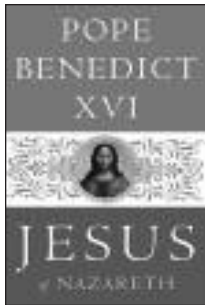


# AN EMBARRASSING MISREPRESENTATION



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*Jesus of Nazareth*, by Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI (New York: Doubleday, 2006, ISBN 13: 978-0-38-552341-7) 374 pp. Cloth \$24.95.

In universities, future clerics, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, receive an introduction to historical criticism of the Bible. They learn the two languages in which it was composed—Hebrew and Greek—in order to read the original texts. In seminars and lectures dedicated to the study of these texts, they learn that the account of Israel's history found in the Old Testament is not to be confused with actual events, nor is the early history of Christianity reliably presented in the New Testament.

Indeed, one of the fundamental facts they discover is that very little is known with historical certainty about persons in the Bible. Even Paul, to whom we can at least ascribe seven authentic letters, remains something of an enigma. First of all, modern critical scholarship has concluded that Luke's portrait of the apostle in the Book of Acts is highly unreliable. Furthermore, not only does Paul tell us relatively little about himself, but also his self-involvement in his missionary enterprise calls into question his objectivity and thus his credibility. Most important of all, he cannot serve as a witness to the historical Jesus of Nazareth—a man whom he never met and whose life and teaching he largely ignored in his own preaching. And this skepticism regarding the reports from

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holy scripture has arisen in conjunction with an impressive body of research and now rests on a wide and interdenominational consensus. It begins with the fact that the identities of the four Evangelists are unknown and the recognition that they did not belong to the first generation of early Christians. "Mark" compiled elements of oral tradition to create the earliest canonical Gospel. Some fifteen or twenty years later, the writers identified as "Matthew" and "Luke" individually reworked his account, adding to it a large volume of diverse written and oral reports based on the recollections of eyewitnesses of the first generation. Luke willingly affirms this in his introductory comments when he both attests to numerous previous accounts and promises that he will set a sometimes-erroneous record straight.

The Gospel of John is quite another matter. It is generally regarded to be a decade or two later than the other gospels, and, in many places it has demonstrably transmuted relatively straightforward narrative material into legend. Thus we may rule that the Fourth Gospel is of very limited value to those searching for the historical Jesus.

## HISTORY OR FAITH?

In his book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict XVI praises historical method in the highest terms and lays great stress on its necessity. The Christian faith is based on and undergirded by the Bible's essentially authentic reflection of actual historical events, and as such is to be strictly distinguished from ancient myth. And yet, in virtually the same breath, we are warned that, when it comes to the Scriptures, the

historical method has limits that must be recognized and respected.

Laws that apply to historical-critical work, Benedict insists, have restricted applicability in the case of the Bible, inasmuch as the text is divinely inspired and intended for the instruction of the Church. He proposes, for example, that faith alone can enable one to discern the profound harmony underlying the New Testament portraits of Jesus—admittedly artful compositions whose dissimilarities have been shown by historical criticism to amount to mutual contradiction. Nevertheless, this faith-based restriction on the work of historians is purportedly in consonance with historical reason, and in no way detracts from the originality of the individual documents of the Bible. This is, to say the least, a remarkable proposal.

The pope's book, which purports to be an examination of the historical Jesus, begins with the Gospel of John's oft-cited assertion of the common nature of the Father and the Son—a speculative and metaphoric proposition that, we are told, faithfully reflects the essence of Jesus's personhood. The uncritical nature of this line of argument and of this Gospel, recognized as the latest of the four by Benedict himself and long known as a "spiritual biography," clearly reveals his uncritical trust in the interconnected and complementary nature of the Gospels. It comes as no surprise to find that Benedict claims the variously depicted Jesus of the Gospel texts to be the genuine "historical Jesus."

His argument runs as follows: This person, when "correctly" observed and understood (i.e., in the light of certain arbitrary and unprovable presuppositions), is much more credible and historically comprehensible than the multifaceted figure reconstructed by historical researchers of the last decades. It follows, then, that not only is the Jesus of the Gospels the more historically meaningful and coherent character, but that only with the aid of such presuppositions can one explain the Gospel reports of his miraculous works and resurrection, as well as the numerous early proclamations of his divinity.

## THE REJECTION OF HISTORICAL REASONING

Benedict rejects the broad consensus of modern New Testament scholars that

the proclamation of Jesus's exalted nature was in large measure the creation of the earliest Christian communities. He considers it "much more logical" to conclude that Jesus's status as an incarnate deity must have been evident to his immediate followers, the more so since such a phenomenon could have been understood only in terms of a perception of divine mystery. Since Benedict is fully aware that, because of its empirical strictures, the historical method could never provide evidence that Jesus was the son of God, he proposes that those committed to it must learn to read the biblical texts with an inner openness to spiritual insights. Thereupon, higher truths will become apparent, and Jesus will be revealed as the figure of faith that he is.

Although the pope somewhat disingenuously classifies this work not as a treatise by a credentialed teacher but rather as the journal of a personal quest, the contents of the book constitute a thinly disguised exposition and defense of the Roman Catholic faith in historical garb. It seems hardly unfair to thus characterize a context in which he sets forth as presuppositions the inspired nature of the scriptures, their infallibility, and hence the divinity of Jesus.

In short, Benedict claims the historicity of the biblical accounts but, unable to make an historical case for his assertions, he offers a rationale that arises out of dogmatic propositions in order to defend the entirely nonhistorical datum of Jesus's divine nature.

The indelible impression this creates is that, once again, the door is being closed to constructive dialogue between Roman Catholic dogma and historical reasoning. To be fair, though, one should concede that the door remains open a crack. For even as the pope hamstring empirical analysis by insisting that Scripture reflects divine inspiration and that certain truths are revealed only to the eye of faith, he makes repeated use of purely historical arguments. Unfortunately, this seems to me to do little to improve the overall prospect for a rapprochement between historical analysis and dogmatic concerns. One can hardly commence an empirical search weighed down with the impedimenta of unverifiable postulates.

To the foregoing general indictment that Benedict has played fast and loose with the historical method he pretends to employ, let me append several specific demonstrations that this pope has gone astray by following exegetical paths that the modern world all but universally recognizes as dead ends.

First, in view of the three-decade span of composition dates and wide differences in social setting among the four Gospels—to say nothing of the complex issues of sources and textual dependencies—one simply cannot rely on the historicity of their character portrayals. This is especially true in the case of John's Gospel, which frequently exhibits clear reliance on secondary material. Furthermore, it is deceptive even to cite, let alone to stress, passages that attribute glaringly inauthentic sayings to Jesus, even if they accurately reflect the spirit of his teachings. Since one noteworthy group of respected scholars has deemed 82 percent of the utterances attributed to Jesus to be the creation of the Gospel writers, simple honesty should demand that an author who in the course of a serious discussion assigns words to Jesus ought to address the issue of their authenticity.

Second, the members of the early Christian communities, whose names are as unknown to us as those of the writers of the four Gospels, played an important role in originating large sections of these works. The fact of their creative activity—more reflective of inner conviction than formative events—helps us to understand the rapid spread of early Christianity, and suggests the existence of historical explanations for the many tensions and downright contradictions in the contents of these sometimes irreconcilable accounts.

Third, decades of careful research by hundreds of able and dedicated scholars has led to the conclusion that the traditional Jesus material found in the Gospels provides at best similarities that allow us glimpses of the historical Jesus on which to base an approximate understanding of his life and mission. We must repudiate equally Mark's thesis of deliberate concealment (4:12) and Benedict's vision of God's truth shining through the mystery of the cross. The cross, after all, was simply an instrument of execution, and that effulgence was what led Jesus to

its fatal embrace. In this context, Benedict's announcement of the profound significance of the similar images of Jesus is a profound hoax, for he has willfully ignored or dismissed the hundreds of volumes of scholarly attempts to compare sayings in order to understand them; instead, he falls back on an outdated belief in allegorical resonance.

Fourth, Jesus did not understand himself to be God. According to Mark 10:18, when someone addressed him as "good teacher," Jesus responded by insisting, "No one is good except God alone." Whether this reflects Jesus or Mark or both (scholarly opinion is divided), such a statement cannot be twisted by theological exegesis to support a claim for Jesus' divinity. Therefore, the pope does not deal with such passages, since they clearly contradict his fundamental thesis.

#### MEDITATIONS FOR LITURGICAL USE

Despite the author's protestations, this volume about Jesus is no historical book. Rather, it is a collection of meditations on the figure of Jesus meant for liturgical use and supplemented along the way by detours into New Testament scholarship. Unfortunately, some of these meditations border on kitsch: "Do I stand in reverence before the mystery of the burning bush, before his incomprehensible closeness, even to the point of his presence in the Eucharist, where he truly gives himself entirely into our hands?" (p. 145). "If one looks at history with a keen eye, one can see this river flowing through the ages from Golgotha, from Jesus crucified and risen. One can see that, wherever this river reaches, the earth is decontaminated and washed of its poison; fruit-bearing trees grow up; one can see that life, real life, flows from this spring of love that has given itself and continues to give itself" (pp. 247–248).

Were its author not the pope, this book would garner no other academic attention than to be cited as an embarrassing gaffe that would soon gather dust even on church bookshelves. But because it comes from the pen of the pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church, and casts reason squarely before the juggernaut of faith, the intellectual scandal it represents must be denounced—if only on behalf of those Roman Catholics whose native honesty compels them to engage in historical-critical exegesis. **f i**