and New Testaments.

In fact, Benedict helps us to see how the original confession of faith presumes not only a belief in the unity of Scripture, but also a belief that Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the cross and resurrection of Christ. In its simplest form, the Christian confession is summarized in the name, "Jesus Christ." In this confession, Jesus, the historical figure whose life and deeds are recorded in the New Testament, is acknowledged to be the "Christ," that is, the anointed messiah foretold in the Old Testament. The confession of faith in Jesus Christ, the very bedrock of "Christian identity … is founded on the unity of the testaments."[60]

Benedict again observes that the Church's most ancient practices cannot accurately be understood without reference to its faith in the saving presence of Christ. The sacrament of baptism, like the Eucharist, is believed to be a true and real initiation into the salvation-historical event that is the content of the Word. The Church's sacraments, Benedict reminds us, are held to be "the communications of him who … is God's visible Word."[61] By these acts, God establishes with men and women a covenant, a familial bond, making them children in "the great family" of the Church.[62] In the sacrament, the believer is united with God's larger salvific design—"a common history in which God brought the people together and became their way."[63]

Faith Seeking Understanding

With this historical foundation laid, we are ready to consider Benedict's understanding of the task and function of theology and exegesis. Again, Benedict wants to clear the path for a genuinely authentic exegesis and theology—one divested of philosophical blinders and true to what we know about the texts from historical and literary study. As a starting point, this requires that theology and exegesis

58 "Hand in hand with the sign there was always the instruction, the Word, that gave the sign its place in the history of Israel's covenant with God." *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 29.

59 *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 27. "To become a Christian is to enter into this one particular Creed, into the communal form of the faith. The inner bond between the community itself and this Creed is expressed by the fact that the acceptance into the community has the form of a sacrament: baptism and catechesis are inseparable… . By its very nature, the word of faith presupposes the community that lives it, that is bound to it, and adheres to it in its very power to bind mankind." *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 329–330.

60 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Many Religions, One Covenant: Israel, the Church and the World*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999 [1998]), 18.

61 *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 47.

62 *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 32; *Behold the Pierced One*, 105–106; *Called to Communion*, 23.

63 *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 29–31.

reckon the integrity and inner coherence of the Word in its original ecclesial context, a context that is at once sacramental, confessional, and missionary; it requires further that theology and exegesis account for the faith of the community that has given us the sacred texts, specifically, the community's faith in the continuing presence and guidance of the divine Word.

For Benedict, the Church is the living subject or "do-er" of theology, which flows out of the Church's remembrance—its pondering, proclaiming, and "actualizing" of the Word of God. Theology stems from the very structure of the faith, as a consequence, even an imperative, of the faith. It begins in the response to God's gift, the divine Word that God has spoken to us in Jesus.[64] Theology is the believer's response to the Word, who is a divine Person; and theology is, essentially, a reflection on the "contents" of the Word—the revelation of God's love, expressed in the new covenant made in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We "do" theology, in the first place, because we believe in and love the God who has shown his face to us in Jesus Christ. Theology is faith seeking better understanding of the One who reveals himself as love. It becomes an "imperative" of the faith because there is an innate human desire to seek the truth and the most intimate knowledge possible of the One we love.

> Faith can wish to understand because it is moved by love for the One upon whom it has bestowed its consent. Love seeks understanding. It wishes to know ever better the one whom it loves. It "seeks his face," as Augustine never tires of repeating. Love is the desire for intimate knowledge, so that the quest for intelligence can even be an inner requirement of love. Put another way, there is a coherence of love and truth which has important consequences for theology and philosophy. Christian faith can say of itself, I have found love. Yet love for Christ and of one's neighbor for Christ's sake can enjoy stability and consistency only if its deepest motivation is love for the truth. This adds a new aspect to the missionary element: real love of neighbor also desires to give him the deepest thing man needs, namely, knowledge and truth.[65]

64 "Theology is a specifically Christian phenomenon which follows from the structure of faith… . It is preceded by a Word which … has been granted … as a gift…Theology is pondering what God has said and thought before us." *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 103–104. "To perceive the meaning of this Word, to understand this Word—that is the ultimate basis of theology …" *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 32; *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 325.

65 *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 27.

We see, then, that theology for Benedict is far from a private affair. Theology's desire to better know and love God is always ordered to the Church's missionary proclamation of the saving Word—"to tell man who he is and … to disclose to him the truth about himself, that is, what he can base his life on and what he can die for."[66]

In Benedict's understanding, there is an original and inner dynamism that orients theology to proclamation and catechesis. This is not at all to reduce the work of theology to apologetics or catechetics. Instead, Benedict sees a missionary impulse issuing from the heart of the Christian faith experience. Faith, because it possesses the truth about human history and happiness, must necessarily express itself in proclamation and catechesis so that others may share in the truth.

The Authors of Scripture as the "Normative" Theologians

If the activity of theology flows from the inner structure of Christian faith, its content and methodology in a similar way issue from the inner structure of revelation. Benedict appropriates a distinction first drawn by Aristotle and later adopted by pseudo-Dionysius and Bonaventure: between *theology* proper (θεολογία), that is, the words of God, and *the study of theology* (θεολογιχή), our efforts to understand the divine discourse.[67]

He sees sacred Scripture as theology in its original and pure form, because it is "the discourse of God rendered in human words … it does not just speak of him but *is* his own speech. It lets God himself speak." He accepts the traditional Catholic notion of inspiration, of Scripture's dual, divine and human, authorship. But he draws out a deeper implication of that affirmation, namely that the human authors of Scripture are the original theologians—"they are 'theologoi,' those through whom God … as the Word that speaks itself, enters into history."

This fact of revelation has great significance for him: "the Bible becomes the model of all theology," and the authors of sacred Scripture become "the norm of the theologian, who accomplishes his task properly only to the extent that he makes God himself his subject." This in turn leads to perhaps his most daring and fruitful assertion of theological principle:

> [T]heology is a spiritual science. The normative theologians are the authors of Holy Scripture. This statement is valid not only with reference to the objective written document they left

66 *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 63–64.

67 *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 320–322.

> behind but also with reference to their manner of speaking, in which it is God himself who speaks.[68]

For Benedict that means that Scripture, and the human authors of Scripture, are meant to serve as the model—not only for how we should "do" theology, but also for what our theology should be about, and how the findings of theological inquiry should be expressed.

Taking the New Testament authors as "normative" means, in the first place, that the theologian must be a person who has heard and believed the Word, professed that faith in the Church, and made personal assent to the standards and teachings of the Church in its sacramental and moral life. Not only were the New Testament authors men of faith, but their written proclamation teaches us that the fullest knowledge of Christ is only possible in following him as disciples.[69] Of necessity, then, "theology presupposes faith… . There can be no theology without conversion."[70]

Following the New Testament writers, Benedict sees theology as essentially "about" Jesus Christ—who he is, the full meaning of the salvation-historical event of his resurrection, and how his presence remains in the world in his Church.[71] "All Christian theology, if it is to be true to its origin, must be first and foremost a theology of resurrection."[72] The primary data for theology becomes the words and deeds of Jesus as remembered and interpreted in the New Testament.[73]

In this sense, theology, following in the footsteps of the normative theologians, is a function of the Church as the living memory of Christ. Benedict illustrates his thought by reflecting on a passage in John's Gospel, a brief statement made after Christ's cleansing of the temple: "When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken" (John 2:22). The passage refers to Jesus' declaration that should his enemies destroy "this shrine," he would raise it in three days. Benedict reads this passage in light of the promise found later in John's

68 *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 320–322.

69 See the biblical citations in *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 67. "[J]ust as we cannot learn to swim without water, so we cannot learn theology without the spiritual praxis in which it lives." *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 323.

70 *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 55, 57.

71 *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 76–77.

72 *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 184–185.

73 "[T]he remembrance and retention of the words of Jesus and of the course of his life, especially his passion, were from the beginning an essential factor in the formation of Christian tradition and in the norms applied to it." Joseph Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1985), 4.

Gospel, that Jesus would send the Holy Spirit to lead the disciples to remembrance of all that he had said (John 14:26).

Benedict suggests that in this passage we have all the elements for a biblical-theological doctrine of the Church as *memoria ecclesiae*: belief in the salvation-historical event of the resurrection; belief in the unity of the Old Testament (the "scripture" Jesus referred them to) and the New Testament (the "word" spoken by Jesus); and remembrance in the Spirit, which takes place in the ecclesial context and authority established by Jesus.[74]

One could even develop Benedict's insights for theology further by delineating more precisely the *content* of the disciples' remembrance. The "word" that the Spirit brings them to remember is, in fact, a spiritual or typological interpretation of the Old Testament. In light of the resurrection, and under the guidance of the Spirit, the apostles understand Jesus' words about the temple to have been referring to the "temple" of his body (see John 2:21).

The passage, then, gives us insight into Jesus' own preaching, which, as the Gospels illustrate in abundance, often involved typological or spiritual interpretation of his identity and mission in light of the Old Testament.[75] This method of interpretation, in turn, becomes the dominant pattern for the normative theologians, the New Testament authors. As we will see below, this pattern of spiritual exegesis is also one of the keys to Benedict's own exegesis and biblical theology.

Read through Benedict's eyes, we see the normative theologians of the New Testament in constant dialogue with the Old Testament texts. Indeed, the New Testament is seen by Benedict as a spiritual exegesis of the Old. "The New Testament is nothing other than an interpretation of 'the Law, the prophets, and the writings' found from or contained in the story of Jesus."[76] He notes that certain principles—"the internal unity of the Bible as a rule of interpretation, Christ as the meeting point of all the Old Testament pathways"—are the hallmarks of the New Testament authors' exegesis.[77]

The central salvation-historical event, Christ's resurrection, is both a mighty act of God and at the same time a vindication of Jesus' interpretation of the Old Testament. Or, as Benedict puts it more pointedly, the resurrection is "God's defense of Jesus against the official interpretation of the Old Testament as given by the competent Jewish authorities." By the resurrection, God "proves," so to speak,

74 See Benedict's discussion in *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 24–25.

75 See, in summary form, the post-resurrection catechesis to the Twelve in Luke 24:27, 44–45.

76 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Milestone: Memoirs, 1927–1977,* trans. Erasmo Leivas-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998), 53.

77 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Preface," Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2003), 11–19, at 14.

that Jesus is the suffering servant, the divine son, and the messiah from the line of David, as foretold by the prophets and the psalms. Of critical significance, in Benedict's mind, is the portrayal of Jesus as "the true lamb of sacrifice, the sacrifice in which the deepest meaning of all Old Testament liturgies is fulfilled." As we will see below, this has "essential significance for the Christian liturgy."[78]

As a final historical note, Benedict acknowledges that Jesus did not "invent" this way of reading the Scriptures. Already in the Old Testament, especially in the prophets and psalms, we find increasing anticipation of a messianic king who will be "the fulfilled image of the true Israel."[79] Nonetheless, Jesus does claim to be definitive interpreter of the Old Testament texts, and the New Testament authors employed certain interpretive methods, already present in rabbinic Judaism, to back up this claim. As we will see, the resulting original Christian pattern of reading the New Testament in light of the Old and the Old Testament in light of the New, becomes normative for Benedict's biblical theology.[80]

Benedict's New Synthesis

We are now in the position to sketch, if perhaps only in broad outlines, some of the fundamental elements of what I would describe as Benedict's biblical theology. The details of what I mean by "biblical theology" will hopefully become clear during the course of my discussion below. But I may state it preliminarily here: By biblical theology I mean a unified understanding of the saving truths of the inspired Scripture as they have been handed on in the tradition of the Church, an understanding based on the unity of the Old and New Testaments, on Christ as the interpretive key of the Scriptures, and on the Church's divine liturgy as the fulfillment and actualization of Scripture's saving truths.

For Benedict, following the normative theologians of the New Testament and the patristic authors, theology is essentially interpretation and commentary on

78 *Dogma and Preaching*, 3–5.

79 *The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood*, 48.

80 "Jesus of Nazareth claimed to be the true heir to the Old Testament —'the Scriptures'—and to offer a true interpretation, which, admittedly, was not that of the schools, but came from the authority of the Author himself: 'He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes' (Mark 1:22). The Emmaus narrative also expresses this claim: 'Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures' (Luke 24:27). The New Testament authors sought to ground this claim into details, in particular Matthew, but Paul as well, by using rabbinic methods of interpretation to show that the scribal interpretation led to Christ as the key to the 'Scriptures.' For the authors and founders of the New Testament, the Old Testament was simply 'the Scriptures': it was only later that the developing Church gradually formed a New Testament canon which was also Sacred Scripture, but in the sense that it still presupposed Israel's Bible to be such, the Bible read by the apostles and their disciples, and now called the Old Testament, which provided the interpretative key." "Preface," *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 17.

sacred Scripture. "Theology is interpretation,"[81] a reflection on the Word that has been given. In autobiographical remarks, he has acknowledged that exegesis has always been "the center of my theological work."[82] I would characterize Benedict in his exegetical theology as a "biblical realist." What he says about the "biblical realism" of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* which he was instrumental in conceiving and editing, is no less true of his own theological thought:

> The *Catechism* trusts the biblical word. It holds the Christ of the Gospels to be the real Jesus. It is also convinced that all the Gospels tell us about this same Jesus and that all of them together help us, each in its own way, to know the true Jesus of history, who is no other than the Christ of faith.[83]

For Benedict, "the biblical books … are, precisely, historical books."[84] He has often stated that the testimony of the New Testament is far more reliable that the constantly shifting hypotheses of historical-critical scholarship.[85] He accepts the Gospel testimony as "a written record of the most ancient catechesis,"[86] and assumes the historical reality of such events as the multiplication of loaves (Mark

81 *The Nature and Mission of Theology,* 93. Benedict's views on the object of theology were well reflected in these statements from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* (June 26, 1990), 6, 8: "[The theologian's] role is to pursue in a particular way an ever deeper understanding of the Word of God in the inspired Scriptures and handed on in the living tradition of the Church… . [T]he object of theology is the truth which is the living God and his plan for salvation revealed in Jesus Christ." In *L'Osservatore Romano,* Weekly Edition in English (July 2, 1990), 1.

82 *Milestones,* 52–53. Describing his thought to a journalist, he once said: "[E]xegesis was always very important… . The point of departure is first of all the Word. That we believe the Word of God, that we try really to get to know and understand it, and then … to think it together with the great masters of the faith. This gives my theology a somewhat biblical character and also bears the stamp of the fathers, especially Augustine." Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger with Peter Seewald, *Salt of the Earth: Christianity and the Catholic Church at the End of the Millennium,* trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997), 66.

83 *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism,* 64.

84 "Relationship between Magisterium and Exegetes."

85 "I credit biblical tradition with greater truthfulness than I do the attempts to reconstruct a chemically pure historical Jesus in the retort of historical reason. I trust the tradition in its entirety. And the more reconstructions I see come and go, the more I feel confirmed in my trust… . In the face of such partial authorities the vital power of the tradition carries incomparably greater weight with me… . I know that the Jesus of the Gospels is the real Jesus and that I can trust myself to him with far greater security than I can to the most learned reconstructions; he will outlast all of them. The Gospel tradition with its great breadth and its range of tone tells me who Jesus was and is. In it he is always present to be heard and seen anew." *Dogma and Preaching,* 9–10.

86 *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism,* 61.

6:34–38).[87] The Old Testament witness, too, he likewise treats seriously as history.[88] He is quite conscious that in this stance he is at odds with the dominant model of "scientific" exegesis. But he rejects the notion that faith and history are somehow in dialectical opposition, that the biblical narrative cannot be a source of true historical knowledge.

> The opinion that faith as such knows absolutely nothing of historical facts and must leave all of this to historians is Gnosticism: this opinion disembodies faith and reduces it to pure idea. The reality of events is necessary precisely because the faith is founded on the Bible. *A God who cannot intervene in history and reveal himself in it is not the God of the Bible…* . That Jesus—in all that is essential—was effectively who the Gospels reveal him to be to us is not mere historical conjecture, but *a fact of faith*. Objections which seek to convince us to the contrary are not the expression of an effective scientific knowledge, but are an arbitrary over-evaluation of the method.[89]

Throughout the history recorded in Scripture, Benedict sees not only a series of events in the life of a people, but also the hand of God, "the great acts of God in history."[90] In this, we see Benedict's hermeneutic of faith, again in sharp contrast to the supposedly "scientific" worldview of biblical criticism. The exegete, he contends,

> may not exclude a priori that (almighty) God could speak in human words in the world. He may not exclude that God himself could enter into and work in human history, however improbable such a thing might at first appear. He must be ready to learn from the extraordinary. He must be ready to accept that the truly original may occur in history, something which cannot

87 See General Audience (May 24, 2006), in *L'Osservatore Romano,* Weekly Edition in English (May 31, 2006), 14.

88 For example, he writes of "the whole history recounted in the books of the Judges and Kings, which is taken up afresh and given a new interpretation in Chronicles," and uses the account of Israel's Exodus and settlement of the land as an insight into the meaning of worship. *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 15–20. Likewise, he considers the history of liturgy from Genesis to the Christian era, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 35–45, and discusses the biblical nature of wisdom in light of Isaiah's prophecy and the Davidic monarchy. *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 356–358. See also, his discussion of Adam and Eve, "Message for the 80th World Mission Sunday 2006," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (June 14, 2006), 3.

89 "Relationship between Magisterium and Exegetes." Emphasis added.

90 *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 190.

> be derived from precedents but which opens up out of itself. He may not deny to humanity the ability to be responsive beyond the categories of pure reason and to reach beyond ourselves toward the open and endless truth of being.[91]

Benedict shares the view of Bonaventure, that to understand the literal, historical text is not to understand Scripture as it is given, as revelation. What is needed is to understand the "spiritual meaning lying behind the letter."[92] He insists that "spiritual [interpretation] does not mean that the exegesis lacks realism or disregards history, but that it brings into view the spiritual depth of the historical events."[93]

As we have pointed out, Benedict reads biblical history using sophisticated tools of historical and literary criticism. However, in endeavoring to read the Bible with the normative theologians, the biblical authors, he does not stop with history, but reads also with the eyes of faith. Faith, informed by the tradition of the Church, especially the Creed, "gives us the right to trust the revealed Word as such."[94] Again and again, Benedict urges us not to oppose faith and reason. Faith does not exempt us from careful literary and historical analysis of the texts. Indeed, faith is a form of special knowledge that empowers us to undertake this analysis with deeper insight and lends to our work a greater unity and coherence.

The Self-Transcendent Meaning of Biblical Words and Events

Following the biblical authors, Benedict's biblical theology is built on a series of *unities*—"the unity of the Old and New Testaments, of the New Testament and early Church dogma, of all these elements together and the ongoing life of faith." These "unities," as we saw above, are not an artificial philosophical construct imposed by Benedict; rather, they are observable in the structure of revelation and the origins

91 *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis*, 19.

92 *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 66–68, 78–79.

93 *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism*, 65, n. 24.

94 "Of course, exegesis can and must also investigate the internal history of the texts in order to trace their development and thought patterns. We all know that there is much to learn from such work. But it must not lead us to neglect the principal task, which is to understand the text as it now stands, as a totality in itself with its own particular message. Whoever reads Scripture in faith as a Bible must make a further step. By its very nature, historical interpretation can never take us beyond hypotheses. After all, none of us was there when it happened; only physical science can repeat events in the laboratory. Faith makes us Jesus' contemporaries. It can and must integrate all true historical discoveries, and it becomes richer for doing so. But faith gives us knowledge of something more than a hypothesis; it gives us the right to trust the revealed Word as such." *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism*, 67–68. He describes this spiritual reading as "a faith that does not set history aside but first opens its eyes so as to be able to understand it in its entirety." *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 59.

of the Church. In his work, Benedict seeks to probe deeply into the mystery of these unities, which are the vehicles through which God's plan continues in the world. His goal is to "seek the inner unity and totality of the truth in the grand historical structure of the faith."[95]

We have seen how the New Testament witness presumes the "inner unity"[96] of the Old and New Testaments. The Bible, in its final canonical form, is essentially a historical narrative. It purports to tell a single story about events that have taken place in the history of a people—from the first day of creation to the last day, which is the beginning of a new heaven and a new earth. The canonical text claims to be more than an account of historical facts or the memoir of a particular people. It claims that God himself was at work in the events it records, and that the words of various characters and their deeds themselves represent actions of God.[97] This suggests, too, that within the very structure of biblical revelation, there is a twofold sense of meaning—the one literal and historical, and the other the sense of the text that can only be gained by faith, by belief in the claims made about God in these texts.

This consideration of the structure of biblical history also informs Benedict's particular contribution to the Church's understanding of inspiration. Because the sacred texts are the products of both divine and human authors, their testimony of necessity must transcend the limits of mere human language. Benedict explains this dynamic of the scriptural Word by referring to the "multidimensional nature of human language,"[98] in which words often convey more meanings than they literally express. This self-transcendent capacity of human language is heightened to an immeasurable degree in Scripture, which is the Word of God expressed in human language. "If even human speech boundlessly transcends itself the greater it is and refers to the unsaid and inexhaustible beyond the words themselves, how much more must this be true of the Word whose ultimate and real subject we believe to be God himself?"[99]

For Benedict, the meanings of the words of Scripture cannot be "fixed to a particular moment in history."[100] Instead, as we know from studying the history of biblical texts and the process of their composition, later Scriptures are always in dialogue with earlier ones, commenting on them and reinterpreting them. The meaning of individual texts "was not frozen at the moment it was written down,

95 *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 96.

96 *Behold the Pierced One*, 44.

97 *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 147–148.

98 "Preface," *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 17.

99 *A New Song for the Lord*, 50–51.

100 "Preface," *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 17.

but entered into new processes of interpretation—'relectures'—that further develop its hidden potential."[101]

As the words of Scripture, by their very nature, must admit of more than the literal level of meaning, the same is true of the historical events recorded in Scripture. This insight, too, naturally follows from the structure of biblical revelation, that is, from the fact that God is the ultimate "author," not only of the words of the inspired texts but of the historical agents and events detailed in its pages.

The events recorded are "real," but because God is their author their meaning far transcends "historical facticity." Indeed, because God is acting in the biblical narrative, "the events carry *within themselves* a surplus meaning … giving them significance for all time and for all men." It is important to understand that these surplus meanings are inseparable from the historical events. They are not arbitrary rereadings of the events or new interpretations of the events given after the fact. The surplus or divine meaning is *within* the original events—"present in the event, even though it transcends mere facticity."[102]

For Benedict, then, we must read the sacred page in such a way as to hear "the living Speaker himself." We must "once again develop methods that respect this inner self-transcending of the words into the Word of God."[103] Further, we must be vigilant in seeking "a greater understanding of how the Word of God can avail of the human word to confer on a history in progress a meaning that surpasses the present moment and yet brings out, precisely in this way, the unity of the whole."[104]

Reading the Scriptures as a single history of salvation, Benedict detects a kind of historical "pedagogy," a long, historical tutelage or "educational process" by which God prepared humanity for the revelation of Christ and his new covenant.[105] He sees in the "inner continuity and coherence"[106] of the Old and New Testaments a revelation of the divine intent in salvation history. "The totality of the Scriptures

101 *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 32–33.

102 See the important discussion in *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 147–148.

103 *A New Song for the Lord*, 50–51; *Eschatology*, 42–44.

104 "Preface," *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*. While it is beyond my scope here, it should be noted that Benedict sees the danger of an incipient "Marcionism"—a heretical discarding of the Old Testament—in some of the assumptions and practices of historical criticism. See his discussion of Harnack, and the legacy of Luther's "antithesis between Law and Gospel" in this important "Preface," 17.

105 *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 55–56; *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 270; *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 344–345; Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995 [1986]), 9, 16.

106 *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 36.

on which the Christian faith rests is God's 'testament' to mankind, issued in two stages, as a proclamation of his will to the world."[107]

In "the profound compenetration of the two testaments as the one Scripture of the Christian faith," Benedict sees the meaning of God's plan revealed in Jesus Christ.

> The real novelty of the New Testament lies not so much in new ideas as in the figure of Christ himself, who gives flesh and blood to these concepts—an unprecedented realism. In the Old Testament, the novelty of the Bible did not consist merely in abstract notions but in God's unpredictable and in some sense unprecedented activity. This divine activity now takes on dramatic form when, in Jesus Christ, it is God himself who goes in search of the "stray sheep," a suffering and lost humanity… . His death on the cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form.[108]

Covenant, the Bible's Central Theme and Key

God's will for the world is the *covenant*, a relationship of communion in love that embraces heaven and earth, spirit and matter, the divine and the human. Benedict reads God's covenant will and desire on the first pages of Scripture, in the account of creation. He expresses the meaning of the creation account in a series of statements: "Creation is oriented to the sabbath, which is the sign of the covenant between God and humankind… . Creation is designed in such a way that it is oriented to worship. It fulfills its purpose and assumes its significance when it is lived, ever new, with a view to worship. Creation exists for the sake of worship."[109]

Fashioned in the image of God, the human person was created for relation-

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107 *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 47. "The synthesis of the testaments worked out in the early Church corresponds solely to the fundamental intention of the New Testament message, and it alone can give Christianity its own historical force." *A New Song for the Lord*, 72. "[T]he understanding of Holy Scripture as an inner unity in which one part sustains the other, has its existence in it, so that each part can be read and understood only in terms of the whole." *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 135–136. "[T]he New Testament itself wished to be no more than the complete and full understanding of the Old Testament, now made possible in Christ. The whole Old Testament is a movement of transition to Christ, a waiting for the One in whom all its words would come true, in whom the 'covenant' would attain fulfillment as the new covenant." *Feast of Faith*, 58.

108 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Encyclical Letter on Christian Love (December 25, 2005), 12, in *L'Osservatore Romano* Weekly Edition in English (February 1, 2006).

109 *In the Beginning*, 27–28.

ship with God. Men and women, too, were created for worship, which is an expression of "the pure relationship of love"[110] of the creature with the Creator. "The goal of creation is the covenant, the love story of God and man."[111] For Benedict, the God who reveals himself to us, the God who creates and redeems, reveals himself in Scripture as a "God-in-relationship." He reveals himself in word and deed in the acts of creation and redemption, acts solemnly expressed in the making of covenant. Covenant is the goal of creation and the way of God's self-revelation, of his entering into relationship with his creation.[112]

Benedict's biblical theology of covenant synthesizes a great deal of scholarship. He presents the covenant, not as a reciprocal partnership, but as the initiative and gift of the divine will. The covenant is a "creative act of God's love," Benedict says, noting that the prophets often described God's "passionate love" for Israel in terms of a husband's love for his bride.[113] In the covenant, we see the perfect "manifestation of his self, the 'radiance of his countenance.'"[114]

God's covenant is always expressed in words and sign, in law and liturgy, Benedict notes. Beginning with the sabbath ordinances, there is a profound inner connection in the covenant structure of revelation between the "legal and cultic" orders, between the moral order and the liturgical order, between the commands and ordinances of God and the sacrificial worship of God.[115] Law and worship are two sides of the covenant relationship. Each is

> an expression of God's love, of his "yes" to the human being that he created, so that he [the human being] could both love and receive love… . God created the universe in order to enter into a history of love with humankind. He created it so that love could exist.[116]

In Benedict's reading, God's testament or covenant is "the central theme of

110 "The true center, the power that moves and shapes from within the rhythm of the stars and of our lives, is worship. Our life's rhythm moves in proper measure when it is caught up in this." *In the Beginning*., 29–30.

111 *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 26.

112 *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 75–77.

113 "The 'covenant' is not a two-sided contract but a gift, a creative act of God's love… . God, the king, receives nothing from man; but in giving him his law, he gives him the path of life." Many *Religions, One Covenant*, 50–51.

114 *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 77.

115 *In the Beginning*, 29; *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 68.

116 *In the Beginning*, 29–30.

Scripture itself, thus giving a key to the whole of it."[117] Covenant forms the narrative structure of Scripture, and the story of Scripture unfolds in the sequence of covenants that God makes—with Noah, with Abraham, with Jacob–Israel, with Moses at Sinai, and finally with David. The plurality and interrelatedness of these covenants makes up the one old covenant. Manifest in them is the truth of God's providential plan, the truth revealed in the covenant of creation.[118]

While each of these covenants is significant, the foundational covenant of salvation history is the covenant with Abraham who, by not withholding from God his beloved son, was blessed by God with the promise that he would become the father of many nations. This promise is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who makes it possible for men and women of all nations to share in the spiritual destiny of Israel, as the children of Abraham.[119]

Benedict sees in Israel's prophets an insistent promise of universalism, that all the nations will come to worship the God of Israel. The work of Jesus thus becomes the fulfillment of the "prophetic thrust of the Old Testament itself."[120] Jesus' mission, indeed, can be understood only in light of the sacred Scriptures of Israel. Through his Gospel, which marks his interpretation of Israel's Scriptures, the promise that Abraham's descendants would be the source of blessing and salvation for all nations, is realized.

The Deep Unity of Law and Gospel

The covenantal sequence of the canonical narrative indicates an "inner continuity" in salvation history—from Abraham and Israel to Jesus and the Church of Jews and Gentiles.[121] Benedict speaks of "the inner continuity and coherence of Law and Gospel" and the "deep unity between the good news of Jesus and the message of Sinai."[122] In fact, Christian identity is defined by reference to the old covenant. The Christian is joined to a history that began with Abraham and culminated in the kingdom of David.[123]

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117 *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 48.

118 "[T]here is only *one* will of God for men, only *one* historical activity of God with and for men, though this activity employs interventions that are diverse and even contradictory—yet in truth they belong together." *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 57.

119 "'You will be a blessing,' God had said to Abraham at the beginning of salvation history (Gen. 12:2). In Christ, the son of Abraham, these words are completely fulfilled." *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 183.

120 *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 28.

121 *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 68.

122 *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 33, 36.

123 *Truth and Tolerance*, 97.

> [T]he mission of Jesus is to unite Jews and pagans into a single people of God in which the universalist promises of the Scriptures are fulfilled that speak again and again of the nations worshipping the God of Israel… . The mission of Jesus consists in bringing together the histories of the nations in the community of the history of Abraham, the history of Israel… . The history of Israel should become the history of all, Abraham's sonship is to be extended to the "many." … [A]ll nations … become brothers and receivers of the promises of the chosen people; they become people of God with Israel through adherence to the will of God and through acceptance of the Davidic kingdom.[124]

Thus the old covenant is fulfilled in the new covenant made in the blood of Christ. The cross by which the new covenant is enacted can only be understood in light of the old covenant. Benedict explains the meaning of the new covenant in light of the Exodus and Passover, and in light of the covenant made with Israel at Sinai. Christ is the new Passover and indeed, all of Israel's liturgical forms and feasts point to the new Passover of Jesus Christ.[125]

Here we see Benedict presuming the dynamic of the scriptural Word as discussed above. For Benedict, the historical event of the Passover, contained within it a surplus, divine meaning. The cross and resurrection of Jesus are "the inner meaning of the Passover … the ultimate Passover in which what has always been meant by that is seen for the first time in its true light." In this beautifully evocative passage, which I cannot possibly do justice to here, Benedict explains how the cross and resurrection are the ultimate meaning, not only of the Exodus and Passover, but of all the salvation history recorded in the Bible.

> The resurrection is the reawakening of him who had first died on the cross; its "hour" is the Passover of the Jews… . Jesus' cross and resurrection are seen by faith in the context of the inner meaning of the Passover, as the ultimate Passover in which what has always been meant by that is seen for the first time in its true light. All salvation history is gathered here, as it were, in the one point of this ultimate Passover that thus includes and interprets salvation history, just as it is itself interpreted and illumined by salvation history. For it is evident now that this whole history is likewise an exodus history; a history that begins with the call of Abraham to go out from his country—and this going-out-from

124 *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 26, 27–28; *Gospel Catechesis, Catechism*, 78–79.

125 *A New Song for the Lord*, 16.

> has been, ever since, its characteristic movement. It attains its deepest significance in the Passover of Jesus Christ … in the radical love that became a total exodus from himself, a going-out-from-himself toward the other even to the radical delivery of himself to death so that it can be explained in the words: "I am going away and shall return" (John 14:28)—by going, I come. The "living opening through the curtain," as the epistle to the Hebrews explains the Lord's going-away on the cross (Heb. 10:20), reveals itself in this way as the true Exodus that is meant by all the exoduses of history.
>
> Thus we see how the theology of resurrection gathers all salvation history within itself and … in a very literal sense, it becomes a theology of existence, a theology of *ex–sistere*, of that exodus by which the human individual goes out from himself and through which alone he can find himself. In this movement of *ex–sistere*, faith and love are ultimately united—the deepest significance of each is that *Exi*, that call to transcend and sacrifice the *I* that is the basic law of the history of God's covenant with man and, *ipso facto*, the truly basic law of all human existence … .
>
> God's action … implies, of necessity, that "is" that faith soon formulated explicitly: Jesus *is* Christ, God *is* man. Hence man's future means being one with God and so being one with mankind, which will be a single, final man in the manifold unity that is created by the Exodus of love. God 'is' man—it is in this formula that the whole greatness of the Easter reality has first been fully apprehended and has become, from a passing point in history, its axis, which bears us all.[126]

This long and extraordinarily rich passage indicates the powerful heights to which Benedict's biblical theology is capable of soaring. However, for my purposes here, I must limit myself to pointing out only a few salient points. First, Benedict presumes a unity of the scriptural Word, a unity that constitutes a "salvation history" at the same time that it enables texts from the Gospel of John and Hebrews to illuminate ancient Scriptures concerning the call of Abraham and the Exodus. All is interpreted in light of the revelation of divine love on the cross. His theo-

126 *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 189–190.

logical discussion includes consideration of the meaning of the Greek text and a concise yet creative meditation on the philosophical concept of "existence." We notice, too, Benedict's sweeping spiritual exegesis, which holds the Exodus to be the fundamental meaning of "the history of God's covenant with man," revealed in Christ's "exodus of love." In this particular exegesis, Benedict, as is typical, presumes knowledge of an important strain of historical and literary exegesis on the exodus motif in Scripture.[127] But Benedict does not stop there; rather, through a theological hermeneutic of faith, he yolks these exegetical findings to the Church's confession of faith that Jesus is true God and true man.

Benedict makes a similar spiritual exegesis in considering the relationship between the memorials instituted in the Last Supper and the Passover. Again, he synthesizes a wealth of scholarship in considering Jesus' quotation from the Sinai covenant (Matt. 26:28). He sees in the covenant at Sinai parallels with ideas of treaty and covenant-making in the ancient Near East. In sprinkling the sacrificial "blood of the covenant" on the altar and then on the people (Exod. 24:8), Moses was evoking the ancient notion of covenant as forming a "blood association" between the covenant partners—in a literal and symbolic sense making Israel and God "brothers of the same blood," Benedict contends.[128]

At the Last Supper, when Jesus refers to the cup as the blood of the covenant, Benedict continues, "*the words of Sinai are heightened to a staggering realism*, and at the same time we begin to see a totally unsuspected depth in them."[129] What the sacrifices of the old covenant all pointed to, is made a "reality" in Christ's death. "[A]ll cultic ordinances of the Old Testament are seen to be taken up into his death and brought to their deepest meaning."[130]

Again, we notice Benedict's theological hermeneutic at work. The language and actions of the original covenant at Sinai bear within themselves their fuller, spiritual significance—the new covenant made in the blood of Christ on the cross, represented in the eucharistic sacrifice. At the Last Supper, Jesus announces the final covenant in biblical salvation history. This covenant does not abrogate the covenant at Sinai. Rather it prolongs and renews it. The blood of the covenant is Christ's, given for the sake of the world. He is the new covenant by which "God binds himself irrevocably" to his creation.[131]

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127 On the exodus motif, see Scott W. Hahn, "Worship in the Word: Toward a Liturgical Hermeneutic," *Letter & Spirit* 1 (2005): 101–136, especially at 122–124, and the current research summarized there at n. 59.

128 Quoting Gottfried Quell, in *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 59–60.

129 *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 60. Emphasis added.

130 *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 41.

131 *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 62–65.

In Benedict's reading of the canonical text of Scripture, we see a liturgical trajectory and teleology to creation.[132] As the covenant blood at Sinai symbolized the sharing of flesh and blood between God and Israel, this sharing is universalized and made real, literal, in the blood of Christ—in which all nations come to worship the God of Israel and are made kin, flesh and blood, one body with Christ through "sacramental blood fellowship."[133]

The Embrace of Salvation

For Benedict, the sacramental liturgy of the Church, the worship of the new covenant, is the goal and consummation of the biblical story. If everything in Scripture is ordered to the covenant that God wants to make with his creation, then everything in the Church is ordered to proclaiming that new covenant and initiating people into it through the sacramental liturgy. The mission of the Church is thus liturgical, its identity and actions defined by the Word revealed in history.[134] In a sense, Benedict says, the revelation of God is not "complete" without the response of the Church in the liturgy, the primary expression of the tradition.[135]

In all his writings, Benedict stresses the unity of the old and new covenant liturgies. The Eucharistic liturgy "places us in continuity with Israel and the whole of salvation history,"136 revealing the Eucharist as the fulfillment of all the liturgies of the old covenant. Israel's liturgical worship was ordered to remembrance, memorial, and "renewal of the covenant."137 Christian worship, too, becomes a remembrance of God's mighty works in history. And like Israel's worship, especially the Passover Haggadah, the Eucharist is both a remembrance of the past and a thanksgiving for God's continued presence among his people.[138]

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132 Compare Hahn, "Worship in the Word," at 130.

133 *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 60. "In the Last Supper he recapitulates the covenant of Sinai, or rather what had there been an approximation in symbol now becomes reality: the community of blood and life between God and man." *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 8.

134 "The Church … is there so that the world may become a sphere for God's presence, the sphere of the covenant between God and men … in order that the covenant may come to be in which God freely gives his love and receives the response of love." *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 288–289.

135 "Christians know that God has spoken through man and that the human and historical factor is, therefore, part of the way God acts. That, too, is why *the Word of the Bible becomes complete only in that responsive word of the Church which we call tradition*. That is why the accounts of the Last Supper in the Bible become a concrete reality only when they are appropriated by the Church in her celebration." *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 169. Emphasis added.

136 Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, Eucharistic Celebration at Cologne-Marienfeld, Germany (August 21, 2005), in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (August 24, 2005), 11–12.

137 *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 62–65.

138 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life*, ed. S.O. Horn and

Christian liturgy, he notes, follows the basic pattern of Old Testament covenant worship—the service including both the reading of the Word of God and the offering of sacrifice. Benedict sees this outline reflected also in Jesus' Easter appearance to his disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:25–31), in which Jesus reads and interprets the Scriptures in light of his resurrection, and then reveals himself in the breaking of the bread.[139]

Benedict acknowledges, as well, the important role Scripture plays in the eucharistic celebration. During the course of the liturgical year, the Scripture readings "enable man to go through the whole history of salvation in step with the rhythm of creation."[140] Through the Word read and prayed in the liturgy, the believer is slowly transformed into the person that God intends him or her to be.[141] In the liturgy, Benedict notes, the Old Testament is read typologically, as it is in the New Testament. And the liturgy is not merely evocative, representative, or commemorative. More than that, it brings about a kind of communion with the events narrated in the sacred pages. What Benedict has written in connection with early Christian liturgical art seems all the more applicable to the function of Scripture in the Christian liturgy:

> On liturgical feasts the deeds of God in the past are made present. The feasts are a participation in God's action in time.... The individual events are now ordered toward the Christian sacraments and to Christ himself. Noah's ark and the crossing of the Red Sea now point to baptism. The sacrifice of Isaac and the meal of the three angels with Abraham speak of Christ's sacrifice and the Eucharist. Shining through the rescue of the three young men from the fiery furnace and of Daniel from the lions' den we see Christ's resurrection and our own. Still more than in the synagogue, the point of the images is not to tell a story about something in the past, but to incorporate the events of history into the sacrament... . We are taken into the events... .

V. Pfnur, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003 [2001]), 48–49.

139 "First we have the searching of the Scriptures, explained and made present by the risen Lord; their minds enlightened, the disciples are moved to invite the Lord to stay with them, and he responds by breaking the bread for his disciples, giving them his presence and then withdrawing again, sending them out as his messengers." *Feast of Faith*, 47.

140 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Co-Workers of the Truth: Meditations for Every Day of the Year*, ed. Irene Grass (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992 [1990]), 2.

141 Through the liturgy, "the language of our Mother [the Church] becomes ours; we learn to speak it along with her, so that gradually, her words on our lips become our words. We are given an anticipatory share in the Church's perennial dialogue of love with him who desired to be one flesh with her." *Feast of Faith*, 30.

> The centering of all history in Christ is both the liturgical transmission of that history and the expression of a new experience of time, in which past, present, and future make contact, because they have been inserted into the presence of the risen Lord.[142]

As we can see, Benedict notices how the New Testament's typological interpretation of the Old is often ordered to the sacramental liturgy, especially as regards the central sacraments of Christian initiation, baptism and the Eucharist. We also see in this passage his sense of the mystery of the Word as living and active, bringing about the very promises that it speaks of in the life of the believer. "Scripture alive in the living Church is also God's present power in the world today—a power which remains an inexhaustible source of hope throughout all generations."[143]

It follows naturally that liturgy is the privileged context in which the community hears the Word and its authentic interpretation. This was the pattern of Christ at Emmaus, in which "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). In the eucharistic liturgy, the New Testament readings are still heard as interpreting the Old Testament in light of Christ. And it is in the liturgy that the texts are "realized" or "actualized" as Scripture, as divine, salvific communications.

> [T]he liturgy is the true, living environment for the Bible… . [T]he Bible can be properly understood only in this living context within which it first emerged. The texts of the Bible, this great book of Christ, are not to be seen as the literary products of some scribes at their desks, but rather as the words of Christ himself delivered in the celebration of holy Mass. *The scriptural texts are thoroughly imbued with the awe of divine worship* resulting from the believer's interior attentiveness to the living voice of the present Lord.[144]

In his writings on the Eucharist as sacrifice, Benedict again shows himself to be conversant with the breadth of scholarship on the continuities between Jewish and Christian worship. He is impressed, for instance, by the evident influence of the old covenant *todah* ("thanksgiving sacrifice"), by which Israelites gave thanks to God after having been delivered from suffering or some life-threatening situation.[145] In

142 *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 117.

143 *A New Song for the Lord*, 52.

144 "Introduction," *The Lord*, xii. Emphasis added.

145 *Feast of Faith*, 51–60. Benedict's discussion includes a long and appreciative review of the

this, Benedict shows the Eucharist to be an eloquent fulfillment of the Old Testament understanding of sacrifice, as expressed in the psalms and prophets. In offering his life on the cross, and in establishing the Eucharist as a perpetual memorial of that self-offering, Jesus revealed that the worship God desires is "the transformation of existence into thanksgiving,"[146] our "giv[ing] ourselves back to him" in love and thanksgiving.

In the unity of the Last Supper and the crucifixion, Benedict sees the true depth of the Bible as the saving Word of God. For in the crucifixion, intended by Christ to be represented in the sacrificial offering of the Eucharist, we have, in effect, "the death of death." By this action, which will be perpetuated in the sacramental form of the Eucharist, Christ transforms death itself into a life-giving word. The Gospel of Christ is, thus, the good news that love is stronger than death. Thus, salvation history culminates in the transformation of death into the saving word of life.

> [T]]he indissoluble bond between the supper and the death of Jesus is … plain: his dying words fuse with his words at the supper, the reality of his death fuses with the reality of the supper. For the event of the supper consists in Jesus sharing his body and his blood, that is, his earthly existence; he gives and communicates himself. In other words, the event of the supper is an anticipation of death, the transformation of death into an act of love. Only in this context can we understand what John means by calling Jesus' death the glorification of God and the glorification of the Son (John 12:28; 17:21). Death, which by its very nature, is the end, the destruction of every communication, is changed by him into an act of self-communication; and this is man's redemption, for it signifies the triumph of love over death. We can put the same thing another way: death, which puts an end to words and to meaning, itself becomes a word, becomes the place where meaning communicates itself.[147]

The sacred Word heard in the Mass, and the sacrificial offering of that Word on the cross, come together in the canon or Eucharistic Prayer of the Church. Here, too, Benedict explains the Christian liturgy in terms of Old Testament belief in the creative power of the Word of God as both speech and deed.[148]As

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scholarship of Hartmut Gese.

146 *God Is Near Us*, 48, 51.

147 *Behold the Pierced One*, 24–25.

148 "God reveals himself in history. He speaks to humankind, and the word he speaks has creative power. The Hebrew concept '*dabar*,' usually translated as 'word,' really conveys both the meaning

God's Word created the heavens and the earth, and as Jesus' word healed the sick and raised the dead, the divine Word spoken in the liturgy also possesses creative and transformative power.[149]

Notice in the following long passage, how Benedict easily integrates modern rhetorical insights into Scripture, especially speech-act theories, with the perspectives of liturgical theology and metaphysics in order to articulate a compelling, biblically grounded understanding of what happens in the divine liturgy:

> This *oratio*—the Eucharistic Prayer, the "Canon" is really more than speech; it is *actio* in the highest sense of the word. For what happens in it is that the human *actio* … steps back and makes way for the *actio divina*, the action of God. In this *oratio*, the priest speaks with the *I* of the Lord—"This is my body," "This is my blood." He knows that he is not now speaking from his own resources but in virtue of the sacrament that he has received, he has become the voice of someone else, who is now speaking and acting. This action of God, which takes place through human speech, is the real "action" for which all of creation is an expectation. The elements of the earth are transubstantiated, pulled, so to speak, from their creaturely anchorage, grasped at the deepest ground of their being, and changed into the body and blood of the Lord. The new heaven and new earth are anticipated.
>
> The real "action" in the liturgy in which we are all supposed to participate is the action of God himself. This is what is new and distinctive about the Christian liturgy: God himself acts and does what is essential. He inaugurates the new creation, makes himself accessible to us, so that, through the things of the earth, through our gifts, we can communicate with him in a personal way… . [P]recisely because God himself has become man, become body … he comes through his body to us who live in the body. The whole event of the incarnation, cross, resurrection, and second coming is present as the way by which God draws

of *word* and *act*. God says what he does and does what he says." Pope Benedict XVI, Message to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the 21st World Youth Day (April 9, 2006), in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (March 1, 2006), 3.

149 In the liturgy, the scriptural word is truly "the Word of transformation, enabling us to participate in the 'hour' of Christ… . It is the Word of power which transforms the gifts of the earth in an entirely new way into God's gift of himself, and it draws us into this process of transformation." Homily, Eucharistic Celebration at Cologne-Marienfeld (August 21, 2005).

> man into cooperation with himself… . True, the sacrifice of the Logos is accepted already and forever. But we must still pray for it to become *our* sacrifice, that we ourselves … may be transformed into the Logos, conformed to the Logos, and so made the true body of Christ… .There is only *one* action, which is at the same time his and ours—ours because we have become "one body and one spirit" with him. The uniqueness of the eucharistic liturgy lies precisely in the fact that God himself is acting and that we are drawn into that action of God.[150]

Here we have reached the summit of the liturgy and the summit of Benedict's biblical theology. In the liturgy, we are drawn into contact with the very means of salvation history, the saving act of Christ on the cross. In the liturgy, the desire of God's condescension meets the desire of the human person for transcendence. Benedict even suggests that this might be a kind of definition for liturgy. The liturgy is that divine-human action that brings about "an embrace of salvation between God and man."[151]

The Cosmic Liturgy

In Benedict's biblical theology, liturgy is the goal of creation and of the human person. In the liturgy, the purposes of salvation history are realized—heaven and earth are filled with God's glory, each participant is swept up into the embrace of salvation, into the communion of God's eternal love. The communion that God has desired since before the foundation of the world—between heaven and earth, between the visible and invisible, between the divine and human—is revealed and effected in the liturgy.

Every celebration of the Eucharist on the earth becomes "a cosmic liturgy … an entry into the liturgy of heaven."[152] In the liturgy, the eschatological orientation of Scriptures is actualized. "In the celebration of the liturgy, the Church moves toward the Lord; liturgy is virtually this act of approaching his coming. In the liturgy the Lord is already anticipating his promised coming. Liturgy is anticipated *parousia*."[153]

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150 *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 172–174.

151 Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience (September 28, 2005), in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (October 5, 2005), 8.

152 *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 70.

153 *A New Song for the Lord*, 129. "Christian liturgy is never just an event organized by a particular group or set of people or even by a particular local Church. Mankind's movement toward Christ meets Christ's movement toward men. He wants to unite mankind and bring about the one Church, the one divine assembly, of all men … the communion of all who worship in spirit and

Benedict observes that in the modern period there has arisen a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of liturgy and the Church, due in large part to faulty exegetical conclusions. Indeed, the *parousia*, the coming again or presence of Christ, and the general character of New Testament eschatological expectation have been sharply debated questions in modern biblical scholarship. For much of the last century it has been an exegetical commonplace that the oldest New Testament writings are shot through with expectation of the imminent end of the world and return of Christ, leading many scholars to conclude that "in his ideas about time Jesus was mistaken … [and] that Jesus' message is intrinsically incapable of being appropriated by us."[154]

I do not have the space here to rehearse Benedict's thorough critique of this crucial exegetical mistake. But at work he sees many of the fallacious philosophical presumptions discussed earlier in considering his critique of criticism. The chief deficiency is the methodological decision to consider the texts apart from the liturgy and the tradition of the Church. This has caused exegetes to ignore or downplay the fact that eschatological expressions like *parousia* and *maranatha* properly "belong in the context of early Christian eucharistic celebration."[155]

Again, Benedict builds his argument on solid philological and historical grounds. He even brings in comparative religious and cultural data concerning the imperial liturgy of the Roman state and traditions of emperor-worship in the ancient Near East. He agrees that the normative theologians who authored the New Testament expect a second coming or *parousia* of Christ. But, he adds, it is clear from the language and the contexts of the various texts, that this coming and presence was anticipated, and in some way experienced, in every celebration of the Eucharist.

> The cosmic imagery of the New Testament cannot be used as a source for the description of a future chain of cosmic events. All attempts of this kind are misplaced. Instead, these texts form part of a description of the mystery of the *parousia* in the language of liturgical tradition. The New Testament conceals and reveals the unspeakable coming of Christ, using language

in truth … . Christian liturgy is a liturgy of promise fulfilled, of a quest, the religious quest of human history, reaching its goal. But it remains a liturgy of hope… . Christian liturgy is liturgy on the way, a liturgy of pilgrimage toward the transfiguration of the world, which will only take place when God is 'all in all.'" *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 49–50.

154 *Eschatology*, 271. On *parousia* (translated "coming" in Matt. 24:27 and "presence" in 2 Cor. 10:10 and Phil. 2:12), see Scott Hahn, *Letter and Spirit: From Written Text to Living Word in the Liturgy* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 104–121.

155 *Eschatology*, 6; 202–203.; For Benedict's critique, see *Eschatology*, 35–45; 271–272. For the Aramaic expression, *maranatha* ("Our Lord, come!"), see 1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 22:20.

> borrowed from that sphere which is graciously enabled to express in this world the point of contact with God. The *parousia* is the highest intensification and fulfillment of the liturgy. And the liturgy is *parousia*, a *parousia*-like event taking place in our midst… . Every Eucharist is *parousia*, the Lord's coming, and yet the Eucharist is even more truly the tensed yearning that he would reveal his hidden glory… . In touching the risen Jesus, the Church makes contact with the *parousia* of the Lord.[156]

"The Beauty and Necessity of the Theologian's Task"

Benedict's "critique of criticism" and his own biblical theology open up fresh new possibilities for the study of sacred Scripture and the practice of theology. What we see in his writings are "the essential elements for a synthesis between historical method and theological hermeneutics," which he has said can be found in the official teaching of the Church, as expressed in *Dei Verbum*.[157]

His synthesis promises a way of reading Scripture authentically as it was written—as a divine, living Word spoken in history to the Church, a Word whose meaning is understood within the broad unity of the Church's experience of the faith, an experience that includes liturgy and dogma, and is not limited to the expectations and contexts of a text's original audience. He promises the theologian that reading in continuity with this ecclesial tradition "increases the excitement and fecundity of inquiry."[158]

> [H]ow exciting exegesis becomes when it dares to read the Bible as a unified whole. If the Bible originates from the one subject formed by the people of God and, through it, from the divine subject himself, then it speaks of the present. If this is so, moreover, even what we know about the diversity of its underlying historical constellations yields its harvest; there is a unity to be discovered in this diversity, and diversity appears as the wealth of unity. This opens up a wide field of action both to historical research and to its hypotheses, with the sole limit that it may not destroy the unity of the whole, which is situated on another plane than what can be called the 'nuts and bolts' of the various

156 *Eschatology*, 202–204.

157 Joseph Ratzinger, ed., *Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit*. Quaestiones Disputatae 117 (Freiburg: Herder, 1989), 20–21.

158 *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 97.

> texts. Unity is found on another plane, yet it belongs to the literary reality of the Bible itself.[159]

For the theologian and exegete of faith, the work of theology and exegesis assumes a place within the grand unity of God's plan as it is revealed in Scripture—that of bringing about the "divinization" of creation in the liturgical offering of the sacrifice of praise.[160]

> The unity of the person of Jesus, embracing man and God, prefigures that synthesis of man and world to which theology is meant to minister. It is my belief that the beauty and necessity of the theologian's task could be made visible at this point… . But [the theologian] can only do this provided he himself enters that "laboratory" of unity and freedom … where his own will is refashioned, where he allows himself to be expropriated and inserted into the divine will, where he advances toward that God–likeness through which the kingdom of God can come.[161]

Benedict bids the theologian and exegete to place himself in service to this divine plan. "We have to enter into a relationship of awe and obedience toward the Bible… . Historical-critical exegesis can be a wonderful means for a deeper understanding of the Bible if its instruments are used with that reverent love which seeks to know God's gift in the most exact and careful way possible."[162]

Hence, we understand Benedict's frequent exhortations concerning the need to retrieve the ancient practice of *lectio divina*, the loving contemplation of Scripture in which study is transformed into prayer.[163] Benedict presents us with a vision of a profound spiritual and scientific exegesis, a faith seeking understanding of the deepest mysteries of the cosmos, in conversation with the living God.

And if we take Benedict's thought seriously and consider the New Testament authors to be the normative theologians, then the academic study of theology and Scripture brings us into the heart of what might be called the sacerdotal nature of the biblical texts.

I will close with a particularly fertile passage, one that indicates the beauty

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159 *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 64–65.

160 *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 28.

161 *Behold the Pierced One*, 46.

162 *A New Song for the Lord*, 50.

163 Pope Benedict XVI, Reflection on the Opening of the 11th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October, 3, 2005), in L'Osservatore Romano, Weekly Edition in English (October 12, 2005), 7.

and necessity of the theological and exegetical task, as well as the excitement and fecundity of Benedict's own research. Through a close reading of the text, he notes the curious preponderance of cultic and priestly language in Romans 15:16, where Paul describes his purpose in writing his letter as part of his mission "to be a minister of Christ Jesus in the priestly service of the Gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable."

> The letter to the Romans, this word that has been written that it may then be proclaimed, is an apostolic action; more, it is a liturgical—even a cultic—event. This it is because it helps the world of the pagans to change so as to be a renewal of mankind and, as such, a cosmic liturgy in which mankind shall become adoration, become the radiance of the glory of God. If the apostle is handing on the Gospel by means of this letter … *this is a priestly sacrificial action, an eschatological service of ministry*… .[N]ow it is the specifically apostolic service of preaching the faith that appears as a priestly activity, as actually performing the new liturgy, open to all the world and likewise worldwide, which has been founded by Christ.[164]

Here Benedict opens a new window into the scriptural text, one in which we see the unity of the Old and New Testaments, of Church and Scripture, Word and sacrament, the Bible and the liturgy—a unity in service of the divine plan, which is a participation in the mystery .

164 *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 118–119.