

The Pope Engages the Jesus Debate: Benedict XVI on Jesus

[A review of *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* by Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), translated from the German by Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

A presentation, at a symposium on Ratzinger's Jesus of Nazareth Society of Biblical Literature Meeting (Southwest Section), Dallas, March 15, 2008.)]

Peter Steinfels has made the comment that you can read Benedict XVI's *Jesus of Nazareth* to learn about Jesus or find out about Benedict XVI. Steinfels expressed greater interest in the former as a way of reading; but I must admit that the latter may be more appealing to New Testament scholars. No one can deny that for many decades Cardinal Ratzinger could more than hold his own in the elite circles of Dogmatic Theology. But given both his towering intellect and the press of enormous ecclesiastical obligations we may well ask what possessed him to use many of his precious spare moments to write a book on Jesus. Now we know the answer. It can be summed up with a simple proposition: the figure of Jesus is the mirror in which we come to know who God is and what he is like (137). Nothing can be more important than that. To draw a significant motif from the Gospel of John, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." That is the focus around which this book revolves. To state it in more theological terms, it is an attempt to provide a stable foundation for the basic Trinitarian theology of the church.

About ten years ago, in a conversation with the late Bill Farmer, Farmer told me about a meeting he had with Cardinal Ratzinger. As I remember Farmer's account it went something like this: Farmer was introduced to Ratzinger as a leading scholar of the gospels. Ratzinger responded, "A gospel scholar. Well, please tell me why is it that I can never get the gospel scholars to say anything about Jesus based on the Gospel of John?"

With this book we now know what was behind this remark, because for Ratzinger the *heart* of his account on Jesus is drawn from Jn 1:18.

No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

What came to light in *Jesus of Nazareth* was ontologically grounded in the triune divine life from the beginning of time. For Benedict, this pre-existent unity is manifest throughout Jesus' ministry from beginning to end. Although Jesus of Nazareth was a historical figure deeply enmeshed in Jewish culture, the revelatory unveiling of this union with the father functions not only for the benefit of Israel but for all humanity. Through the incarnation all humans are invited to respond to this revelation of the Father through the Son and be drawn into this union. Speaking about the image of the vine and branches in John's gospel, Benedict says,

Jesus is inseparable from his own, and they are one with him and in him (260).

It is this *skopos* that functions as Benedict's fundamental *discrimen* for reading the gospel accounts of Jesus' life – indeed the entire biblical text. From there Benedict fans out into many different areas including engaging in some interaction with New Testament scholarship. But it is clear that this interaction is a second level conversation and is subservient to his main interest in high Christology. Summing up two of his earlier chapters on the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord's Prayer he concludes,

We have seen 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; he announces the Kingdom of God as coming and having come in his person (188).

Encountering the mystery is the key goal of a study of Jesus' life. Historical study is the vestibule to get us to the mystery. This ambivalence to embrace fully historical methodology, always keeping it on a leash, will no doubt not sit well with many in the New Testament guild. It is interesting to note the names of Benedict's main interlocutors. They are conveniently listed in the last few pages of the book. In most instances they sound very much like the people I was reading when I was doing my graduate work in the 60's. We could have a field day listing the gaps with respect to his engagement with key works. For example, on the parables Jülicher, Jeremias and Dodd are his major conversation partners. Because he has so much at stake in his use of the Gospel of John he is constrained to address the Johannine question. But he does it by attacking Bultmann's long discredited theories on Gnosticism and in its place he puts a rather unexamined acceptance of Stuhlmacher's ideas about the Johannine writer being "the literary executor of Jesus' favorite disciple" (227).

But to pursue whom he quoted, or didn't, would not be profitable and, I believe, would render a disservice to the book. After all a review of an important book should seek to get other potential readers to engage it and wrestle with the arguments of the author.

Nevertheless, I wish to move into a couple of problematic areas where I would like to see more exploration. Then I will make brief closing observations noting where, I believe, Benedict makes important points, that should be addressed by anyone who wishes to do New Testament Theology.

Two Problematic Areas

The claim that the core of Jesus' Mission entailed the universalization of the family of God

Throughout the book we are peppered with frequent comments to the effect that Jesus' mission put into effect what Israel was never able to accomplish – to be a light to the nations.

He (i.e. Jesus) has 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. He has brought the gift of universalism which was the great definitive promise to Israel and the world (116).

Of course, readers of the NT are left in no doubt that is the *effect* of Jesus' coming. Paul claims that it is only on the universal principle of justification by faith for Jew and Gentile that

God can be sovereign of all nations while the Johannine writings stress the universal impact of Jesus' sacrifice. But is this *effect* of Jesus' mission fully coherent with a body of textual evidence that describes the earthly Jesus as a prophetic reformer of Israel with only a passing interest in the Gentiles?

I draw attention to this point because I think it leads to a number of dubious emphases in the book that are not substantiated by solid historical inquiry.

1. It is historically questionable that Israel understood its goal as a people was to bring the knowledge of the one God to the nations. This is a massive issue; but to be succinct, the weight of the prophetic emphasis is that at the Day of the Lord the nations would come centripetally to Zion and recognize the glory of Israel's God.
2. More significantly, this raises the question of Jesus' own attitude toward the Gentiles. Jesus never traveled outside of Israel and there is solid historical information that he was overwhelmingly focused toward the salvation of the lost sheep of the house of Israel. To the extent that he had views about Gentiles, I think it would be fair to say, that he held the traditional belief that in the eschaton the nations would come and acknowledge in Zion the glory of the God of Israel.
3. These references to the eschaton point to another problematic consequence in Benedict's use of historical methodology. I refer to Jesus' view of the future. Inevitably in any analysis of Jesus' life in general there must be a substantial interchange between Jesus' view of the ultimate emergence of the kingdom and his realized eschatology in general. But for Benedict, realized eschatology resurfaces with a vengeance. It gets the vote. For Benedict the kingdom is radically present in the ministry of Jesus.

...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; he announces the Kingdom of God as coming and as having come in his person...Yes, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is "eschatological," if you will, but eschatological in the sense that the Kingdom of God is "realized" in his coming (188).

C.H. Dodd has gained a significant adherent. The idea of the future triumph of the Son reigning in a renovated new creation fades into the background.

Consequently the crux of the tension between now and not yet, the idea that Jesus and the Twelve were a community of the last days, and that the synoptic picture of Jesus' mission focusing on bringing Israel to face its coming crisis fades into the background. In its place is the understanding that dominating Jesus' mission, based on his intimate relationship with the Father, was his desire to unfold the salvific plan of God. Thus the scales are tipped in favor of the Johannine reading. But should this be done at the expense of the Synoptics?

Static View of Early Christian Development

A second consequence of this integrative account of the fourfold gospel tradition on Jesus is the remarkable static view of the development of the gospel tradition within the maelstrom of what we call early Christianity.

As one who has spent much of his academic career on the issue of the Synoptic Problem it is rather startling to note that the issue never surfaces in this book. By now I am used to the customary opening paragraph of a book on Jesus where the author, obviously ignorant of the technical aspects of the source issues, recuses himself – and then goes on to use the Two-Source Theory anyway. But, as far as I can tell, Benedict has a kind of lordly disdain for all the theories. He discusses each Gospel account on its own terms and does not clearly distinguish between the written account and historical fact. Given my propensities on the source issue it is somewhat refreshing to read a book on Jesus without having to wade through all the discussion about the different levels of the Q community and the intricacies of Mark-Q overlaps.

But, of course, in any work where there is little or no distinction between the text itself and the actual historicity of what is being described there is bound to be some lack of precision and erosion in the analysis of the dynamic developments which took place in early Christianity. This comes out time and time again when Benedict turns to a particular text. On the notorious passage on the new wineskins Benedict first states that Mark's account (2:22) and Matthew's are similar (181). They are not. Matthew also has the phrase, "and so both are preserved," which gives a key compositional clue with respect to his positive view of Torah. Then Benedict notes Luke's additional statement, "and no one after drinking old wine desires new," for he says, "The old is good" (Lk 5:39). From this Benedict draws the conclusion that Luke has a special sensitivity to the Jews – opposed to Matthew and John! Perhaps this is so, but without additional careful exegesis it is hardly demonstrated by this analysis.

Although some may think this is a trivial point, the instances pile up and could, in the end, cast doubt on the validity of the whole enterprise. A failure to have a working hypothesis of how the Gospel tradition developed does conceal important facts with respect to how some key theological decisions were determined at the dawn of Christianity. I have already noted a whole body of texts surrounding eschatology and Jesus' view of the kingdom. Another one, critical for this book would be the issue of Christological development. We are promised that the infancy accounts will be discussed in a later volume. But, for Benedict, despite an interesting chapter on Jesus declaring his identity we never get a clear historical discussion on some key issues that are critical for this argument. Was Jesus always conscious of a unique relationship with the Father? Did this insight develop? Can it be identified through close attention to the formation of the Gospel tradition? Or is it a datum that functions as a fundamental presupposition for doing theology?

Of course, some of these issues come within the province of specialists within the field of early Christianity. But since Benedict seems to be intent on shoring up the basic foundation for orthodox Christology it would have been helpful if he entered more into dialogue with those who have a more dynamic view of early Christian Development.

Closing Observations

The Role of Historical-Critical Exegesis

On page 23 of the Foreword Benedict gives us a word that we should all ponder:

I have merely tried to go beyond purely historical-critical exegesis so as 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.

This quote comes in a paragraph where he affirms historical-critical exegesis as an enterprise that should be welcomed by people of faith. Anyone who gives the book a fair reading will affirm that Benedict not only affirms the use of the historical-critical method, but is not afraid to mix it up with the exegetes. Of course we would prefer that he apply it more rigorously at times – but we have already made our point there.

What is fascinating is the reference to “a proper theological interpretation.” I may be wrong but I do not think he is referring to something like the four levels of ecclesial reading in the ancient church. Rather, I see it as similar to what Peter Stuhlmacher has been advocating – consenting to read the text with a presupposition that transcendence is inherent in the story. The claim is that without this presupposition one has not made a fair ecclesial reading. To those who are listening this clearly will be grist for the mill in the present lively debate over the nature of biblical theology.

Historical Jesus or Christ of Faith

I suppose this is only another way of opening up the old question of the historical Jesus or the Christ of Faith that has been around, at least, since Lessing’s ‘great ditch’ and the nineteenth century response to Strauss. Benedict knows that the *Enlightenment* took place and in a very real sense we can never go home again. In a closing paragraph one should not even try to be definitive on this massive subject but only suggestive. Perhaps I am a little impish but it struck me that, in some strange way, at this point Benedict sounds like Barth. For Barth there is nothing more fundamental than the incarnation. Why should we believe it? Because it is so! God did it. That is how he is! In much the same way something like this is foundational for Benedict. And for both Barth (in his lengthy notes in the *Dogmatics*) and Benedict in some of his extended reflections on the text (e.g. on Lazarus), creative imagination rather than strict historical reflection rules the day in the analysis of the text based on these basic dogmas. My guess is that, in the long run, it will be this type of reading that may prove more interesting and could well stand the test of time – would we dare say – eternity?

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