



A New Scriptural Springtime

The Biblical Theology of Pope Benedict XVI

BY SCOTT HAHN

We should hardly be surprised that Pope Benedict XVI has made biblical renewal a key theme during the first year of his pontificate.

I've been reading and studying his writings since before I became Catholic—ever since I discovered his book *Introduction to Christianity* more than 20 years ago. What we hear today from the chair of St. Peter are notes Benedict has been sounding throughout his career.

In the year since his elevation, I've found myself rereading and meditating intensely upon his collected writings. And I'm willing to venture a prediction: that history will remember this as a time in which the Church was led by one of the world's great biblical theologians.

Benedict knows that terrible truth, first articulated by St. Jerome: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ." Indeed, he's quoted Jerome several times since taking office—almost as if Jerome had been prophesying about something that's come to pass in our own day.¹

That explains, to my mind at least, why Benedict took the unprecedented step of talking at length about "scientific" biblical interpretation during his homily for the Mass in which he was installed as the Bishop of Rome.²

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Ignorance of Scripture, Ignorance of Christ

Why does biblical interpretation matter so much to the Pope?

Because we can't know Christ unless we know how to hear (and read) the Scriptures correctly. And if we don't know Christ, we're lost, without a Savior.

"The crisis of faith in Christ in recent times began with a modified way of reading sacred Scripture—seemingly the sole scientific way," he writes in *On the Way to Jesus Christ*.³

The "scientific" way that he's referring to is the so-called historical-critical method, which has been the dominant model in universities, seminaries, and pulpits for nearly a century.

There is a kind of "suspicion" built into the method—that we can't trust the plain sense of Scripture, that we

have to get behind the text to discover its original meaning, which supposedly has been plastered over with agenda-driven additions by Church leaders aimed at propping up the Church's dogmas, moral teachings, and liturgical rituals.

Benedict believes such research can be invaluable in helping us understand how biblical texts came to be written and what these texts might have meant to their original audience.

The problem is that, especially in universities and, unfortunately in not a few seminaries and parishes, historical-critical findings are often taken to be the final word on what the Bible means.

What has happened is that a method—which should be but one means by which faithful scholars and others seek to understand God's Word—has become an end in itself. And an exclusive end at that. Indeed, the historical-critical mindset is so dominant, in the academy especially, that it brooks no alternative viewpoints or interpretations.

Criticism of Criticism

For Benedict, the historical and critical methods are only useful to the extent that they are subordinated to and harnessed by the living faith of the Church.

Throughout his career—most famously in his 1988 Erasmus Lecture, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis”⁴—Benedict has urged a “criticism of criticism.”

By this he means that historical critics should examine their prior philosophical assumptions, many of which, as Benedict sees it, are affected or infected by post-Christian or anti-Christian ways of thinking.

The method’s fundamental weakness, as he sees it, is in severing the bond that unites the Bible and the Church.⁵

In studying biblical texts in isolation, with no reference to the way these texts have been and are still used in the Church’s liturgy, preaching, and practice, this approach makes the Bible a dead letter—like an artifact from a long extinct culture.

Benedict also notes a strong agnostic streak in the method that he traces to the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, who said it was impossible for human reason to know the truth and reality of “things in themselves,” especially God.

Like Kant, historical critics begin with the presumption that we can’t know anything but the purely human element in Scripture. Because of this, they are compelled to bracket off as pious exaggerations or legends every claim made in the texts about miracles, or about God’s work in the world and in history.

This puts historical critics in the position of having to explain away rather than to explain the plain sense of the texts. To take but one example: When the Gospels say that Jesus multiplied loaves and fishes to feed the multitudes, the historical-critic must find some “unsupernatural” way to account for the scene. Benedict, on the other hand, would have us seek to understand what the Gospel writer believed and how he wished to express that belief.

Again these concerns aren’t merely an academic quibble or a turf battle between the pontiff and biblical scholars.

What’s at stake is the salvation of souls. Because, as Benedict points out,



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Pope Benedict XVI carries the Book of the Gospels during a liturgy at the Vatican.

the picture of Jesus that emerges from historical-critical research is hardly more than that of a mere man.

Most disturbingly, Benedict believes that this image of Jesus as a milquetoast preacher of tolerance and benevolence “has made major inroads into the congregations of Christian believers in all the churches.”

Benedict’s New Synthesis

Benedict has articulated a masterful retrieval and updating of the Church’s ancient way of reading Scripture, one that synthesizes the best of the old with the best of modern biblical scholarship.

He starts with a simple historical fact: There is an original, essential, and indivisible unity that binds together the Bible and the Church, the Old and New Testaments, the Gospel Word and the sacraments, a unity that is seen in its fullness in the liturgy.

The Bible, in fact, was a product of the Church, which at the same time it established the canon of Scripture also established the bishops, the successors of the apostles, as its

authentic interpreters according to the *regula fidei* (“rule of faith”).⁶

Practically speaking, this means that the Bible cannot be the Bible without the Church, just as the Church cannot be the Church without the Bible. Without the Bible, the Church is just another human organization. Without the Church, the Bible is simply a gathering of different books.

The Bible can’t be read apart from the tradition in which the Bible was composed and handed on.

And the heart of that tradition, as Benedict rightly sees, is the liturgy.

As he notices in his *Principles of Catholic Theology*, the early Church’s criteria for deciding which books to include in the Bible was liturgical: “A book was recognized as ‘canonical’ if it was sanctioned by the Church for use in public worship.”

From the start, Scripture was meant to be heard in the liturgy. He adds: “In the ancient Church, the reading of Scripture and the confession of faith were primarily liturgical acts of the whole assembly gathered around the risen Lord.”⁷

Benedict goes so far as to define the Church by its relationship to divine revelation. As he told a group of biblical scholars last summer, the Church is “a community that listens to and proclaims the Word of God.”⁸

All our theology, Benedict has written, is a response to God’s greatest gift—the divine Word that He has spoken to us in Jesus.

“Theology is pondering what God has said and thought before us,” he writes in *The Nature and Mission of Theology*.⁹

Following ancient Church writers like pseudo-Dionysius and, later, St. Thomas, Benedict sees the Bible as the original theology. Why? Because, as he writes in *Principles of Catholic Theology*, in Scripture we have “the discourse of God rendered in human words . . . it does not just speak of him but *is* his own speech.”¹⁰

The biblical writers are the original theologians in that through them, “the word that speaks itself, enters history.” It follows, for Benedict, that the Bible is the “model for all theology” and the “normative theologians” are the authors of Holy Scripture.

What does that mean for Pope Benedict? That Scripture—and the human authors of Scripture—should serve as the model for how we should “do” theology and for what our theology should be about.

The Hermeneutic of Faith

The biblical authors were men of faith who saw and believed the saving acts of God and were inspired to proclaim those saving words and deeds in their sacred texts.

And we who seek to ponder their words—to study them, and to proclaim them ourselves—must also be men and women of faith.

This is the crucial difference between Benedict’s new synthesis and the historical-critical method.

The work of interpreting the Bible doesn’t end after the historical and literary sources have been studied.

We must also seek to understand the events and words in individual biblical texts in light of “the inner unity and totality of the truth in the grand historical structure of the

faith,” he writes in *The Nature and Mission of Theology*.¹¹

This type of reading—which looks at Scripture from both a historical and literary perspective, but also in light of how Scripture functions in the liturgy and teaching of the Church—is what Benedict calls a “hermeneutic of faith.”¹²

As he writes in *Behold the Pierced One*, this hermeneutic, or “way of interpretation,” has great “explanatory power” because it reads Scripture as it was written: as a divine Word spoken in history to the Church, a Word whose meaning is intended for every age.

Again and again, Benedict urges us not to oppose faith and reason.

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Faith, he shows us, doesn’t exempt us from careful literary and historical analysis of the texts. Indeed, the faith empowers us to undertake this analysis with deeper insight and lends to our work a greater unity and coherence.

Salvation and History

Reading in light of the faith and the Church’s living tradition, Benedict reads the Bible—the Old and New Testaments—as a unified whole, a single book about Christ.

Read from this standpoint, the Bible tells a single story—a plan or “history of salvation,” as Benedict frequently calls it.

This history of salvation unfolds as a series of covenants that God makes throughout the pages of

Scripture—the covenant of creation, of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Israel, David, and, finally, the new covenant announced by Jesus during the last supper.

In *Many Religions, One Covenant*, he sees God’s covenant love and desire as “the central theme of Scripture” itself.¹³

The Embrace of Salvation

If everything in Scripture is ordered to the covenant, everything in the Church is ordered to proclaiming that new covenant and bringing its blessings to every man and woman. These blessings come to us in the sacramental liturgy of the Church, especially the Eucharist.

Since assuming the papacy, Benedict has repeatedly reminded us that the liturgy, especially the Mass, is the living environment in which the Bible is to be read.

And as he told more than one million young people in the final Mass of World Youth Day, in the liturgy, “the sacred power of the words” sweeps us into God’s saving embrace—into “the whole of salvation history.”¹⁴

In the liturgy, as Benedict sees it, the purposes of salvation history are realized—heaven and earth are filled with God’s glory, each one of us is swept into the communion of God’s eternal love.

Every celebration of the Eucharist is “a cosmic liturgy . . . an entry into the liturgy of heaven,” he writes in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*.¹⁵

I find in Benedict’s work a profound biblical theology. And as a biblical theologian myself, I find myself drawing great inspiration and encouragement from his example. I am inspired, too, by his personal and prayerful immersion in God’s Word.

Indeed, Benedict has urged all of us to the ancient practice of *lectio divina*, which he has described as reading Scripture prayerfully, “as an intimate dialogue” with God.

If this practice were to become widespread in the Church, he told a group of biblical ministers last fall, it would usher in a “new spiritual springtime” in the Church.¹⁶

I think we can safely say that, in the pontificate of Benedict XVI, biblical theologian, this new springtime is now beginning.

¹ Address to the participants in the international congress organized to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, at Castel Gandolfo (September 16, 2005).

² Eucharistic Celebration and Installation in the Chair of the Bishop of Rome (May 7, 2005).

³ Ignatius Press, 2005, p. 9.

⁴ Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989.

⁵ *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, p. 62.

⁶ Ecumenical meeting at the Archbishopric of Cologne (August 19, 2005).

⁷ Ignatius Press 1995, pp. 148–150.

⁸ Address to the participants in the international congress organized to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, at Castel Gandolfo (September 16, 2005).

⁹ Ignatius Press, 1995, p. 104.

¹⁰ Ignatius Press, 1987, pp. 321–322.

¹¹ Ignatius Press, 1995, pp. 96–97.

¹² Ignatius Press, 1986, pp. 44–45.

¹³ Ignatius Press, 1999, p. 48.

¹⁴ Homily Mass at Marienfeld area (August 21, 2005).

¹⁵ Ignatius Press, 2000, p. 70.

¹⁶ Address to the participants in the international congress organized to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, at Castel Gandolfo (September 16, 2005).



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