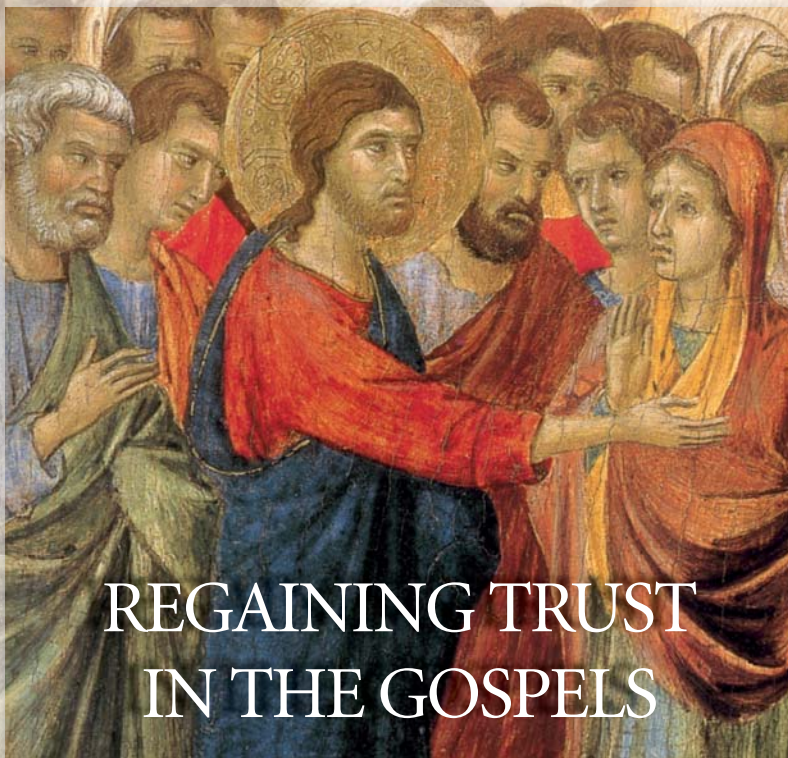


IGNACIO CARBAJOSA



REGAINING TRUST IN THE GOSPELS

MADRID, MARCH 30, 2011

PRESENTATION OF THE BOOK BY
JOSEPH RATZINGER
BENEDICT XVI

JESUS OF NAZARETH

From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection



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Translated from Italian by Sheila Beatty

Quotes are drawn from the two volumes:

J. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, translated from the German by Adrian J. Walker, Doubleday, New York, 2007.

J. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2011.

They are indicated in the text as Vol. I and Vol. II, with the page number.

This text is meant as a help in reading the book by J. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, Jesus of Nazareth, first of all, in understanding its historical importance, because the Pope's book represents a great contribution to overcoming the divide between faith and reason that for over two centuries has constituted one of the greatest challenges to our faith. At the end of the 18th century, Enlightenment thinkers began to demand to truly know the historical Jesus, that is, the "true" Jesus. This claim was born of a prejudice about what the Church had transmitted up to then, according to which the Jesus confessed by the faith was not the object of historical knowledge. According to certain authors, the Gospels transmitted an image of Jesus born of faith in His divinity and shaped by devotion, something that hindered knowledge of the true Jesus.

With this book, the Pope deals with the divide between faith and knowledge hidden in the very heart of the faith: the person of Jesus. Descending into the arena of text interpretation, and in dialogue with the great exegetes, he shows the reasonableness of the image of Jesus transmitted by the Gospels, affirming that faith, which is at the origin of the writing of the New Testament, is true knowledge of Jesus. Better still, faith is the correct precondition for understanding what we find written in the sacred text. Thus we can recover our faith in the canonical Gospels: in them we find the unmistakable features of that Presence that is at work among us, today.

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JESUS OF NAZARETH: FROM THE ENTRANCE INTO JERUSALEM TO THE RESURRECTION

I. A HISTORICAL PARABOLA

This book could be seen, in a certain sense, as a work located at the end of a long and singular historical parabola that goes from the critical *Life of Jesus* by the Protestant Reimarus to *Jesus of Nazareth* by J. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, covering over two centuries of exegetic research on Jesus, which moved step by step with the history of ideas and has exercised an evident influence on the Christian people's image of the Gospels.

In effect, in 1774 G.E. Lessing published the posthumous work of H.S. Reimarus, which can be considered the first critical proposal of a life of Jesus. Reimarus was a theist, that is, a person who believes in God but not in revelation, miracles, or supernatural intervention. His work represents an attack on the historicity of the biblical stories (both in the Old Testament, as in the crossing of the Red Sea, and in the New Testament, as in the stories of the Resurrection). From the rationalistic point of view, he brought to light their contradictions and historical implausibility. He sought to destroy traditional Christianity based on biblical revelation and miracles, and to substitute it with the natural or rational religion professed by the intellectuals of the Enlightenment and the "Age of Reason."

Reimarus affirms, for example, that the disciples themselves stole Jesus' body because they did not want to go back to work or be a laughing stock of the people. So they invented a story, and to corroborate their story they padded it with scriptures from the Old Testament and presented Jesus as a self-proclaimed suffering Messiah. To strengthen these theories, they spoke of the imminent end and of the evil that would strike those who did not believe.

Since then, and up to the end of the 19th century, there was a proliferation of *Lives of Jesus*, by writers such as Paulus, de Wette, Baur, Strauss, and Wrede, and all began, and sometimes concluded, with the radical separation of the Jesus who really existed and the one proclaimed by the Gospels, a creation of the Church. For almost a century, this research developed exclusively in the Protestant sphere. And yet the rationalism reigning in these studies also became seductive in the Catholic field. In 1863, Renan, who had been a Catholic seminarian, published his *Life of Jesus* in France, and it became an enormous success. In his preface to the work, he stated,

“Day and night, if I might so speak, I have reflected on these questions, questions which ought to be agitated without any other prejudices than those which constitute the essence of reason itself.”¹ Unfortunately, this declaration of intent started from a conception of reason that was profoundly rationalistic, the product of the times. This passage on the question of the miracles is a clear example of his assumptions:

“The miracles related to the Gospels have had no reality and ...the Gospels are not books written under the inspiration of Divinity. Those two negations are not with us the result of exegesis; they are anterior to exegesis. They are the outcome of an experience which has not been denied. Miracles are things which never happen; only credulous people believe they have seen them; you cannot cite a single one which has taken place in the presence of witnesses capable of testing it; no special intervention of the Divinity, whether in the composition of a book, or in any event whatsoever, has been proven. For this reason alone, when a person admits the supernatural, such a one is without the province of science; he accepts an explanation which is non-scientific, an explanation which is set aside by the astronomer, the physician, the chemist, the geologist, the physiologist, one which ought also to be passed over by the historian. We reject the supernatural for the same reason that we reject the existence of centaurs and hippogriffs; and this reason is, that nobody has ever seen them. It is not because it has been previously demonstrated to me that the evangelists do not merit absolute credence that I reject the miracles which they recount. It is because they do recount miracles that I say, “The Gospels are legends; they may contain history, but, certainly, all that they set forth is not historical.”²

The case of Renan would not be the only polemic episode in the Catholic field. At the beginning of the 20th century, Alfred Loisy, who previously had been the Catholic paladin who opposed the attacks of A. von Harnack against the historical foundation of Christianity, ended up himself denying the historicity of the stories of the Passion and the Resurrection, and Jesus’ intention to found the Church.

The conclusion of this first phase of research on the life of Jesus was constituted by the work of Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical*

¹ E. Renan, “Life of Jesus,” in *The History of the Origins of Christianity* (Volume 1), Mathieson and Company, London, 1890, p. xiv. Available online at Cornell University Historical Monographs Collection: Cornell University Library Digital Collections.

² *Ibid*, pp. xi-xii.

Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede, published at the dawn of the 20th century, which gathers almost a century and a half of studies. His conclusions draw a veil of skepticism over the possibility of knowing the historical Jesus through critical research, and at the same time reveal with great mastery the assumptions that guided the authors of numerous *Lives of Jesus*:

“The historical investigation of the life of Jesus did not take its rise from a purely historical interest; it turned to the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma.”³

There appeared as many models of Jesus as were His biographers, who did nothing other than project on the life of Jesus their personal categories: “Thus each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus; that was, indeed, the only way in which it could make Him live. But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character.”⁴

It is curious that the skepticism in the Protestant sphere during the first decades of the 20th century about the possibility of reaching the historical Jesus coincided with a proliferation of *Lives of Jesus* in the Catholic sphere, constructed on the basis of trust in the testimony of the Gospels.

Ratzinger himself recalls this in the introduction to the first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*, which he meant as an introduction to the entire work:

“When I was growing up—in the 1930s and 1940s—there was a series of inspiring books about Jesus: Karl Adam, Romano Guardini, Franz Michel Willam, Giovanni Papini, and Henri Daniel-Rops were just some of the authors one could name. All of these books based their portrayal of Jesus Christ on the Gospels. They presented Him as a man living on earth who, full human though He was, at the same time brought God to men, the God with whom as Son He was one. Through the man Jesus, then, God was made visible, and hence our eyes were able to behold the perfect man” (Vol. I, p. xi).

But the skepticism reigning in the Protestant field concerning the historical figure of Jesus very soon penetrated the Catholic Church. And it did so through the powerful influence that the Protestant exegete R. Bultmann exercised on biblical research of every tendency. Bultmann represented the

³ A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress From Reimarus to Wrede* (German, 1906). English edition translated by William Montgomery, A. & C. Black, London, 1910–1911. Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2001 (ISBN 0800632885), p. 4.

⁴ Ibid.

most mature fruit of the skepticism after the work of Schweitzer, and went so far as to legitimize the radical division between the historical Jesus and the Christ of the faith. According to Bultmann, the first is unattainable, and thus does not interest us. He affirms solely the second, fruit of the process of demythification of the Gospels. From this perspective, freeing the evangelical stories from their mythic tinseling, we reach the heart of the proposal of the Christian faith. Bultmann asserts that the word is what has value, the first *kerygma* [preaching] of the Church, and in order to transmit this word, stories are created; facts. Believing the form of these stories, as they have come down to us, would be a sin of gullibility. Precisely for this reason, Bultmann does not believe he does any harm with his historical radicalism, in fact: "I have never been concerned about my critical radicalism.... Very calmly I let the fire burn, because I see that what is consumed is only the infantile portraits of the theology of the Life of Jesus" (Quoted in: R. Morgan—J. Barton *Biblical Interpretation*, Oxford University Press; Oxford 1988, 107).

However, several of Bultmann's disciples were not a little worried about their master's radicalism, and, above all, about the absence of a historical foundation upon which to base faith in Jesus. Thus was born the *New Quest*, or second search for the historical Jesus, the most eminent representative of which is Käsemann. This movement, which sought to recover trust in Jesus starting from historical research, would be short-lived and of little influence, perhaps because the exegetical, theological, and ecclesiastical agenda of the 1960s and 1970s was shifting toward other questions.

It followed that both in the Protestant field and in the Catholic one, the separation between the historical Jesus and the Christ of the faith consolidated into something like a dogma, above all in the practical exercise of exegesis of the Gospels, and, consequently, in the theology based on them. In short, the Gospels reflect the faith of the Church, a post-paschal faith in the risen Jesus. But the "pre-paschal" Jesus, who did not pass through the faith of the witnesses, was different.

2. A GREAT CHALLENGE TO THE INTELLECTUS FIDEI

Ratzinger, in the introduction to the entire work of *Jesus of Nazareth*, describes very well the consequences that this position causes for the Christian people:

"All these attempts [he is referring to the reconstructions of the historical Jesus done by scientific research beginning in the 1950s] have pro-

duced 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. 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” (Vol. I, p. xii).

In fact, as Ratzinger affirms in the same introduction, “what can faith in Jesus as the Christ possibly mean, in Jesus as the Son of the living God, if the man Jesus was so completely different from the picture that the Evangelists painted of Him and that the Church, on the evidence of the Gospels, takes as the basis of her preaching?” (Vol. I, p. xi)

It was this very grave problem, posed by the *intellectus fidei*, that induced the theologian Ratzinger to undertake the work of which we are speaking. He himself considered this an urgent task, as is evident in the fact that such a project did not sleep the sleep of the just after Ratzinger’s election to the Chair of Peter.

At this point, we must ask ourselves what newness this work holds in the sphere of modern exegesis, given that a pope decided to go down into the “arena” of scientific discussion. In other words, in what sense can we affirm that this work is positioned at the end of a historical parabola that goes from distrust in the Gospels to trust in them?

This question becomes in a certain sense more pressing if we keep in mind that in the past 15 or 20 years both Catholic and Protestant exegesis has been involved in what is known as the *Third Quest* for the historical Jesus, with great bibliographic production. Is not this new current enough to restore trust in the testimony about Jesus transmitted to us by the Gospels? Unfortunately, the *Third Quest*, even though it expresses very different points of view and levels of seriousness, is not immune to a final doubt about that testimony. The most serious examples of this production introduce new historical knowledge on the context of Jesus’ life, which contribute to making His figure emerge with greater vivacity and depth. But He often continues to be a nebulous figure who comes from the past, with few “fresh” features. Ratzinger mentions this current in the introduction to this second volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*, when he says:

“The quest for the ‘historical Jesus,’ as conducted in mainstream critical exegesis in accordance with its hermeneutical presuppositions, lacks sufficient content to exert any significant historical impact. It is focused

too much on the past for it to make possible a personal relationship with Jesus” (Vol. II, p. xvi).

Thus the question is whether we can reasonably give credit to the image of Jesus transmitted to us by the Gospels, canonical and inspired books. If this were not possible, one should ask whether it makes sense to try to recover, through historical research, the features of a figure who would inevitably belong to the past.

In answering the question about the newness of the book we are dealing with (which is one and the same with the question of why this project did not stay in the drawer of the theologian Ratzinger, elected Pope), we must present the two axes at the basis of its originality. The first is the methodological foundation, and the second is the practical exercise of exegesis, as a paradigmatic illustration of that foundation. Let us proceed in this order.

3. THE METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

Concern for the methodological aspect of exegesis is not new in J. Ratzinger. The conference held by the then-Cardinal in New York in 1988, and later published as *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today*,⁵ very soon became one of the milestones of the hermeneutic debate that has had enormous growth since then, a debate in which Ratzinger himself has intervened on other occasions, not only as Cardinal, but also as Pope.

In that conference, the Cardinal illustrated the philosophical premises that set into motion a great part of the dominant exegesis, casting doubt on its claim to be a scientific discipline with results, in terms of exactness, comparable to those of the scientific world. In addition, he underlined another question that, with time, would become central to any debate: How can one unite in a balanced way the two methodological principles of exegesis presented by the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* in Number 12—an exegesis that is at the same time historical and theological? Ratzinger himself holds that the Council presents adequately the two dimensions to be affirmed, but does not clarify how they can integrate into one single exegesis:

“While this situation is not the fault of the Second Vatican Council, the Council was also unable to prevent it. The Constitution on Divine

⁵ J. Ratzinger, *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard Neuhaus, Eerdmans Publ. Co., Grand Rapids, 1989 (ISBN 13978 0802802095).

Revelation attempted to hold the two sides of interpretation—historical ‘explanation’ and holistic ‘understanding’ Personally I am convinced that a careful reading of the *whole* text of *Dei Verbum* can identify the essential elements needed for a synthesis between historical method and theological ‘hermeneutics,’ but the coherence between them does not simply lie ready to hand.”⁶

This is the point upon which Pope Ratzinger has been most incisive in recent years, in an exegetical panorama more open to the methodological debate (in part thanks to his own contributions). In his talk in the Hall, during the XII General Congregation of the Synod of Bishops, dedicated to “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church,” Benedict XVI reminded listeners of “the necessity of keeping in mind within exegesis the two methodological levels mentioned in *Dei Verbum*, No. 12, where it speaks of the need to develop not only a historical but also a theological exegesis.”⁷ This observation was taken up, in the same terms, in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (No. 34), the most important magisterial document on the Bible after the Constitution *Dei Verbum*.

In the second volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*, he insists anew on the dual methodological dimension of exegesis:

“I also note with gratitude that discussion of the methodology and hermeneutics of exegesis, and of exegesis as a historical and theological discipline, is becoming more lively despite a certain resistance to some recent developments”⁸ (Vol. II, p. xiv).

This methodological insistence is not gratuitous. If exegesis has taken great strides forward as a historical discipline, the same cannot be said of it as a theological discipline, or, in other words, as help for the total comprehension of the Word of God. In the introduction to the second volume of the book, he is particularly incisive:

“If scholarly exegesis is not to exhaust itself in constantly new hypotheses, becoming theologically irrelevant, it must take a methodological step forward and see itself once again as a theological discipline, without abandoning its historical character. It must learn that the positivistic hermeneutic on which it has been based does not constitute the only

⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷ Benedict XVI, *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI during the 14th General Congregation of the Synod of Bishops*, Synod Hall, October 14, 2008.

⁸ Among more recent studies that deal with the question of how to articulate an exegesis that is at once historical and theological, see also I. Carajosa, “De la fe nace la exégesis. La interpretación de la Escritura a la luz de la historia de la investigación sobre el Antiguo Testamento,” Estella, 2011.

valid and definitively evolved rational approach; rather, it constitutes a specific and historically conditioned form of rationality that is both open to correction and completion and in need of it. It must recognize that a properly developed faith-hermeneutic is appropriate to the text and can be combined with a historical hermeneutic, aware of its limits, so as to form a methodological whole” (Vol. I, pp. xv-xvi).

In this context, his observation about reason is particularly evident. The dominant exegesis does not suffer from lack of instruments or expertise in their use, but it does suffer from the problem of the inadequate use of reason that, evidently, blocks an adequate comprehension of the Scriptures. This is what the Pope defined in his famous Ravensburg speech, “the modern self-limitation of reason,” because of which one affirms that “only positivistic reason and the forms of philosophy based on it are universally valid,” and thus the divine remains excluded “from the universality of reason.”⁹ Further ahead we will see some examples of this “self-limitation” drawn from the book we are dealing with.

On this point, as well, Pope Ratzinger finds himself at the end of another historical parabola, the one modern reason has traveled in the last three centuries in the West. It is no coincidence that both historical parabolas, that of reason and that of exegesis, walk in pace: understanding this close bond is what has enabled Ratzinger to have a lucid gaze on the problem of exegesis. In fact, the Enlightenment started out with an exaltation of autonomous reason that, with time, relegated belief and the religious fact to the sphere of irrationality or, at least, the a-rational. Faith and reason had no relationship. In this sense, the Catholic Church and her Magisterium appeared as an impediment to knowledge, which it seemed right to shake off. The enthroning of the Goddess Reason in Notre Dame of Paris in 1793 clearly illustrates this program.

Paradoxically, the historical itinerary of the “modern self-limitation of reason” led to the “weak thought” that in post-modernity has in practice abandoned reason. In public debate, there is a great deal of talk about freedom and more rights, but few hold to determinate reasons or to reason in general. It is paradoxical that at the beginning of the 21st century, precisely a pope, the pope who dialogues with Habermas, calls the West,

⁹ Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflection,” Lecture of the Holy Father at the Meeting with the Representatives of Science, Aula Magna at the University of Regensburg, September 12, 2006.

telling it to “have the courage” to recover reason, courage in “broadening our concept of reason and its application.”¹⁰

The object of exegesis, the Scriptures, is the witness of a religious phenomenon that has a particular historical expressiveness. Only a reason capable of drawing close to the object, adopting this dual dimension, will be capable of truly understanding it. This is the reason for Ratzinger’s insistence on the fact that exegesis must recognize itself as a theological discipline without renouncing its historical character. Only in this way can what Benedict XVI calls a “methodological totality” be reached. Only in this way is it possible to inhabit that “unknown land” or “unknown region” (*weiße Fleck*) that, according to Norbert Lohfink, exists in DV 12, one in which critical methodology and theological hermeneutics live together.¹¹

Today, with increasing frequency, exegetes acknowledge the need to arrive at theology. In other terms, it is acknowledged with greater simplicity that exegesis must be at once historical and theological. But reaching a harmonious articulation of the two dimensions in one biblical interpretation is, without a doubt, the central problem of contemporary exegesis. This is the task that the Pope sets for himself in the present book.

4. THE PRACTICAL EXERCISE OF EXEGESIS

Undoubtedly, we need a theological foundation that shows the articulated unity of exegesis that is both critical and theological. But it is equally evident that the exercise of an exegesis that, in practice, shows the modalities by which both dimensions converge fruitfully in the study of the same object, the Scriptures, testimony of the Revelation, is decisive for persuading us of the goodness of this unitary approach.

This is precisely what Ratzinger/Benedict XVI sought to do in the present book, as he confesses in the introduction to this second part:

“Naturally, this combination of two quite different types of hermeneutic is an art that needs to be constantly remastered. But it can be achieved. ...I would not presume to claim that this combination of the two hermeneutics is already fully accomplished in my book. But I hope to have taken a significant step in that direction.” (Vol. II, p. xv)

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ N. Lohfink, “Der weiße Fleck, in *Dei Verbum*, Artikel 12,” *Trierer theologische Zeitschrift*, No. 101 (1992), pp. 20-35.

It was not possible to complete an undertaking of this caliber without running the risk of descending into the “arena” of the interpretation of texts, entering into controversial problems and questions, a risk that Ratzinger/Benedict XVI took, conscious of the stakes. If, instead of this project, the Pope had conceived of a work of “spirituality,” a *Life of Jesus* that, taking as its point of departure the Gospels, recreated the interior world of the Pope, without other claims, we would find ourselves in front of the *n*th recreation of the figure of Jesus, starting from the faith, destined to fill the void left by the cold exegetical studies of the Gospels. In this way, though, the dualism between scientific- and theological-believing exegesis would have been left intact.

Descending into the exegetical arena means battling with the best swordsmen of biblical interpretation. Thus it is not surprising that the pages of this book should host the most prestigious or most controversial figures of New Testament science of the past century: Barret, Bultmann, Dodd, Conzelmann, Gnilka, Grelot, Harnack, Hengel, Jeremias, Meier, Pesch, Schnackenburg, Vanhoye, Wilckens, and many others. The Pope is well aware of the risk he is running, and for this reason makes it very clear that we do not find ourselves in front of a magisterial document. Any exegesis is limited and, for this reason, subject to correction. Identifying in the present book questions dealt with insufficiently or noting the lack of data not taken into consideration should not scandalize us. It is part of the nature of a book like this.

But certainly the risk was well worth it. In the discussion of concrete exegetical questions, Ratzinger has demonstrated, paradigmatically, an exegesis that is at once critical and theological, unveiling in many occasions the philosophical or cultural assumptions that limit modern reason applied to the Scriptures. We’ll give a few examples.

One of the most debated questions of New Testament exegesis is everything concerning the Last Supper: the date, Jesus’ intentions, His nature, the words of the institution of the Eucharist, etc. The Pope deals with all these problems through a rigorous exercise of reason, open to embracing all the factors in play. All, including that of the liturgical tradition, which has an undeniable historical weight. And, in concrete, he illustrates the reasonableness and historical plausibility of the story, as it has reached us, in its multiple testimonies. But, with great intelligence, Ratzinger shows that in this discussion we are not dealing solely with facts and reasons. Modern cultural assumptions enter into play, interfering with right knowledge.

In effect, “much of present-day exegesis disputes the claim that the words of institution go back to Jesus Himself. ...The principal argument against the historical authenticity of the words and actions of the Last Supper may be summarized as follows: there is an insoluble contradiction between Jesus’ message about the kingdom of God and and the notion of His vicarious expiatory death” (Vol 2, pp. 117-118). In other words, modern exegesis identifies two different conceptual worlds that must belong to two strata of tradition that are different and subsequent. Ratzinger asks whether there really are two different conceptual worlds. To his mind, the ultimate reason many theologians and exegetes do not admit the words of the institution as original, “... is not on the basis of historical evidence: as we have seen, the eucharistic texts belong to the earliest strand of tradition. From the point of view of historical evidence, nothing could be more authentic than this Last Supper tradition. But the idea of expiation is incomprehensible to the modern mind. Jesus, with His proclamation of the kingdom of God, must surely be diametrically opposed to such a notion. At issue here is our image of God and our image of man. To this extent, the whole discussion only *appears* to be concerned with history” (Vol. II, p. 119). “The mystery of atonement is not to be sacrificed on the altar of overweening rationalism” (Vol. II, p. 240).

Acknowledging this fact, according to Ratzinger, “will require of us a readiness not only to form a ‘critical’ assessment of the New Testament, but also to learn from it and to let ourselves be led by it: not to dismantle the texts according to our preconceived ideas, but to let our own ideas be purified and deepened by His word” (Vol. II, p. 120).

On the contrary, “exegetical hypotheses ...all too often make exaggerated claims to certainty, claims that are already undermined by the existence of diametrically opposed positions put forward with an equal claim to scientific certainty” (Vol. II, p. 105).

In this way, from within the exegetical discussion, Ratzinger illustrates a principle that he himself had formulated many years before: “The debate about modern exegesis is not at its core a debate among historians, but among philosophers.”¹²

¹² J. Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict: On the Foundations and Itinerary of Exegesis Today,” in *Opening Up the Scriptures: Joseph Ratzinger and the Foundations of Biblical Interpretation*. Edited by Jose Granados, Carlos Granados, and Luis Sanchez-Navarro, Wm. B. Berdsman Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2008, Chapter III, par. 2, p. 19.

Another paradigmatic controversy centers on the Resurrection of Jesus, with the foundation of our faith at stake. The interpreter of Scripture is not alien to the question that modern people, children of a certain mentality, ask of the stories about the empty tomb and the appearances: “But could it really be true? Can we—as men of the modern world—put our faith in such testimony? ‘Enlightened’ thinking would say no” (Vol. II, p. 246). The “scientific image of the world” would seem opposed to the content of these stories.

This question, once again, is not merely a matter of the historical or literary data in our possession: what is at play is a certain exercise of reason, as open reason. Concretely, what is at stake is whether reason can admit the category of possibility that is connatural to it, that is, whether it can accept the possibility that the Mystery that made all things can reveal itself and do so at a point in history. The illuminist dogma that a historical event cannot be a necessary and universal truth weighs heavily on the interpretation of these texts. This is what Ratzinger says when he expounds the difficulties to be faced when one accepts the apostolic testimony about Jesus who, in rising from the dead, passes into a new dimension: “Rather we are told that there is a further dimension, beyond what was previously known. Does that contradict science? Can there really only ever be what there has always been? Can there not be something unexpected, something unimaginable, something new? If there really is a God, is He not able to create a new dimension of human existence, a new dimension of reality altogether?” (Vol. II, p. 247)

5. THE FINAL PHASE OF THE HISTORICAL PARABOLA

The global result of this work, setting aside the scholastic or arguable questions, is more than satisfying, above all because it hits the mark, showing an exegesis in action, at once critical and theological, that reaches the objective, the Jesus testified to by the Gospels, presented reasonably and plausibly as the “historical” Jesus. In the introduction to the two parts of the book, Ratzinger explained this intention:

“I wanted to try to portray the Jesus of the Gospels as the real, ‘historical’ Jesus in the strict sense of the word. I am convinced, and I hope the reader will be, too, that this figure is much more logical and, historically speaking, much more intelligible than the reconstructions we

have been presented with in the last decades. I believe that this Jesus—the Jesus of the Gospels—is a historically plausible and convincing figure” (Vol. I, p. xx).¹³

Therefore, we can well understand the curious historical parabola traveled by exegesis in the last two and a half centuries: from Reimarus, who, starting from reason and in its name rejecting dogma, moved in search of the historical Jesus on the margins of the Gospels, to arrive at the *Jesus of Nazareth* of a theologian pope who, urging an appropriate use of reason, reconfirms the historical truth and the reasonableness of the Jesus of the Gospels.

Ratzinger has thus demonstrated, in act, that the most appropriate context for the interpretation of the Gospels is precisely the place they were born: the life of faith, the Church. It is not useless, this contemporaneity with the narration, which the Holy Spirit guarantees us within ecclesiastical experience, and that enables us to understand and be attuned to the event of Christ. The Pope has rendered a great service to the faith, showing in his results the truth of this hermeneutic principle. In other words, he has become an example of what he himself asks of Christians so that their contribution may be decisive in today’s world: “that knowledge of faith becomes knowledge of reality.”¹⁴

¹³ “In the combination of the two hermeneutics of which I spoke earlier, I have attempted to develop a way of observing and listening to the Jesus of the Gospels that can indeed lead to personal encounter and that, through collective listening with Jesus’ disciples across the ages, can indeed attain sure knowledge of the real historical figure of Jesus” (Vol. II, pp. xvi-xvii).

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the 24th Plenary Session of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, Consistory Hall, May 21, 2010: “We must recover and reinvigorate authentic political wisdom; be demanding in what concerns our own sphere of competency; make discerning use of the research of the human sciences; face reality in all its aspects, going beyond any kind of ideological reductionism or utopian dream; show we are open to true dialogue and collaboration, bearing in mind that politics is also a complex art of equilibrium between ideals and interests, but never forgetting that the contribution of Christians can be effective only if knowledge of faith becomes knowledge of reality, the key to judgement and transformation.”

