

JOSEPH RATZINGER'S THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS FOR CHRISTIANS' FAITH ENHANCEMENT: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

The question of who Jesus is often arouses cognitive as well as affective responses that have far reaching influences on people's faith. The category of those who subscribe to the affective mode with foot in systematized cognitive investigation of the question often experience what Ratzinger refers to as "a clutching of the air"¹ in an attempt to form a relationship with Jesus. In other words, the role of modern biblical critical method of studying the Gospels, with its characteristic scientific approach to the question of who Jesus is, is said to often create a gap between belief and practice. Among scholars who have attempted to bridge such a gap are Rudolf Schnackenburg and Joseph Ratzinger. The latter has attempted a theological and spiritual hermeneutics in approaching the question. The general intent of this paper is an appraisal of his method for reading the gospels as highlighted in two of his writings: *Jesus of Nazareth* and "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis". While the central effort of the paper is to evaluate the adequacy or otherwise of Ratzinger's model for Christians' faith enhancement, the guiding question shall be what possibility such method has in ameliorating the "danger of clutching the air" and in establishing an "intimate friendship with Jesus" through the gospels.

Keywords: *Historical Jesus, Modern Biblical Critical Methods, Joseph Ratzinger, Theological Hermeneutics, Faith Enhancement.*

Introduction

Cognitive answers and affective responses to the question of who Jesus is, have hitherto varied with either mode of reactions occasionally influencing the other. Often, the influence of the cognitive answers, especially in its critical mode has had a far reaching negative influence on the faith of people in the latter category. Those in the latter category often demonstrate a faith-based response to the question of who Jesus is; however, they may sometimes experience what Joseph Ratzinger² refers to as "clutching at thin air"³ in an attempt to form a relationship with Jesus using the former category.

The expression "clutching at thin air" is metaphoric. Although Ratzinger did not explain in any specific term his usage of the expression, it would appear from such usage in connection with establishing "intimacy with Jesus", to refer to an elusive creedal tenacity where an "intimate friendship with Jesus" (of the

Gospels) is difficult to obtain. This interpretation coheres with George Weigel's view of the expression in his "Book Excerpt on 'Jesus of Nazareth'"⁴. Therein George implies the same connotation as implied in this paper. He wrote:

Benedict XVI is no reactive anti-modern. He readily and gratefully acknowledges that, thanks to historical-critical scholarship, we know much more, today, about the different literary genres of the Bible; about the ways in which a Gospel writer's intent affected his portrait of Jesus; about the theological struggles within early Christianity that shaped a particular Christian community's memory of its Lord. The difficulty is that, amidst all the knowledge gained in the biblical dissecting room, the Jesus of the Gospels has tended to disappear, to be replaced by a given scholar's reconstruction from the bits and pieces left on the dissecting room floor. And that makes "intimate friendship with Jesus" much more difficult, not just for scholars, but for everyone.⁵

The description of George at clarifying "clutching at thin air" in relation to establishing "intimate friendship with Jesus" results from attempts at a relationship with Jesus in spite of taking the "Jesus of the Gospel" to a 'dissecting room' via modern biblical critical method. To put the point in perspective, one wonders how "to love and respect what you are being taught to dissect."⁶ Such a relationship portends a gap between using the gospels, for example, to establish a personal relationship with Jesus and using such tools as the historical critical method to break the sources of required information into pieces.

Different Scholars have attempted various ways by which a faith-based understanding of Jesus and an understanding from a dissected source could be bridged.⁷ For example, Rudolf Schnackenburg who Ratzinger said was "probably the most prominent Catholic exegete writing in German during the second half of the twentieth century,"⁸ was concerned about the "the believing Christians who today have been made insecure by scientific research and critical discussion."⁹ His effort at bridging this gap is the theme of his *Jesus in the Gospels: A Biblical Christology*. While Ratzinger considers this work as "one last great work," he felt that Schnackenburg's "account of the figure of Jesus" in the book "suffers from a certain unresolved tension because of the constraints of the method he feels bound to use, despite its inadequacies."¹⁰ In fact for Ratzinger all previous attempts to resolve the crisis surrounding faith due to the methodologies applied, "have produced a common result: the impression 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."¹¹ As an alternative, Ratzinger offers a medium through which the crisis may be resolved namely, a theological and spiritual hermeneutics. What is intended in this paper is an appraisal of this method as embedded in two of his writings as a model for reading the gospels.¹² To situate the discussion in proper context, the paper casts a general look at the concept of hermeneutics as a step to examining Ratzinger's theological hermeneutics. The paper is guided by the question of adequacy of such method in establishing "intimate friendship with Jesus" through the gospels.

Background to the Problem

Reading Ratzinger,¹³ one gets the impression that what is at the root of the problem of the seeming incompatibility of historical critical method and sustenance of faith is philosophical misappropriation. There is a transfer of modern scientific worldview into biblical scholarship in such a way that historical issues are being measured with the prism of modern philosophical categories. Thus the question, “who is Jesus?” is often innocently conflict-ridden; yet it is a question that cannot be avoided because of the significant interest and implications that responses to it have on people’s lives.

That there is a record of a Jew called Jesus, whose works and deeds were mighty, and who was eventually tried, killed and resurrected is not so much often disputed. This story forms the content of four Gospels in the New Testament and is attested in other books of the New Testament. The point of dispute is the extent to which these records are representative of what ‘actually’ happened and how much redaction went into them. In other words, are the Gospels historical accounts of the Jesus event? Are the claims in the gospels actual representations of what historically took place? Can one really get to the ‘historical by scrutinizing the content and production of these records? If the answers to these are in the negative, then of what value are the gospels? At the heart of matters arising from such discourse is the problem of sustaining faith within the quagmire of inquiries surrounding the question of faith; and historicity must be squarely placed at the feet of the Christological foundational question of who Jesus is. The question, ‘who is Jesus?’ is not strange to efforts at an understanding of a Jew whose story has effected a religion and in whom divine recourse is sought. It is written in the Gospel that he had put the same question to his disciples who in turn had told him how he is perceived.¹⁴ From that time, one dare say that the answer to this seemingly simple question varies and reveals, in turn, variations in Christologies that has affected how Jesus is perceived.

The early Christian communities defined Jesus in images that represent different aspects of their faith in the mission and deeds of the Jesus they knew as “Lord” and as “Savior”.¹⁵ Similarly, the medieval Christians through the Renaissance maintained and preserved to a large extent the basic ways in which the humanity and divinity of Jesus have been defined in the New Testament, corroborated by the ‘gospels’ eyewitnesses’ and subscribed by the early church fathers.¹⁶ The issue at stake, from much of this background until the last three centuries was not profoundly about a systematic doubt of whether Jesus ever existed or about attributing to him a divinity that he never claimed; much of that became mostly evident with the penetration of the question of who Jesus is with a radical rationalization that characterized a peculiar scholarship prevalent from the 17th century onwards, and signaled by the work of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694 – 1768).

There are, of course, documented stories of the events of Jesus as in the New Testament but also, that there is now much controversies concerning those

stories in modern New Testament scholarship is a truism. Thus, one must be quick to acknowledge a basic difficulty in projecting a one clear and unambiguous Christology using the New Testament. According to Thomas P. Rausch, “while the New Testament is the most important source for our knowledge of Jesus, the difficulty with using it as a starting point is that it offers not one Christology, but many. The Synoptic Gospels present a very different Jesus than the one that emerges in John.”¹⁷ This situation opens up the Jesus debates to even more controversial outcomes. For instance, Rausch observed that various kinds of Christologies emerged from the end of the New Testament period and given that fact, “should we start methodologically with those Christologies which emerged [at that period], or with those in the earlier books, or with those even earlier that may lie behind the written texts?”¹⁸ There is a hint here on the necessary implication of engaging scientific scholarly tools in making such determination.¹⁹

Consequent on the dilemma arising from using the New Testament as the single source for the Jesus debates, other sources were explored. Some of these sources have been identified by Rausch as ‘the creeds and dogmas of the church’, ‘the faith of Christian people’, ‘the historical-Critical approach’, as well as ‘Dialectical Christology’. The attendant strength and problems associated with each of these methods are well discussed in the book.²⁰ Other approaches include the modern biblical method which includes the historical critical method.

The historical-critical method as an approach to our knowledge of Jesus is of particular interest to this paper. While keeping in mind that in whatever way within which this scientific (modern) critical effort is considered, there is always a potential danger to the sustenance of the individual’s faith of a Christian, this paper shall in the following pages consider this approach in dialogue with Ratzinger’s views on its inadequacy for sustenance of the Christian faith.²¹ It is important to note that the position of the Ratzinger in the texts to be considered betrays his pastoral and spiritual interest in his criticism of the historical-critical method. Again, Ratzinger is not the first nor the only one to be interested in such retrieval efforts as noted earlier in this paper; Schnackenburg did make the same attempt.²² Ratzinger however felt that Schnackenburg was not successful. The problem to be addressed then is what did he offer in place of such ‘failed’²³ efforts as Schnackenburg’s? Is such an effort adequate for his purpose? And possibly, how can such a result be put into concrete practice, if found successful?

The Historical-Critical Approach to Knowing Jesus

Simply stated, this approach states that the history underlying the Gospels and the New Testament narratives are products of early Christians’ faith and may not be regarded as history in the modern conventional sense of history. This way of referring to historical criticism may be considered too simplistic but it does contain the basic ingredients to identify such an approach to the Jesus’ study. It is an attempt at sifting through the Gospels to retrieve a historical Jesus through the

use of “scientific tools of modern historical research.”²⁴ The object of such methodology, the “historical Jesus”, is “thus a scientific construct, a theoretical abstraction of modern scholars that coincides only partially with the real Jesus of Nazareth.”²⁵ What this means is better appreciated when considered from the point of views in which the method has been put into practical use.

Robert Price considers historical criticism as an exercise that largely began “as an attempt to debunk the Christian religion as a pious fraud”²⁶ where “the gospels were seen as bits of priest-craft and humbug of a piece with the apocryphal Donation of Constantine.”²⁷ Of course, it depends on who is making a review of the exercise, the works of scholars from Reimarus through Schweitzer and Bultmann, wherein Jesus was no more than a mere ‘end-time’ preacher with perhaps some ideas of himself as a messiah, lends credence to what Price said. What is evident in the enterprise is that the method seeks to focus on the ‘historical’ Jesus and a possible reconstruction of his life and times without any attention to what such could mean spiritually or even theologically.

Ratzinger and the limits of Historical Criticism

The most concise view of Ratzinger on the relationship between historical criticism and the faith of the believers is well presented in his “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today”. It was a lecture presented on the 27th of January 1988 at Saint Peter’s Church, New York.²⁸ Highlights of the lecture present the historical critical method of biblical criticism as setting “out with enormous optimism” at the start.²⁹ At the beginning, according to Ratzinger, the method struck a different cord from the Enlightenment constraint on the understanding of the Scriptures. That initiative was refreshing in that “it seemed that we were finally going to be able to hear again the clear and unmistakable voice of the original message of Jesus.”³⁰ However, according to Ratzinger optimism and beauty of the method gradually dissipates to an extent that it ‘requires a radicalizing process’.³¹ The method becomes “confused” as it gradually raises “a visible fence that barred the way to the Bible for the uninitiated”³² and for the initiated, he/she “no longer reads the Bible, but dissects it into the elements from which it is supposed to have grown.”³³ Succinctly, according to Ratzinger the method is inadequate for the very fact that ‘faith is not one of its components’ and “God is not a factor in the historical events with which it deals.”³⁴ Furthermore, the method is primarily concerned with past events with inherent methodological limitations that cannot make the past present.³⁵

From the above summary of Ratzinger’s reservations on the historical-critical method and for the purpose of this paper, two significant limitations among others ought to be highlighted. First, to Ratzinger, the method “does not exhaust the interpretative task for someone who sees the biblical writings as a single corpus of Holy Scripture inspired by God,”³⁶ and secondly, the method is constrained by its own limits.³⁷ On the second point, Ratzinger’s view is that

historical method investigates the past and therefore, if it “remains true to itself ... the historical method not only has to investigate the biblical word as a thing of the past, but also has to let it remain in the past.”³⁸ The obvious implication of an exclusive use of this method on the faith of Christians would therefore be rather appalling. Such attempt will produce a doubt that put the Christian’s “intimate friendship with Jesus... in danger of clutching the air.”³⁹

Ratzinger's stance identified above stems from the end results of divergent portraits of Jesus by various re-constructionists through modern biblical criticism. In other words, results derived from the use of such a method have “become more and more incompatible with one another.”⁴⁰ It is also a method that does not respect biblical wholeness and continuity, but “dissects the Bible into discontinuous individual parts.”⁴¹ It is by such maneuvering that those new interpretations that are contrary to the bible's own intentions and are “symptomatic of the decay of interpretation and hermeneutics”⁴² are possible. For instance, an ‘analyses’ of Scripture in terms of depth psychology’ shows that the “Scripture is being read contrary to its own intention.”⁴³ In this statement, as in many others, this paper perceives Ratzinger as saying that such method as the historical criticism has produced a common result that leaves an “impression that we have very little certain knowledge of Jesus.”⁴⁴

The above conclusion points to the inadequacy of the historical critical method to take on board the necessary and inseparable connection between the Jesus that the method searches for in history, and the Christ of faith. By that fact, a method that supposedly stands in “direct apprehension of the purely historical can only lead to mistaken conclusions.”⁴⁵ Ratzinger’s *Biblical Interpretation in Conflict* and the *Jesus of Nazareth* suggest his belief that any method that creates a discontinuity between event and faith or history and God’s interventions, cannot appreciate the significant role of God who acts in history. Such a method is problematic to faith enhancement. In solving such a problem, there is a need for a method that establishes “the principle of the *analogia scripturae* on the basis of the interior claim of the biblical text itself.”⁴⁶ This is where Ratzinger’s theological hermeneutics comes in, since the modern biblical criticism is incapable of the task.

Theological Hermeneutics

By definition, hermeneutics is understood by this paper to connote human attempts at understanding ‘texts’, where ‘texts’ is not limited to written documents but includes other objects of interpretations, such as persons or painting. This understanding of hermeneutics is in line with Kevin Vanhoozer’s reference to ‘text’ as “person, a poem, a play, or a painting.”⁴⁷ In a rather broader definition, Daniel Treier defines it as “effort to understand the nature of human understanding.”⁴⁸ Its form, according to him includes “understanding the understanding of texts, or else all forms of understanding in terms of ‘texts’”.⁴⁹

Treier went further to identify two stages in the development of Christian hermeneutics: the pre-modern and the modern stages. While the former relates theological hermeneutics to “pre-critical models and to the Rule of Faith, championed by Irenaeus, Tertullian, and other patristic interpreters”⁵⁰, the modern “tried to overcome the ideological limitations of historicist interpretation of the Bible.”⁵¹ In the second stage, Rudolf Bultmann, for example is referenced by Treier as having “used supposedly historical criteria to separate faith from history (which) in his particular Lutheran view, constitute reliance upon something besides the word of God.”⁵² Significantly, the movement from the initial model to the latter is characterized by a shift in focus on hermeneutics. It is a shift that Treier identified in a movement “from the practice of textual interpretation to its ontological possibility via human historicity.”⁵³ From the ongoing, two designations to theological hermeneutics may be identified:⁵⁴

1. To develop an account of text interpretation or even human understanding in interaction with Christian doctrine.
2. To develop an account of how biblical interpretation should shape, and be shaped by Christian theology.

In the light of the above designations, doing theological hermeneutics entails collaboration between exegetes (on text interpretation), and theologians (of Christian theology). Although these functions are not mutually exclusive, the exegete would probably be more concerned with certitudes of scripture and its historical basis prior to the theologians’ reflections on doctrines that flow from the ensuing historical biblical witness. This is a consideration as this offers a window to vent the views of Ratzinger where the exegete needs to be open to the theologian’s reflections in grasping the religious implication of what is analyzed.

In the first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*, Ratzinger sees the nature of authentic biblical exegesis as that which permits greater allowance of theological understanding in its operations. This is very much in tune with the overall motif of the *Jesus of Nazareth* project. Theological understanding is prized above the work of the exegete in spite of being loyal to the dictates of the method applied by the exegete in biblical studies. In other words, in Ratzinger’s “Theological Hermeneutics”, ‘texts’ must be approached from a faith standpoint, and through fervent disposition to the Holy Spirit through whom it was written.⁵⁵

Joseph Ratzinger’s Theological Hermeneutics

This paper does not see Ratzinger’s criticism of historical critical method as completely a total condemnation, but a call to its inadequacies and the need to move beyond it, especially when it comes to issues that border on faith and scripture. He considers the place of historical research as indeed important to Christianity since “it is of the very essence of biblical faith to be about real historical events. It does not tell stories symbolizing supra-historical truths, but based on history, history that took place here on earth.”⁵⁶ What is therefore needed is not “a refuge in a supposedly pure literal understanding”, nor “a merely

positivist, rigid ecclesiasticism,⁵⁷ but a 'search for corrective factors at better synthesis between historical and dogmatic methods, criticism and dogma.'⁵⁸ More clearly, "what is needed is a criticism of criticism, developed, not from outside, but simply from within, from critical thought's potential for self-criticism..."⁵⁹

According to Ratzinger, so far, there seems to have been no "convincing overall conception that does justice to the positive insights of the historical method while at the same time transcending its limitations and opening it up into an appropriate hermeneutic."⁶⁰ While Ratzinger acknowledges the enormity of such task and recognises that such an effort does not yield quick results, he went ahead to place the task of his theological hermeneutics on that same path.

Ratzinger's Theological method

The theological method of Ratzinger emphasizes an inclusion of historical-critical biblical exegesis and a hermeneutic of faith in what he understood to be a holistic approach to theology and its aspects. Ratzinger's position is essentially an effort that "tried to go beyond purely historical-critical exegesis so as to apply new methodological insights that allows us to offer a properly theological interpretation of the Bible."⁶¹ The method, according to him "requires faith, but the aim unequivocally is not, nor should be, to give up serious engagement with history."⁶² The impression here is that engagement with history in biblical interpretation is not seriously the problem as the pulling out of that history the place of God thereby treating 'God's word' as a worldly reality open to scientific scrutiny for validation and meaning. This mode of scholarship necessarily subjects traditional exegesis within the confines of pure reason which would not permit a meaning of history that includes the paramount place of God in the creation and salvation history of man. In turn, the place of faith and revealed theological truth become more and more untenable in that order of reality.

In response to the problem of theology being held within the confines of a philosophical worldview, of a transfer of modern scientific (natural sciences) worldview into biblical scholarship and making the Bible lose a voice of its own, Ratzinger cuts "a couple of paths into the thicket" using the following principles⁶³ which he believes can keep one on track of a theological hermeneutics:

1. Preparation must be required to open up the inner dynamics of the word... through a sympathetic understanding, a readiness to experience something new, to be taken along a new path.
2. The exegete must not approach the interpretation of the text with a ready-made philosophy or with the dictates of a so-called modern or "scientific" world view, which predetermines what may and may not be.
3. The relationship between event and word must be seen in a new light. The fact, then, as such, cannot be a vehicle of meaning. Meaning lies only in the word, and when events themselves seem to be vehicles of meaning, they must be regarded as illustrations of the word and as

referring back to it. ... Only harmony between the two methods results in understanding the Bible.

- a. Word and event must be regarded as equally original.
- b. Whenever the connection between word and event is allowed to drop, there is no longer any unity in Scripture.

In summary, Ratzinger's theological hermeneutics requires that the place of God in history must be established as concrete. This is because the reality of the incarnation places the entrance of God into human history in concrete terms in words and events. Thus the exegete must acknowledge and be ready to work with the recognition of the place of Jesus as the center of history.⁶⁴ Secondly a relationship of continuity that necessarily characterized what God did in the Old Testament and what happened in the New Testament must be well established. In other words, there must also be a dedication to uphold the organic unity of the scripture. According to Ratzinger, it is only by these efforts that an authentic understanding of Scripture could be attained.

Critique of Ratzinger's theological hermeneutics

Ratzinger's proposal has not gone unchallenged. One of the most outstanding critics of his view is Gerd Lüdemann, a Professor of the History and Literature of Early Christianity.⁶⁵ He strongly opined that historians cannot accept such a proposal that subjects their work to a metaphysical or meta-historical statement (of faith) without questions.⁶⁶ He argues for a critical examination of testimonies offered by eyewitnesses and sources used as references. These, of course, include the Gospels as historical sources documented by supposed eyewitnesses.

As stated earlier in this paper, Ratzinger's proposal in establishing a connection between biblical study tool such as the historical-critical method and the sustenance of the Christian faith calls on the exegete to be open to the theologian's faith based religious insights. As observed, this view cuts across the first volume of his *Jesus of Nazareth*. Therein, Ratzinger sees the nature of authentic biblical exegesis as that which permits greater allowance of theological underpinning in its operations. Ratzinger subsequently invites responses to his proposal. Gerd Lüdemann in his *Preface*⁶⁷ wrote that "when the Pope – the leader and chief spokesman of more than a billion Catholics – publishes a book that purports to study the life of Jesus of Nazareth, it is both reasonable and requisite ... to examine it and to review its objective value". Clearly, Lüdemann takes the Pope's work seriously and responds critically. He notes that objectivity based on available facts ought to supersede personal or group spiritual convictions.

From the outset Lüdemann argues that "the historian is obliged to present objective evidence for his or her assertions. The rules of the game do not permit one to rely on uncorroborated testimony or claims of authority."⁶⁸ According to Lüdemann, even Joseph Ratzinger "praises historical method in the highest terms and lays great stress on its necessity".⁶⁹ Therefore, any historian "who fails to

challenge eyewitness testimony and submit documentary sources to critical examination ... is not an historian."⁷⁰ He went further to argue that "the so-called historical method used by the Pope ... has the sole aim of proving the reliability of the gospels...but the Pope never examines their historical trustworthiness."⁷¹ It is not surprising then that Lüdemann opens the first chapter of his work with a statement that, "Ratzinger's presupposition that the gospels present accurate historical accounts is wrongheaded."⁷² Be that as it may, there are recent scholarly works of celebrated authors of no less in importance than Richard Bauckham⁷³ who also buys the ideas of Ratzinger.

Summarily, Lüdemann's main problem with Ratzinger's work according to him, is that Ratzinger implicitly grants the "scholarly consensus that the gospel portrait of Jesus are artistic compositions, [but] seems to ignore the fact that some of their dissimilarities amount to mutual contradiction"⁷⁴ But one must not lose sight of Ratzinger's reservation and point of contention when it comes to historical-critical method. His main point, which Lüdemann also acknowledges in his book⁷⁵ is that the method "does not exhaust the interpretative task for someone who sees the biblical writings as a single corpus of the Holy Scripture inspired by God."⁷⁶ Therefore, his task is to attempt a purification of the historical-critical method, and facilitate a return to a faith-informed reading of the Scripture.

Evaluation of Ratzinger's Theological Hermeneutics

It is deducible from all that have been said that Ratzinger perceives that there is no justifiable reason why faith and an impartial historical research on the life and times of Jesus cannot be conducted.⁷⁷ What is required in doing that will be for the historical critical method to be purified and purged of its tendencies to subjugate theology and issues of faith to categories that do not necessarily apply to them. In this case, self-criticism of the historical critical method will have to be geared towards a purification that is aimed at sanitizing the excessive philosophical weight that has so colored it at the detriment of faith. After all, what is at the core of the problem "is not a dispute among historians" but a philosophical one.⁷⁸ What is thus needed is an identification of such philosophies that give no room for the exercise of faith within a historical-critical research. By identifying such philosophies and their possible impact on the outcome of the research, the exegete can then determine the value of such element for the understanding of Scripture and Tradition.⁷⁹ There is no doubt that this step is forward looking in the attainment of results other than the attitude that *what is by reason is that which is right in belief*.

Furthermore, the call for a self-examination of historical-critical method is a call on exegetes who adopt this method to be more open-minded and reconsider their operational modalities by such method. This task cannot be said to be an easy one. It requires deep conviction and humility on the part of the exegete. This is because two key areas that have been held at par will have to be

given a clear-cut distinction and the loyalty of the exegete to faith must be given a priority of place over the historical-critical assumptions. One of the results that will emerge by such efforts will be a discontinuity in the dissection of the scripture. By so doing, the internal unity of the Bible will once again be retrieved and for a Christian believer, the unity of the Bible will once again make meaningful the continuity in the salvation story. For Ratzinger, this effort “does not contradict historical-critical interpretation, but carries it forward in an organic way toward becoming theology in the proper sense.”⁸⁰

Again, an understanding of theological hermeneutic as a hermeneutic of continuity is a key factor in understanding Ratzinger’s theological hermeneutics. He believes that “all the currents of Scripture come together in him [Jesus] that he is the focal point in terms of which the overall coherence of Scripture comes to light - everything is waiting for him, everything is moving towards him.”⁸¹ The ongoing well understood will translate into acknowledging an allusion to an inner unity of the Old Testament and the New Testament, and perhaps a link that binds faith and history. This disposition will help see history from the eye of faith. While faith and reason or history are separate, they are not in sharp bi-focality but related in such a way that faith could serve as a purificator to the other. Through this means, the exegete or the Christian believer is put on the right path to ‘see God’, and establish a better relationship with Jesus through an openness of reason to the transcendent.

Finally, one of the implications of holding solely to the historical critical method is a disconnection from the sense of the Scripture. Getting the sense of the Scripture is intricately connected with the internal unity of the Scripture. “If you want to understand the Scripture in the spirit in which it is written, you have to attend to the content and to the unity of Scripture as a whole;”⁸² this for Ratzinger is a ‘datum’. Since “Jesus attaches great importance to being in continuity with the Scripture, in continuity with God’s history with men,”⁸³ the place of such significant principle cannot be neglected in the exegesis.

To make the best from the point on continuity mentioned above, especially in making a comparison of claims in modern theological innovations, the proposal of Ratzinger “to introduce into the discussion the great proposals of Patristic and medieval thought”⁸⁴ is one more way to help keep the Christian or the exegete on the right track. Given the overall target of maintaining a relationship with Jesus, modern biblical scholarship must be kept in tandem with the teachings and practices of the church’s tradition and Patristic exegesis alongside the Scriptures. This view will help the Christian or the exegete in having a strong foothold in the tradition of the church. Secondly, through such means, the spiritual sense of passages and events being read are discovered. According to Ratzinger, there is an embedded spiritual sense that underlies the scripture and it is that within which the unity of the bible is seen; this spiritual understanding of the relatedness of biblical passages must be upheld in doing a

theological exegesis. The historical-critical method forecloses this paramount requirement and thus cannot arrive at any spiritual understanding.

Conclusion

What Ratzinger proposes as theological hermeneutics is what is needed in modern times to help Christians sustain their faith within a reasonable footing in history. The problem, as he said is not with historians but the overloading of the tool for investigating history with juridical authority to preside over what is true, acceptable and right in faith. The resultant effect of this exercise has not been, at the least, an impartial presentation of issues that border on faith. Obviously, such tools do not possess such juridical power to determine what should be accepted in faith parlance, thus theology must be freed from such confines. The proposals of Ratzinger on the one hand, that faith and reason are not necessarily mutually exclusive but that its exercise only need be refocused, and that the spiritual sense of the scripture should play a major role in exegetical exercises, must be taken seriously in an attempt to establish a relationship with Christ. This paper finds such proposal adequate in turning around the use of the historical critical method in biblical scholarship for better Christian hermeneutics that can promote the faith of the individual Christian.

Notes and References

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- 1 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration, Vol. 1* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), *Preface*. A detail of this expression is explored on page 2 of this paper.
 - 2 The actual name of Pope Benedict XVI, i.e. Joseph Ratzinger shall be used throughout this work in discussing his contributions to the scholarship being addressed here. This is especially for the fact that he wrote concerning his *Jesus of Nazareth* project that the book is, "... in no way an exercise of the *magisterium*, but solely an expression of my personal search 'for the face of the Lord' (cf. Ps 27:8)."
 - 3 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration, Preface*. What this paper understands by "clutching at thin air" is discussed in the second paragraph above, *see p.2, par.1-2*. The expression is considered to be the danger in holding unto indefinable or elusive reality. In this case, *clutching at thin air* refers to one holding on to scanty information distilled after dissecting the gospel. Such information is considered too insufficient and thus too "thin" to establish any "intimacy" with the Jesus of the Gospels.
 - 4 George Weigel, "Book Excerpt on *Jesus of Nazareth*". <http://www.newsweek.com/book-excerpt-jesus-nazareth-100955> (Accessed October 11, 2015).
 - 5 George Weigel, "Book Excerpt on *Jesus of Nazareth*".
 - 6 George Weigel, "Book Excerpt on *Jesus of Nazareth*".
 - 7 See the works of Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Jesus in the Gospels: A Biblical Christology, Translated by O. C. Dean, Jr. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005)* and Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the traditional Gospels* (New York, HarperCollins Publishers: 1996).
 - 8 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth, Vol. 1*, xii - xiii
 - 9 Schnackenburg was concerned about the crisis of faith of "the believing Christians who today have been made insecure by scientific research and critical discussion, so that they may hold fast to faith in the person of Jesus Christ as the bringer of salvation and Savior of the world." See Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Jesus in the Gospels: A Biblical Christology, Translated by O. C. Dean, Jr. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005)* x.
 - 10 Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, Vol. 1*, xiii.
 - 11 Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, Vol. 1*, xii.
 - 12 The basic texts for conversation in this paper are *Jesus of Nazareth, Vol. 1*, and "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations

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- and Approaches of Exegesis Today” in *God’s Word: Scripture-Tradition-Office* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005).
- 13 Especially the two sources identified as main sources for this paper, see Notes and Reference #12 above.
- 14 Cf. Mark 8:29: “who do you say that I am?”
- 15 Roman 10:13, 6:23
- 16 Thomas P. Rausch has made a good survey of this development in his work, *Who is Jesus?* See, especially his introductory remarks on “images of Jesus” in *Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003)1f
- 17 Thomas P. Rausch, *Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003)3.
- 18 Thomas P. Rausch, *Who is Jesus?* 4
- 19 Tools such as form criticism, source criticism and the redaction criticism in attempting such distinctions come to mind.
- 20 See Thomas P. Rausch, *who is Jesus?* 4 – 8.
- 21 The main texts of Ratzinger to be engaged in this regard are his ‘Biblical Interpretation in Conflict: The Question of the Basic Principles and Path of Exegesis Today’ in Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, *God’s Word: Scripture-Tradition-Office* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008)91-126 and the First two volumes of his *Jesus of Nazareth* project.
- 22 Schnackenburg stated that the motif for his book is to find an alternative that will “ultimately seek to be of service in meeting the Jesus Christ who is alive and continues to live and to ask for us in the present,” (See Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Jesus in the Gospels: A Biblical Christology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press) ix, but Ratzinger feels that he was unsuccessful in that task See Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan*. xiv.
- 23 The term is used to designate shortcomings at initial efforts to engage the gap created by historical-critical method on the knowledge about Jesus it produces and the faith of believers that hangs at stake.
- 24 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus Vol. II* (New York: Doubleday, 1987) 4.
- 25 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 4.
- 26 Robert M. Price, “Is There a Place for Historical Criticism?” *Religious Studies* 27, No. 3 (Sep., 1991). 371.
- 27 Robert M. Price, “Is There a Place for Historical Criticism?” 371.
- 28 Joseph Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today” in *God’s Word: Scripture-Tradition-Office* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005) 91-126. The lecture was delivered by the Cardinal on 27 January 1988, at Saint

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- Peter's Church, in New York, NY. The document can also be accessed at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/RATZBIBL.HTM>.
- 29 Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis", 91
- 30 Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis", 92
- 31 Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis", 91
- 32 Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis", 91
- 33 Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis", 91
- 34 Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis", 91
- 35 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol. 1. xvi.
- 36 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol. 1. xvi
- 37 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol. 1. xvi
- 38 Joseph Ratzinger. *Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol. 1, xvi
- 39 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol.1, xii. An explanation of the expression *clutching at thin air* has been made on page 2 of this paper.
- 40 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol. 1. xii
- 41 Joseph Ratzinger, *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, 95
- 42 Joseph Ratzinger, *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, 95
- 43 Joseph Ratzinger, *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, 96
- 44 Ratzinger, Joseph. *Jesus of Nazareth: Vol.1, p. xii*
- 45 Ratzinger, Joseph. *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, 126
- 46 Ratzinger, Joseph. *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, 121
- 47 This definition is given by Daniel Treier, "Theological Hermeneutics, Contemporary" in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, N.T. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 2005), 787.
- 48 Daniel Treier, "Theological Hermeneutics, Contemporary" 787.
- 49 Daniel Treier, "Theological Hermeneutics, Contemporary", 787
- 50 Daniel Treier, "Theological Hermeneutics, Contemporary", 787
- 51 Daniel Treier, "Theological Hermeneutics, Contemporary" 788
- 52 Daniel Treier, "Theological Hermeneutics, Contemporary" 788
- 53 Daniel Treier, "Theological Hermeneutics, Contemporary" 787
- 54 The designations listed here are from the work of Daniel Treier, "Theological Hermeneutics, Contemporary", 788
- 55 This thought is from *Dei Verbum*, #11-12, a major Catholic Church document in which Ratzinger was a major contributor.
- 56 Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol. 1, xv
- 57 Joseph Ratzinger, *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, 99
- 58 Joseph Ratzinger, *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, 99
- 59 Joseph Ratzinger, *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, 100
- 60 Joseph Ratzinger, *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, 99

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- 61 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From The Baptism In the Jordan*, xxiii
- 62 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From The Baptism In the Jordan*, xxiii
- 63 I have only made a selection of three of those principles in this paper, details of the principles can be found in “some Basic Elements of a New Synthesis” in *God’s Word: Scripture-Tradition-Office*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 114 - 126. From 1 to 3b are direct quotation taken from between pages 114 - 126
- 64 Joseph Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis,” 17
- 65 There are other critiques of Ratzinger’s work, among which the following works are good sources for further reading: C. Martini “Ardent Testimony on Jesus: On the Book *Jesus of Nazareth* by Joseph Ratzinger/ Benedict XVI”. In *Bulletin Dei Verbum* 84/85 (207):44. Luke Johnson, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration.*” In *Modern Theology* 24. 2 (2008):318.
- 66 Gerd Lüdemann, *Eyes that See Not: The Pope Looks at Jesus* (Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 2008), 131.
- 67 Gerd Lüdemann, *Eyes that See Not: The Pope Looks at Jesus*, vii.
- 68 Gerd Lüdemann, *Eyes that See Not: The Pope Looks at Jesus*, ix.
- 69 Gerd Lüdemann, *Eyes that See Not: The Pope Looks at Jesus*, ix.
- 70 This quotation is accessed from the official Amazon books review of Gerd Lüdemann. *Eyes that See Not: The Pope Looks at Jesus*. <http://www.amazon.com/Eyes-That-See-Not-Looks/dp/1598150065>. (Accessed: 13 November 13, 2015).
- 71 Gerd Lüdemann. *Eyes that See Not: The Pope Looks at Jesus*. <http://www.amazon.com/Eyes-That-See-Not-Looks/dp/1598150065>. (Accessed: 13 November 13, 2015).
- 72 Gerd Lüdemann. *Eyes that See Not: The Pope Looks at Jesus*, 3
- 73 Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Win. B. Eardmans Publishing Co., 2006). In the book, the author argues for the veracity of the four Gospels as rooted authentic eyewitness testimony of those who personally knew Jesus.
- 74 Gerd Lüdemann. *Eyes that See Not: The Pope Looks at Jesus*, x
- 75 Gerd Lüdemann. *Eyes that See Not: The Pope Looks at Jesus*, ix
- 76 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol. 1, xvi.
- 77 Ratzinger notes in *The Pierced One* that “the historical critical method is essentially a tool, and its usefulness depends on the way in which it is used. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual*

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- Christology, Transl.* Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984)
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- 78 Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis" 113
- 79 In *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*
Ratzinger states the thesis: "The historical-critical method and other
modern scientific methods are important for an understanding of Holy
Scripture and Tradition. Their value, however, depends on the
hermeneutical (philosophical) context in which they are applied." *Behold
the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*, 42
- 80 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From The Baptism in the Jordan*, xix
- 81 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From The Baptism In the Jordan*,
246
- 82 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth, Vol.1*, xviii referring to the American
scholars development of 'canonical exegesis' project
- 83 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth, Vol.1*, xviii
- 84 Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crises" 125