

## The Importance and Contemporary Relevance of Joseph Ratzinger/ Benedict XVI's *Jesus of Nazareth*

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Benedict XVI's *Jesus of Nazareth* represents an attempt to reveal the face and nature of Jesus Christ in the midst of a period of history when many biblical scholars claim that we can know little to nothing with certainty about the true Jesus. While respectful of the historical-critical method and the insights it reveals, Benedict XVI underlines its limits and argues that its dominance of contemporary scriptural exegesis has damaged Christian faith and distorted many Christians' understanding of the practical demands of Christian faith, including issues of a political and economic nature. This essay situates *Jesus of Nazareth* in the context of developments in biblical exegesis over the past four hundred years, while simultaneously sketching some of its implications for Christian thought about the temporal order.<sup>1</sup>

*No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. (John 1:18)*

*Tota fides Christiana circa divinitatem et humanitatem Christi versatur. (Saint Thomas Aquinas)*

*The fact that Christianity has been proclaimed to you means that you have to form an opinion about Christ; he, or rather the fact that he exists and that he existed, is the decision of the whole of existence. If Christ has been proclaimed to you, it is a scandal to say "I don't want to have an opinion about him." (S. Kierkegaard)*

## Introduction and Context

Which names and ideas have shaped twentieth-century man's vision of the world? The short answer is "many." We can, however, confidently say that English deism and what some call the "German classic philosophy"<sup>2</sup> that began with Kant and passed by way of Hegel and Schleiermacher before reaching Marx and Nietzsche, are among those currents of thought that have significantly contributed to that vision, especially when it comes to contemporary perceptions of religion. In some ways, religion has never been so much the subject of discussion as in our modern age. It is equally clear that the movement that began with the Lutheran Reformation acquired, after a certain fashion, its philosophical-theological vision first in Kantian gnoseological criticism and then in the dual and opposed pathway of the transcendental idealism of Fichte-Schelling-Hegel. The latter exalted religion but subordinated it to philosophical reason. Eventually, we see the emergence of the fideist irrationalism (nearer to Kant) of Jacobi-Fries-Schleiermacher, which identified the essence of religion in an individual "feeling" of the divine.

Parallel to such developments, the person of Jesus of Nazareth was transformed from being recognized as the Son of God consubstantial with the Father to the "teacher of the Gospel," a sort of great moral figure on a par with Socrates or the founders of other religions. This moral figure then became the "representation *par excellence*" of the absolute spirit, at times even an impostor, before becoming a pious creation of the community of believers that was born from faith in his divine nature.

As these changes occurred, the application of modern philology to Scripture identified new problems about the composition of the Old and New Testaments. This was especially true regarding the authors, authenticity, structure, and interpretation of the inspired books—problems that patristic and scholastic theology could not have even suspected. In an analogous way, contemporary research in the Middle East into the ancient civilizations of the biblical world, and the comparative study of extra-biblical religions, demonstrated analogies and resemblances that could not be merely accidental and thus required an overall interpretation beginning with a new unitary principle. The concept of change or progress as transition from the potency to act of Aristotelian origins reworked by Hegel as unitary becoming (*Werden*) from being to nothing and *vice versa*, or also as development (*Entwicklung*) of the spirit was reinterpreted by Darwin and the neo-Darwinists as the only way to understand the origin of the universe, life, and the spirit itself.

The temptation of religious and moral relativism—which has always been present in the history of thought and the Christian church—has seized and contin-

ues to seize upon the developments noted above to repropose the attempt (already manifest in Gnosticism) to unify all questions about truth and religion in a single principle: the subjectivity of truth and the relativity of all its forms, including dogmatic formulations. As Benedict XVI observed: “In the nineteenth century under Pius IX, the clash between the Church’s faith and a radical liberalism and the natural sciences, which also claimed to embrace with their knowledge the whole of reality to its limit, stubbornly proposing to make the ‘hypothesis of God’ superfluous, had elicited from the Church a bitter and radical condemnation of this spirit of the modern age.”<sup>73</sup>

One manifestation of this is the ongoing attempt to change the facts about Jesus Christ and thus the very meaning of Christian faith, natural theology, and the dynamics of human reason as man searches for the truth. In his Regensburg address, Benedict XVI notes how the realism of Greek philosophy and its Christian re-elaboration—whose basis was the distinction among the human being, nature, and God, and the difference between the order of the natural creation and that of the supernatural re-creation that was the work of Christ the Savior—came to be undermined and rejected by the many waves of “de-Hellenization.”<sup>74</sup> This eliminated not only every form of objective transcendence but also every absolute and transcendent value of the principles of reason. This in turn eradicated the possibility of any logical structure to reasoning, not to mention the validity of any metaphysical positions. When subject to the “dictatorship of relativism,”<sup>75</sup> true religion becomes undermined by a subjectivist virus that corrupts not only the truth of faith but also the objective value of truth in itself—the truth contained in reason and historical fact. Thus, we find ourselves subject to the principle of the Sophist Protagoras (481–420 BC): “Man is the measure of all things” (*Theaet.*, 152, frag. B 1).

From the Christian viewpoint, the principal error of this relativism is the attempt to interpret the intimate experience of the subject (consciousness, self-consciousness) as not only the essence of religion but also the sole and authentic expression of religion. A further error is to consider the religious experience and religious consciousness, whether shared or natural, as the essence or the common denominator of divine revelation itself and the life of grace. While Kantian deism and subjectivism would claim that this is simply to take into consideration the religion of natural (and modern) man, it makes pure subjective experience the decisive criterion for the legitimacy of every religion. This results in subordinating even revealed religion to the natural religious experience, which itself is even construed as a form of supernatural revelation.

By contrast, Christianity stresses that every religious experience must heal and purify itself, especially through the supernatural infusion of grace. This allows

religious experience to acquire preparatory value as regards grace, dependent on revelation and, the Catholic Church teaches, the authentic Magisterium of the Church. As Aquinas writes: “The gifts of grace in this way are added to the gifts of nature which take nothing away from them, indeed they complete them; thus the light of faith, which is infused into us freely, does not annul the light of natural knowledge which is congenital to us, indeed it strengthens it.”<sup>6</sup>

The widespread “nonunderstanding” of the supernatural dimension of divine revelation, Christ, and his grace, is inherent in human reason that, fallen into sin, has the tendency to raise itself up to an absolute criterion of truth. This occurs in the form of rationalism as well as fideism that is also a subtle form of rationalism (as Kierkegaard noted) designed to tame faith at the level of its transcendent dimension. It is little wonder, then, that it continually arises in the history of the Church. Nowadays, it is manifested in those attempts to change the Catholic Church by, as Benedict XVI observes, relying upon certain interpretations of the Second Vatican Council as a “hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture” that “has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media, and also one trend of modern theology.”<sup>7</sup>

These challenges and developments constitute an important but little-appreciated context for Pope Benedict’s *Jesus of Nazareth*, but far from simply rejecting modernity, *Jesus of Nazareth* (which the pope describes as a private theological offering rather than a magisterial act) conducts on every page a dialogue with the challenges and the consequences of a form of modernity that is opposed to faith. This is especially true when it comes to the subject of the essence and nature of the Christian religion, and even more particularly to the historical reality and divine nature of Jesus Christ, especially as interpreted by approaches that rely almost exclusively upon use of the historical-critical approach to Scriptural exegesis. As Benedict XVI observes:

All these attempts have produced a common result: that we have very little knowledge of Jesus and that we have very little certain knowledge of Jesus and that only at a later stage did faith in his divinity shape the image we have of him. This impression has by now penetrated deeply into the minds of the Christian people at large. This is a dramatic situation for faith, because its point of reference is being placed in doubt: Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air. (*JN*, xii)

In short, the disintegration of true knowledge of the person of Jesus is not simply an academic problem. A type of absolutization of the historical-critical approach has had real consequences for the character and sustainability of Christian faith within the Christian community, as well as Christian understanding

of the practical demands of Christian belief. Such demands, *Jesus of Nazareth* suggests, do not simply relate to people's moral lives, but also to their thinking about the social and political ordering of the temporal realm.

## A Dialogue with Modernity's Challenges and Consequences

As a result of his theological studies and his professorial activities at various German universities, Ratzinger was able to follow closely the various vicissitudes of research into religion and research into the historical evidence about the figure of Christ. From the time of Kant (1724–1804), questions connected with knowing and being able to prove whether God intervened in history after creation through revelation and his grace as the “new creature” (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:14)<sup>8</sup> became very topical. So, too, did another question intimately connected with this: namely, whether we are able to say something historically certain about the life of Jesus. As the effort to deny supernatural intervention by God in history (which provides a foundation for the history of salvation begun with the covenant of Israel with God) developed, there emerged the tendency to separate the historical Christ from the Christ of faith. The result, Benedict suggests, was the denying or relativizing of Christ's historicity and thus Christ's very divinity (*JN*, xii).

Throughout *Jesus of Nazareth*, this philosophical, historical, and exegetical background is omnipresent. It first manifests itself with the distance that Benedict establishes in his foreword from the famous leader of a school of contemporary Catholic exegesis, Rudolf Schnackenburg. “It is obvious,” Benedict writes, “that the way that I look at the figure of Jesus goes beyond what some contemporary exegesis, as represented by someone such as Schnackenburg, has to say.” Certainly the historical-critical method, Benedict affirms, “has opened up to us a wealth of material and an abundance of findings that enable the figure of Jesus to become present to us with a vitality and depth that we could not have imagined even just a few decades ago.” Benedict also states that he intends to apply “new methodological insights that allow us to offer a properly theological interpretation of the Bible. To be sure, this requires faith, but the aim unequivocally is not, nor should be, to give up serious engagement with history” (*JN*, xxiii). We should, however, note that Benedict sees nothing contradictory in bringing faith and reason together to meditate upon the question of who Jesus Christ is. For Benedict, “Faith in the one God is the only thing that truly liberates the world and makes it ‘rational.’ When faith is absent, the world only *appears* to be more rational. In reality the indeterminable powers of chance now claim their due; ‘chaos theory’ takes its place alongside insight into the rational structure of the

universe, confronting man with obscurities that he cannot resolve and that set limits to the world's rationality" (*JN*, 174).

## Contemporaneousness with Christ

Turning to the book itself, we see that it addresses events in Jesus' life, from the Baptism to the Transfiguration. In doing so, the author passes with ease from considering facts about Jesus to elaborating (in some cases in considerable detail) upon the importance that these facts had for subsequent generations and for the Church in the world of today. Jesus of Nazareth is full of allusions and suggestions regarding contemporary questions, including matters that touch directly (or by inference) upon the legitimacy or otherwise of different approaches adopted by Catholics and other Christians to a number of social and political issues. In this sense, *Jesus of Nazareth* embraces a Kierkegaardian approach insofar as it addresses our relationship with Christ and Christ's relationship with us in terms of Christians being truly "contemporaneousness with Jesus." It is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's *The Exercise of Christianity*—a work that revolves round this category of "contemporaneousness with Christ."

Ironically, much of *Jesus of Nazareth's* contemporaneousness emerges from its attention to Tradition. Just as Benedict XVI's Magisterial teaching draws heavily upon and cites the church fathers, so, too, does *Jesus of Nazareth* utilize what is called Tradition with a capital *T*. The historical-critical method has always experienced enormous difficulty in taking Tradition into consideration. Thus, with respect to the Greek words *epiousios*, which is translated as "daily" bread, Benedict quotes Origen who states that "it does not appear anywhere else in Greek, but that it was coined by the Evangelists" (*JN*, 153). In another instance, Benedict proceeds by referring to Saint Jerome's *Vulgate* "which translates the mysterious word *epiousios* as *supersubstantialis* (i.e., supersubstantial), thereby pointing to the new, higher "substance" that the Lord gives us in the Holy Sacrament as the true bread of life" (*JN*, 154). Concerning interpretation of the request made in the Lord's Prayer, "lead us not into temptation," Benedict refers to the interpretation of Saint Cyprian: "so that our fear, our devotion and our worship may be directed to God—because the Evil One is not permitted to do anything unless he is given authorization" (*De dominica oratione*, 25; *CSEL* III, 25, p. 285f)" (*JN*, 163). Even Plato is referred to in the context of the Beatitudes because "the crucified Christ is the persecuted just man portrayed in the words of the Old Covenant prophecy—particularly the Suffering Servant Songs—but also prefigured in Plato's writings (*The Republic*, II, 361e–362a)" (*JN*, 89).

Each of these are instances of how Benedict's general observations on religion, on history prior to Jesus and his contemporaneity, confers on the book an importance and a contemporary relevance that other books on Christ, which are concerned with a meticulous discussion of the events of his life, do not possess.

Another example of this contemporaneity is Benedict's reflections on Christ's temptation in the desert. Jesus cites Deuteronomy to tell Satan that "man does not live by bread alone" (Deut. 8:3). According to Benedict, there are real and negative consequences from prioritizing "bread" over truth and freedom—including in the realm of material goods. He uses the instance of foreign aid to demonstrate how this occurs:

The aid offered by the West to developing countries has been purely technically and materially based, and not only has left God out of the picture, but has driven men away from God. And this aid, proudly claiming to "know better" is itself what first turned the "third world" into what we mean today by that term. It has thrust aside indigenous religious, ethical and social structures and filled the resulting vacuum with its technocratic mind-set. The idea was that we could turn stones into bread; instead, our "aid" has only given stones in place of bread. The issue is the primacy of God. The issue is acknowledging that he is a reality, that he is the reality without which nothing else can be good. History cannot be detached from God and then run smoothly on purely material lines. If man's heart is not good, then nothing else can turn out well. And the goodness of the human heart can ultimately come only from the One who is goodness, who is the Good itself. (*JN*, 33–34)

Benedict also explains that the third temptation—when Satan offers Christ dominion over the world—manifests itself over and over again in the history of the Church:

Its true content becomes apparent when we realize that throughout history it is constantly taking on new forms. The Christian empire attempted at an early stage to use the faith in order to cement political unity. The Kingdom of Christ was now expected to take the form of a political kingdom and its splendour. The powerlessness of faith, the early powerlessness of Jesus Christ, was to be given the helping hand of political and military might. This temptation to use power to secure the faith has arisen again and again in varied forms throughout the centuries, and again and again faith has risked being suffocated in the embrace of power. (*JN*, 39–40)

## Overturning the Preaching on the “Kingdom of God”

Benedict’s attention to the problem of buttressing the Church with political power is matched in *Jesus of Nazareth* by his observations about the danger of politicizing the Church in the sense of reducing the Church’s purpose to political activism. Benedict is especially concerned about current interpretations of the subject of the “Kingdom of God” (*JN*, chap. 3) that distinguish between Jesus and the preaching of the Apostles. The exegesis that Benedict has in mind is one that identifies the kingdom of God with what might be called the temporal purpose of religion in general or the “community of religions”: of religions that are understood as “natural” because they are contrasted to revealed religions or what that form of religion which in classic theology is called natural revelation or more simply “the light of intelligence.”

Benedict begins by quoting a famous and significant observation of the Catholic modernist, Alfred Loisy: “Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, and what came was the Church.” Benedict XVI observes: “These words may be considered ironic, but they also express sadness. Instead of the great expectation of God’s own Kingdom, of a new world transformed by God himself, we got something quite different—and what a pathetic substitute it is: the Church” (*JN*, 48).

Benedict also observes that in the theology of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, many people spoke about the Church as the kingdom of God on earth: that is, the Church was seen as the realization of the kingdom of God in history. The pope notes that “the Enlightenment had sparked an exegetical revolution in Protestant theology and one of the main results of this revolution was an innovative understanding of Jesus’ message concerning the Kingdom of God” (*JN*, 50–51). One of the exegetical trends developing from this revolution, Benedict comments, was that associated with the most significant representative of liberal theology at the beginning of the twentieth century, Adolf von Harnack. His thinking, Benedict points out, had a great impact, to such an extent that his interpretation had been also widely adopted in Catholic exegesis by the beginning of the 1930s.

Benedict reminds his readers, however, that Harnack’s liberal theology was also linked to the opposition among three great forms of Christianity: the Roman Catholic, the Greek-Slavic, and the Germanic-Protestant. Harnack privileged this last, Benedict holds, because it promoted a pure kingdom of freedom, an interpretation very close to the more famous Hegelian theory of history. This makes it less surprising, Benedict then adds, that:

Various efforts have been made to transpose Jesus' vision of the imminent end times into the language of modern Christian life, since for us it is not immediately intelligible. Bultmann, for example, tried to do so in terms of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger—arguing that what matters is an existential attitude of “always standing at the ready.” Jürgen Moltmann, building on the work of Ernst Bloch, worked out a “theology of hope,” which claimed to interpret faith as an active involvement in the shaping of the future. (*JN*, 52–53)

These observations allow Benedict to demonstrate how the question of the kingdom of God has mutated from the original reference, the Church of Christ, to a secularized interpretation of a community of religions—with a consequent distortion of the Christian religion as well.

Since that time, a secularist reinterpretation of the idea of the Kingdom has gained ground, particularly, though not exclusively, in Catholic theology. This reinterpretation propounds a new view of Christianity, religions, and history in general, and it claims that such radical refashioning will enable people to reappropriate Jesus' supposed message. (*JN*, 53)

Benedict then proceeds to show the stages by which this overturning occurred: “It is claimed that in the pre-Vatican II period ecclesiocentrism was the dominant position: The Church was represented as the center of Christianity. Then there was a shift to Christocentrism, to the doctrine that Christ is the center of everything. But it is not only the Church that is divisive—so the argument continues—since Christ belongs exclusively to Christians. Hence the further step from Christocentrism to theocentrism. This has allegedly brought us closer to the community of religions, but our final goal continues to elude us, since even God can be a cause of division between religions and between people” (*JN*, 53).

The next stage, Benedict notes, was for these writers to insist that the program of religions today should be to

move towards “regnocentrism,” that is, toward the centrality of the Kingdom. This at last, we are told, is the heart of Jesus' message, and it is also the right formula for finally harnessing mankind's positive energies and directing them toward the world's future. “Kingdom,” on this interpretation, is simply the name for a world governed by peace, justice, and the conservation of creation. It means no more than this. This “Kingdom” is said to be the goal of history that has to be attained. This is supposedly the real task of religions: to work together for the coming of the “Kingdom.” They are of course perfectly free to preserve their traditions and live according to their respective identities as well, but they must bring their different identities to bear on the common task of building the “Kingdom,” a world, in other words, where peace, justice, and respect for creation are dominant values (*JN*, 53–54).

Here, we cannot help but think of *Deus caritas est*'s warnings about the dangers of reducing Christian charity to activism (*DCE*, no. 37) that is almost indistinguishable from that pursued by secular—even secularist—thinkers. Certainly, Pope Benedict comments, “No one has ever seen God.”<sup>9</sup> However, he insists, the problem with reducing Christianity to the pursuit of peace, justice, and respect for creation is that it leads to man’s forgetting God: “The main thing that leaps out is that God has disappeared; man is the only actor left on the stage” (*JN*, 54). Instead, however, of simply lamenting this state of affairs, Benedict observes that this situation should lead us to a greater appreciation of the fact that divine clemency comes to provide us with help in our journey toward God. The Lord intervenes with the special revelation of himself, a revelation that is intended to facilitate the suffered journey of human experience and reflection so that “everyone can easily participate in divine knowledge”<sup>10</sup> without falling into the doubts and the errors into which paganism fell and into which man falls whenever he draws distant from faith. Recourse to revelation is not therefore injurious or illicit but is, rather, indispensable and the source of true liberation (especially when it concerns the spiritual life)<sup>11</sup> rather than mere activism. Again, one is reminded here of the pope’s strictures in his second encyclical *Spe salvi* about the dangers of limiting the horizon of our hope to the temporal realm.

This point is reemphasized in *Jesus of Nazareth* when Benedict XVI points out that “philosophical monotheism was not enough to bring people to a living relationship with God” (*JN*, 180). In short, the pope insists that Christians must recognize that the special revelation that begins with Moses and the Prophets reaches its fulfilment in the fullness of Christ who is now the only way of truth to the eternal life for human beings, a way that has become accessible to everyone.<sup>12</sup> It is not the privilege of a lucky few endowed with higher intellectual or moral powers. Benedict thus illustrates that without the reality of Jesus, who was made of flesh and blood and yet also divine, Christianity becomes simple moralism, a matter of intellect or will, and not a new ontological reality, a communication of new life, a new potency (*dynamis*) in history (*JN*, 318).

It is precisely for this reason that *Jesus of Nazareth* seeks to anchor the Christian faith in the Jewish tradition. Benedict makes many references to the words of the Old Testament, and in particular to the Psalms (which are quoted in profusion), in order to outline the framework within which the words and actions of Jesus should be understood. For Christians, Benedict notes, divine revelation begins with the special revelation that God communicated to the Jewish people, especially through Moses and the Prophets. Benedict does this with reference to the Psalms and the Prophets and in particular Moses’ prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:15–18 (“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from

among you ... him you shall heed ... and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak in my name"). This is a prophecy, Benedict comments, that would be fulfilled in Jesus (*JN*, 3). The Old Testament, Benedict notes, makes it very clear that Moses met the Lord. Yet, Benedict stresses, Israel can hope for a new Moses; it can hope that it will meet God as a friend meets another friend but to whom it will not be said, as happened with Moses, "You cannot see my face" (Ex. 33:20). Israel—and through Israel, the rest of humanity—will be granted "a real and immediate vision of the face of God and thus the ability to speak entirely from seeing, and not just from looking at God's back" (*JN*, 5–6). Jesus has a vision of God that no other man can have; as the prologue of the Gospel of John observes: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (John 1:18). This is the new and decisive point of departure beginning from which it is possible to understand the "person of Jesus" (*JN*, 6).

In this context, Pope Benedict dedicates considerable space to a discussion with the American Rabbi, Jacob Neusner. Neusner's book<sup>13</sup> finds, on the one hand, similarities between the Torah and what Christ said (his book is written with a great deal of respect for Jesus and a great sense of his membership of the Jewish people and Jewish tradition) and, on the other, decisive differences in understanding how Christ interpreted the Old Testament. Benedict concludes, "The proper interplay of Old and New Testament was and is constitutive of the Church" (*JN*, 121). But that the substantial difference from the Jewish interpretation lies in what follows: "[Jesus] brought the God of Israel to the nations, so that all the nations now pray to him and recognize Israel's Scriptures as his word, the word of the living God" (*JN*, 116). To this Benedict adds: "What scandalized people about Jesus was exactly what we have already seen in connection with Rabbi Neusner's conversation with the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount: He seemed to be putting himself on an equal footing with the living God himself. This was what the strictly monotheistic faith of the Jew was unable to accept" (*JN*, 303).

## **The Historical Value of the Gospel of John and Its Author**

Another challenge found in *Jesus of Nazareth*, including too much contemporary biblical exegesis and subsequent ways of thinking about the Church, is Pope Benedict's broad analysis of the historical value of the Gospel of John. Benedict clearly rejects the famous but flawed interpretation of Rudolf Bultmann while accepting much of the more realistic interpretation of Martin Hengel.<sup>14</sup> Ratzinger

also criticizes the interpretation advanced by some Catholic writers. He then presents his own summary, which is near to the thesis proposed by Hengel, although it contains an acknowledgement of the historicity of the Gospel and consequently of Jesus himself. Even though Pope Benedict moves within the context of modern critical-historical exegesis, he succeeds in demonstrating that John the son of Zebedee *is* the author of the fourth Gospel, which itself *is* historically reliable concerning the facts that really reflect the life of the earthly Jesus. It describes, as no other gospel does, the historical reality of the flesh, bones, and blood of Christ as well as his divine descent by essence (*homoousios*) (*JN*, 320).

Since the beginning of the Church, enemies of Christ and his mission of salvation have made the gospel of John, especially the miracles and the prophecies that prove the divine nature of Christ found in it, the principal target of their attacks. They have either denied their existence or emptied them of the meaning intended by Jesus. According to the ordinary Magisterium of the Catholic Church, the credibility of Christian faith lies specifically in the miracles and the prophecies, as was indicated by Jesus himself: “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28). Even today, the miracles and the prophecies continue to promote Christian conversion, strengthen Christian faith, and confound the opponents of faith. Miracles are also key elements of the process of declaring certain men and certain women saints: that is, examples of the Christian life. From an existential point of view, the miracles and prophecies in John’s gospel are signs of both Christ’s divinity and his presence in the Church. From a certain (objective) perspective, they assure the truth of dogmas; from a certain (subjective) perspective, they also become the subject of faith. It is this act of faith that Christ himself wishes from those who ask miracles of him. As Benedict XVI writes: “In the miracles of healing performed by the Lord and by the Twelve, God displays his gracious power over the world. They are essentially “signs” that point to God himself and serve to set man in motion toward God. Becoming one with God can be the only true process of man’s healing” (*JN*, 176).

In the last and most dramatic miracle of John’s gospel—that of raising Lazarus, who had been dead for four days and already had signs of decomposition on his body, from the dead—Jesus declares to Lazarus’s sister Martha that he is “the resurrection and the life, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.” Martha, transformed by the inner impetus of grace, answers him: “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world.” This is followed by the meeting with Lazarus’s sister Mary. Jesus, seeing her weeping, was deeply moved in spirit and wept. He then cried out in

a loud voice: "Lazarus, come out." The dead man, who had come back to life, came out of the tomb, to the amazement of the Jews who were present (John 11:20). This was the third dead person to be brought back to life by Jesus, after the young girl Tabitha and the son of the widow of Naim. The circumstances of this event that John the evangelist, an eyewitness, describes in minute detail, have no parallel in any other religion.

The most obstinate opponents of Jesus' miracles especially reject this miracle. They argue that only John the evangelist relates it and he does so sixty years after the death of Christ. They see this miracle as a mere invention of the evangelist.<sup>15</sup> To what extremes does this partisan approach lead!

The modern contestation of the messianic prophecies began with the anonymous work by J. Collins, *A Discourse on the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (London, 1724). This provoked a large number of energetic contestations among English theologians of the time. The thesis of the *Discourse* is banal: the prophecies were invented by the Evangelist to demonstrate the agreement between the Old and New Testaments and the references to Christ have a purely allegorical significance. It is symptomatic that both Woolton and Collins relied upon a certain Jewish rabbi, Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), to engage in polemics with the Christian religion. However, having denied the historical fact of the prophecies, miracles, and thus indirectly the divinity of Christ, there remained to them only the so-called natural religion. This was the point of departure for the founder of deism—Herbert de Cherbury. As an opponent of revealed religion and in particular of Christianity, deism quickly turned to biblical criticism, subjecting Scripture, and in particular the gospel of John, to examination by the new philological-historical sciences. This work was carried out above all by John Roland and was then taken up on the continent with more rigorous criteria by Reimarus in his famous *Fragments of Wolfenbüttel*, which was edited posthumously by Lessing. These two writers may be seen as the founders of modern biblical criticism. This lineage of complete independence from patristic theology and the theology of Saint Thomas was adhered to by Kant in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. At the time, this was weakly disputed by Jacobi who opposed the atheistic rationalism of Spinoza with a form of fideistic realism. The lineage of deistic religious rationalism, right from his early years, was promoted by Fichte's *Aphorismen* (albeit in a form of dynamic Spinozism). This rationalist approach was also taken up by Schelling and above all and with more genius and influence by Hegel, whose *Religionsphilosophie* constitutes the classic text of speculative deism in that it places Christ at the center of history but secularizes him by emptying him of participation in divine nature as supernatural grace. From Hegel's philosophy of religion emerged in a dialectical fashion Feuerbach's

radical atheism, from which emerged Marx's sociological anthropology. This still dominates much of the critique of religion on the basis of Feuerbach's principle that "the secret (essence) of theology is anthropology." This led to Nietzsche's radical revolution with his decision that *God was dead*. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it reached Catholic theology with the modernist movement, which was condemned in 1907 by Saint Pius X's encyclical *Pascendi*. We have recently celebrated the hundredth anniversary of this work. This encyclical remains the fixed point for the condemnation of the immanentistic approach to the question of religion that is continued in the pragmatic, relativistic, and nihilistic atheisms of the end of the twentieth century and even the current denial of Jesus' historical existence.

Pope Benedict responds to these challenges by going to the heart of the question. His corollary is lapidary: "This means that the Gospel of John, because it is a 'pneumatic Gospel,' does not simply transmit a stenographic transcript of Jesus' words and ways; it escorts us, in virtue of understanding-through-remembering, beyond the external into the depth of words and events that come from God and lead back to him" (*JN*, 234–35). The pope adds: "As such the Gospel is 'remembering' which means that it remains faithful to what really happened and is not a 'Jesus poem,' not a violation of the historical events" (*JN*, 235). For Pope Benedict, John's gospel shows us Jesus in his *real* historical dimension of flesh and blood, *and* in the *real* metaphysics of his divinity: "It truly shows us who Jesus was, and thereby it shows us someone who not only was, but is; who can always say 'I AM' in the present tense. 'Before Abraham was, *I am*' (Jonn 8:58)" (*JN*, 235).

## The Theological Approach of Benedict XVI

Not all modern and contemporary philosophers and exegetes of the "*partisan approach*" will identify with Benedict XVI's words on the author of the fourth gospel. According to Benedict, "in the light of current scholarship, then, it is quite possible to see Zebedee's son John as the bystander who solemnly asserts his claim to be an eyewitness (cf. John 19:35) and thereby identifies himself as the true author of the Gospel" (*JN*, 225). Benedict is completely opposed to the hegemonic claims of the exegetical method: "The historical-critical method," he writes, "claimed to have the last word on the interpretation of the Bible and, demanding total exclusivity for its interpretation of Sacred Scripture, was opposed to important points in the interpretation elaborated by the faith of the Church."<sup>16</sup>

Benedict acknowledges that the historical-critical method is important and contains pearls of knowledge, which he discerns within the “dark forest” of its conflicting interpretations. He is equally insistent that the exclusive use of the historical-critical method runs the risk of dismembering the text and making the facts to which it refers incomprehensible. The pope thus seeks to read the different biblical texts within the overall context of the totality of Scripture, Tradition, the faith of the Church, and the fullness of divine revelation. While Benedict notes that “[t] his process is certainly not linear,” he demonstrates that

you can see it moving in a single overall direction; you can see that the Old and New Testaments belong together. This Christological hermeneutic, which sees Jesus Christ as the key to the whole and learns from him how to understand the Bible as a unity, presupposes a prior act of faith. It cannot be the conclusion of a purely historical method. But this act of faith is based upon reason—historical reason—and so makes it possible to see the internal unity of Scripture. By the same token, it enables us to understand anew the individual elements that have shaped it, without robbing them of their historical originality. (*JN*, xix)

This long quotation shows how reason and faith, and miracles and the readiness to accept them, are mutually implicit and “mutually intertwined” in Benedict’s thought. Thus, within Benedict’s approach of the knowledge of God, we are not dealing with having recourse to an immediate “sense of the divine,” as the “philosophies of intuition” (Schleiermacher) claim, or an inspiration of the Spirit that is absolutely extraneous to historicity (Bultmann, Hengel). Rather, *Jesus of Nazareth* holds that we must conclude that there is an inseparable alliance between reason and faith, between historical reason and theological faith, between the objective and the subjective dimension, and between history and memory of faith. This neither means nor implies their passive dependence on each other, because reason must perform its proper task, as should faith. Instead faith and reason encounter each other in a relationship of “complementarity,” as *Fides et ratio* well observes.

In this light, Benedict considers inadmissible the opposition between faith and historical reason, convinced as he is that the Jesus of the Gospels *is* a historical figure and that the Church’s faith in Christ as God and Man *cannot* do without a concrete historical basis. This means that Benedict, as he himself observes, trusts the Gospels (*JN*, xxi), even though he supplements this approach with what modern exegesis tells us. From all this springs a real Jesus—a *truly* “historical Jesus” in the strict sense of the term (*JN*, xxii). His figure “is much more logical and, historically speaking, much more intelligible than the reconstructions we have been presented with in the last decades” (*JN*, xxii). Benedict is convinced

that “unless there had been something extraordinary in what happened, unless the person and the words of Jesus radically surpassed the hopes and expectations of the time, there is no way to explain why he was crucified or why he made such an impact” (*JN*, xxii). This ultimately leads his disciples to attribute to Jesus the name that the prophet Isaiah and the whole of biblical tradition reserved for God alone (*JN*, xxi–xxii).

Applying this methodological and theological approach to the reading of the Our Father and also to Christ’s words and speeches, *Jesus of Nazareth* shows that Benedict is persuaded “that the deepest theme of Jesus’ preaching was his own mystery, the mystery of the Son in whom God is among us and keeps his word” (*JN*, 188). As the pope says with respect to the Johannine question—that is, the question of the historical value of the gospel of John and the words of Jesus that it records, which differ from the words of the Synoptic Gospels, the mystery of Jesus’ union with the Father is always present and determines the whole, although it remains concealed in his humanity (*JN*, 235). Jesus’ statements about himself, Pope Benedict argues, definitively show what is communicated by the philosophical word *homooúsios*: namely that “in God himself there is an eternal dialogue between Father and Son, who are both truly one and the same God in the Holy Spirit” (*JN*, 320).

*Jesus of Nazareth* states it is necessary that “true to the nature of God’s written word—we read the Bible, and especially the Gospels, as an overall unity expressing an intrinsically coherent message, notwithstanding their multiple historical layers” (*JN*, 191). This approach is not distant from that indicated by Saint Thomas as the method specific to sound theology, which is a “science in that it rests upon principles known in the light of higher science, that is the science of God and the blessed” (*S.Th.*, I, q. 1, a. 2).

## **The Success and Contemporary Relevance of the Work**

If this is Benedict’s hermeneutic approach, what should we think about the general success of *Jesus of Nazareth*? On one level, its success attested to by the large number of copies sold worldwide indicates the need for such a book, interest in the special thought and character of its author, and the importance and contemporary relevance of its subject-matter. At the beginning of *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict confesses that this book “has undergone a long gestation” (*JN*, xxiv). Though he began to work on it during the summer of 2003, the book is the outcome of lifelong thought and study by Benedict. As we have seen, Benedict understands that the issue of how we study Scripture has more than

purely academic ramifications. If it is done in the full context of the faith of the Church as well as an appreciation of the full dimensions of human reason, such exegesis can lead us closer to the person of Christ and help us approach political and economic issues in ways that truly accord with Christ's expectations of his disciples. If, by contrast, the analysis of Scripture absolutizes methodologies that, to some extent, assume an agnostic or even hostile stance toward Christ's divinity, or by efforts to make Christ into a rather secular-revolutionary figure, then error is inevitable. It is not for idle reasons that *Jesus of Nazareth* twice emphasizes, for example, that Christ was not a political revolutionary like Barabbas or Bar-Kochba (*JN*, 44, 303). The very same point is stressed in *Spe Salvi* (SS, no. 4). Rather, Pope Benedict concludes that "Jesus is no myth. He is a man of flesh and blood and he stands as a fully real part of history. We can go to the very places where he himself went. We can hear his words through his witnesses. He died and he is risen" (*JN*, 271–72). This work is a great and burning testimony to the full reality of Jesus, to his meaning for the whole of mankind, and our perception of the true nature of God. One can well say of this book what Saint Thomas said about the fourth gospel: "*Evangelista Ioannes intendit principaliter ostendere divinitatis Verbi incarnate*" (*In Ioannem*, 1, 1).

It is always comforting to read testimonies like this, even more so if they come from a great theologian who, thanks to Providence, is a successor to Saint Peter. After three hundred years of efforts to thrust the true face of Christ into the shadows, *Jesus of Nazareth* enables us to understand in a new way how Jesus *really* existed and *is* the Son by essence of being truly God and truly man. To echo the bishops who met in Aparecida (Brazil) for the Fifth Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopate in 2007, we can have every confidence that this book will help "to mature, to root and to grow in the whole of the ecclesial body the awareness that Christ, the God with a human face, is our true and only Savior."<sup>17</sup> We can also hope that it will help facilitate—as was the case with the 1930s and 1940s—a series of inspiring works on Jesus so that he can be truly known and therefore truly loved more in his full historical *and* theological reality.

It is also true that *Jesus of Nazareth* enables us to understand the great faith of its author. We can apply to Benedict XVI what Saint Thomas says (quoting the Pseudo Dionysius) about a good theologian: "Hierotheus is wise not only because he studies the divine but also because he experiences it in himself."<sup>18</sup> Theology is not an abstract academic exercise for Benedict. *Jesus of Nazareth* does not confine itself to the intellectual sphere—it is also directed toward "building up the church" (1 Cor. 14:12). Here, just as in *Deus caritas est*, Benedict XVI guides us toward the path of love for God and neighbor, as when he explains the parable of the Good Samaritan:

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For now we realize that we are all “alienated,” in need of redemption. Now we realize that we are all in need of the gift of God’s redeeming love ourselves, so that we too can become “lovers” in our turn. Now we realize that we always need God, who makes himself our neighbour so that we can become neighbours (*JN*, 201)

Thus, *Servati servandis*, we may make our own the concluding words of a review of this book by the former Catholic Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Carlo-Maria Martini, S.J., a noted Scripture scholar in his own right:

I also thought toward the end of my life of writing a book on Jesus as a conclusion to the work that I have engaged in on the New Testament. Now, it seems to me, this work by Joseph Ratzinger corresponds to my wishes and my hopes, and I am very happy that he wrote it.<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

1. This article is based on a paper delivered at the Embassy of Croatia to the Holy See, 30 October 2007. The references to Jesus of Nazareth are taken from Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007). Hereafter *JN*.
2. W. Jaeschke, *Hegel. La conciencia de la Modernidad* (Madrid, 1998), 63.
3. Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia,” 22 December 2005 [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_spe\\_20051222\\_roman-curia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia_en.html).
4. Benedict XVI, “Address at the University of Regensburg,” 12 September 2006. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html).
5. “Mass ‘Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice,’ Homily of His Eminence Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Dean of the College of Cardinals,” 18 April 2005: “Today, having a clear faith based on the creed of the Church is often labelled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be “tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine,” seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.” [http://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice\\_20050418\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html)
6. *In Trin.*, 2, 3. Also: “*Fides praesupponit cognitionem naturales, sicut gratia naturam et ut perfectio perfectibile*” (tr. “faith presupposes natural knowledge, just as grace, nature and the perfect presuppose the perfectible”).

7. Benedict XVI, "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia," 22 December 2005.
8. Cf. my essay, *La gracia come participación de la naturaleza divina* (Salamanca, 1979), 192.
9. John 1:17.
10. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, chap. 4.
11. "Ad ea etiam quae de Deo ratione humana investigari possunt, necessarium fuit hominem instrui revelatione divina. Quia veritas de Deo, per rationem investigata, a paucis, et per longum tempus, et cum admixtione multorum errorum, homini proveniret, a cuius tamen veritatis cognitione dependet tota hominis salus, quae in Deo est" (tr. "as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors. Whereas man's whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth") (*S Th.*, I, q. 1, a 1).
12. "Nullus philosophorum ante adventum Christi cum toto conatu suo potuit tantum scire de Deo et de necessariis ad vitam aeternam, quantum post adventum Christi scit una vetula per fidem: et ideo dicitur Isai. XI, 9: repleta est terra scientia domini" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio in Symbolum Apostolorum*, Proemium).
13. Jacon Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (Montreal: McGill, 1993).
14. Martin Hengel, *Die johanneische Frage* (Tübingen, 1993).
15. T. Woolton, *A Fifth Discourse on the Miracles of Our Saviour* (London, 1728).
16. Benedict XVI, "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia," 22 December 2005.
17. Documento Conclusivo, § 22, Aparecida, 2007, 22.
18. *S.Th.*, I, q. 1, a. 6 ad 3.
19. Author's translation from Carlo Maria Martini, *Recensione a Gesù di Nazaret*. [http://www.corriere.it/Primo\\_Piano/Cronache/2007/05\\_Maggio/24/ammiro\\_gesu\\_di\\_ratzinger.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/Primo_Piano/Cronache/2007/05_Maggio/24/ammiro_gesu_di_ratzinger.shtml).