

**Jesus of Nazareth**  
**A review of Pope Benedict XVI's Landmark Book**  
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Pope Benedict XVI began writing *Jesus of Nazareth* during his 2003 summer vacation. He produced the finished versions of chapters one through four during August of the following year, and then, after he was elected pope, he used his spare time to work on the other chapters. He published these first ten chapters before finishing the entire work because, he says, “*it struck me as the most urgent priority to present the figure and the message of Jesus in his public ministry, and so to help foster the growth of a living relationship with him*” (xxiv). The current work traces Jesus’ life from his Baptism in the Jordan to Peter’s confession and the Transfiguration. Benedict hopes to publish a second work that will include the Infancy Narratives and expound on the events of Jesus’ life after the Transfiguration.

In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict dismantles false edifices erected around the historical Jesus by poor biblical exegesis, enabling the faithful to find “*the face of the Lord*” (Ps 27:8) and “*to help foster the growth of a living relationship with him.*” (xxiv). Benedict’s main thesis is that we can only understand Jesus’ true personality – and his presence – in light of his relationship with God the Father. This thesis both presupposes and proposes the Christian belief in the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ. For this reason, he concentrates on the historicity of Jesus’ words and actions, and on the deeper meanings of Jesus’ words, miracles, and titles, especially using the divinity-revealing “I AM” statements from John’s gospel to emphasize his point.

Benedict clearly states in the Foreword that this work “is in no way an exercise of the magisterium,” ( xxiii), but rather a first installment of reflections of his own “*personal search ‘for the face of the Lord’ (Ps 27:8)*” (xxiii). Moving into the Preface, he immediately compares and contrasts Moses’ conversing with God “face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Ex 33:11) to Jesus’ prayerful intimacy with the Father based on his Sonship. From this, Benedict identifies the reason no one can teach Jesus’ teachings “with authority,” an authority Moses and the prophets could never claim in regard to their own teachings when he states that “*Jesus’ teaching is not the product of human learning, of whatever kind. It originates from immediate contact with the Father, from ‘face-to-face’ dialogue –from the vision of the one who rests close to the Father’s heart. It is the Son’s word. Without this inner grounding, his teaching would be pure presumption*” (7).

Later, in Chapter 8, Benedict re-visits this discussion through John’s Prologue, “*And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses: grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Fathers’ heart, who has made him known*” (Jn 1:16-18). In this context he shows Jesus to be the fulfillment of Moses prophecy, for “*The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren – him you shall heed*” (Duet 18:15). According to Benedict, “like me,” refers to another prophet who speaks to the Lord “face-to-face,” although that is not its only meaning.

These “face-to-face” passages, which can stand beautifully by themselves, also represent seasons in Benedict’s own faith journey. He describes the books of his youth in which the authors were faithful to the gospel accounts of Jesus, and concludes: “*Through the man Jesus, then, God was made visible, and hence our eyes were able to behold the perfect man*” (xi). This view, he says, changed with the advancement of the historical-critical method of biblical scholarship, which “*led to finer and finer distinctions between layers of tradition in the Gospels, beneath which the real object of faith – the figure [Gestalt] of Jesus – became increasingly obscured and blurred*” (xii). In addition, reconstructions often made matters worse.

Benedict first pulls back the many veils that poor exegesis has placed between the believer and Christ by explaining where they originated and why they exist, and then he properly uses the same tools of exegesis to point the believer toward the Lord. By addressing the historical-critical method of biblical scholarship early in the book, Benedict quickly removes the unnatural divide between the “historical \Jesus” and the “Christ of faith.” Throughout the book, he presents the historical-critical method’s indispensable place in biblical exegesis while both clarifying its limits and exposing its abuses. In general, he accomplishes this task in accordance with the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 1993 document, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, and in some places does it with a tongue-in-cheek humor that orthodox theologians, biblical students, and armchair-theologians will enjoy.

There is, however, one place where Benedict waters down the Commission’s text. In the Foreword, he introduces the role of “Canonical exegesis” and its relationship to the historical-critical method as a means of interpretation that “*carries it [the historical-critical interpretation] forward in an organic way toward becoming theology in the proper sense*” (pg xiv). He gives no other explanation which leaves the devotional reader at a loss. Mentioning that the birth of the “canonical” approach was a reaction to the historical-critical approach and its inability to successfully reach theologically sound conclusions when interpreting Scripture would supply the proper context for Benedict’s comment (Interp, pgs 52-53, Pauline Books and Media edition). This explanation would do justice to the

main chapters of the book, too, where he both points out and corrects examples of poor biblical exegesis that have resulted from the misuse of the historical-critical method. The difficulties in the canonical approach, especially the defining of the “canonical process,” are also left out (Interp., pg 54). This omission tends to position the canonical approach as a perfect solution and/or a counter-weight to the historical-critical method’s limitations. This positioning is oversimplified and misleading, however, it is not a big issue in the larger scope of the book. In practice, he uses both methods together well throughout the book.

Benedict bases his vision of Jesus on the gospels, and, in doing so, he follows his own directives in regard to biblical exegesis. He uses the historical-critical method to show that God entered into real history. On this historical ground, he tells us, that Christian faith finds its sure footing. He also employs the historical-critical method to reveal the meaning of certain words and circumstances found in the scriptures by presenting their historical context. In the same breath, he uses canonical exegesis to place these revelations in their proper location in the rest of the scriptures, thus revealing even more truth than either method would alone. The capstone Benedict uses to unify these truths into a cohesive whole is Jesus, himself. He also brings out the connection between faith and reason in this same context when he states “*This Christological hermeneutic . . . presupposes a prior act of faith. It cannot be the conclusion of a purely historical method. But this act of faith is based upon reason – historical reason – and so makes it possible to see the internal unity of Scripture*” (xix).

Benedict illustrates his own biblical exegesis directives when he writes about the “I AM” sayings in John’s gospel. In one of the passages that he presents, he leads to Jesus’ statement, “*You will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he*” (Jn 8:24). After first mentioning the dispute Jesus has with the Jews when he reveals himself as the source of living waters, and that he does so at the Feast of Tabernacles (Jn 7:37), Benedict points out that the people in the crowd became divided over whether or not Jesus is the Prophet who was to come.(Jn 7:40, 52). Benedict follows John’s narrative until it reaches its climax in the “I am” statement of John 8:24.

Then he positions this information in its Jewish context by taking the reader back to Moses and the burning bush in Exodus 3:14 where God reveals his name YHWH, “I am Who I Am,” or in essence, “I Am.” However, Benedict does not stop there. Taking his own advice, he brings the historical-critical and canonical methods together so that each supports the other in revealing a deeper dimension of truth than either method could by itself. He takes the history of the first Exodus and links it to the hopes of the Jews who wanted to escape from their captivity in Babylon. Then, he shows the reader the relationship between those situations and the prophetic revelation of Is 43:10. His exegesis brings these historical facts together to show that “I AM” was still present to the Israelites in Babylon and still solicitous for their good. What do these elements have to do with Jn. 8:24? Using the bow of canonical exegesis, he shoots these arrows of historical detail straight to Jesus, the full revelation of I AM who is still solicitous for the good of his people and ready to lead them in a new exodus from sin and death into a Land/Kingdom of abundant life and joy. Benedict also uses this technique to give his reader a more complete understanding of the religious beliefs and mindset of Jesus’ contemporaries, which was often incomplete. Now when Jesus says, “*You will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he*” in John 8:24, the reader has a contextual background that enables him to hear and understand Jesus more deeply.

Benedict begins his work chronologically, moving from the Baptism of Jesus in the first chapter, to his Temptations in the Desert in the second. In Chapter One, he quotes from all four gospels to establish Jesus’ place in history, relying most heavily on Luke’s historical notes to place King Herod, Caesar Augustus, Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Annas, and Caiaphas into the different time periods of Jesus’ life. He also explains Jesus’ words to John the Baptist, “*Let it be for now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness*” (Mt 3:15), and then explains why Jesus’ baptism that can only be “*seen in light of the Cross and Resurrection*” (17). Adding to the richness of this chapter is a brief explanation of the Baptism of Jesus in the iconographic tradition of the Eastern Church, and an explanation of why the words, “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (Jn 1:29) is particularly meaningful before the distribution of Communion in the Roman Liturgy. Interestingly, Benedict uses the biblical exegesis of Joachim Jeremias, a neo-Orthodox German Lutheran scholar, to reveal this significance. Before ending the chapter, Benedict rejects the idea put forward by liberal scholarship that Jesus’ Baptism was a kind of “vocational experience” (23) and that it was then “*that he became aware of his special relationship to God and his religious mission*” (24). This exegesis is further explained by Benedict before he compares it to a “Jesus novel” (24) because none of what the liberal theologians have claimed is in the scriptures.

In Chapter Two, Benedict not only explains the temptations of Jesus as one would expect, but applies their lessons to some of the signs of the times. For example, Benedict points to the negative outcomes of Marxism as a proof that bread does not satisfy men when it becomes secondary to God’s Word. Moving in closer to where we live he states that “*The aid offered by the West to developing countries . . . not only has left God out of the picture, but has driven men away from God . . . The issue is the primacy of God. The issue is acknowledging that he is a reality, that he is the reality without which nothing else can be good*” (33-34). He presents this exegesis in light of Jesus’ Eucharistic presence. Most readers will probably best see Jesus in the latter part of the chapter as Benedict opens up the meaning of Barabbas’

name, and as a result, is able to contrast two types of messianic beliefs. Also in this chapter, Benedict allows liberal exegesis, that denies God as a living and acting Being, to be deservedly mocked and scourged by the satire of Russian writer Vladimir Soloviev. This alone made the \$25 price of admission worth it – even on a teacher’s salary.

Before moving to the Sermon on the Mount (Ch. 4), Benedict spends a chapter developing the reader’s understanding of what the Kingdom of God is and is not. He presents a short explanation of these three main ideas about the Kingdom that were held by the Church Fathers: Jesus as the Kingdom in person, the Kingdom as a place in man’s heart, and the Church as the Kingdom on earth. He also presents it as founded on the Old Testament just like the rest of Jesus’ message. More importantly, he shows that Jesus’ proclamation of God’s Kingdom is an announcement of a reality that is present and revealing itself in a new way in history. This reality is God, himself. To enter the Kingdom is to enter into communion with God.

Benedict points out the relationship between the Enlightenment and the “exegetical revolution” (50) among Protestant Theologians, especially as it concerns the Kingdom of God. He clearly outlines some of the main teachings from Adolf von Harnack’s *What is Christianity?* and introduces the reader to the theological proposals of Bultmann, Loisy, Weiss, Schweitzer and a few other liberal exegetes as their teachings apply specifically to an understanding of the Kingdom of God. Rudolf Bultmann also enjoys the distinction of being one of the few scholars whom the Pontifical Biblical Commission called by name as it rejected his existentialist hermeneutical theory, pointing it out as “*inadequate for interpreting Scripture*” (Interp., 80) because it was too attached to a particular philosophy. Benedict specifies that philosophy as that of Martin Heidegger on page 53 while he is in the process of explaining the errors in the exegesis of those mentioned above. Amazingly, Chapter 3 flows from thought to thought in such a way that even the errors are used to help the readers to discover what the Kingdom of God is by explaining what it is not.

In Chapter Four, Benedict mentions the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew first, which frees Benedict to return to the theme of Jesus as the New Moses. In light of that, he is also able to move the theme of “face-to-face” communication with God forward by pointing out that it became a reality for those who saw and heard Jesus preach on the Mount. He then uses Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Plain to show that Jesus’ message is for everyone, thus making clear that Jesus calls the Gentiles to discipleship, too.

Moving into the Beatitudes, Benedict centers them among those directional scriptures in the Old Testament designed to help people find the right path. Identifying them with Jesus’ own inner life, Benedict says, “*The Beatitudes are the transposition of Cross and Resurrection into discipleship*” (74) and they become for us the meaning of discipleship, itself. One by one, Benedict walks us through a biblical understanding of the key words and concepts. At the same time, he is careful to keep bringing the focus back to Jesus. For example, after explaining that “nonviolent” is a poor and restrictive translation of the Greek word *praus*, and that “meek” is the better translation, he reminds us of the messianic prophecy in Zech 9:9-10 which states, “*Lo, your king comes for you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble [meek] and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass.*” He also links this third Beatitude’s meekness and the promise of land to the Land promised to the Israelites, highlighting that, “*The land was given as a space for obedience, a realm of openness to God that was to be freed from the abominations of idolatry.*” This passage, he explains, can have both a purely historical meaning as well as a theological one, yet he makes sure we do not miss the direct correlation of this “place” and of the “king” (Zech 9) at every Eucharistic assembly we attend.

After more beautiful exegesis, Benedict plants this question on page 93, “*How is man’s inner eye purified?*” Part of the answer is on page 94 where he tells us that “*One fundamental condition is that those who would enter into God’s presence must inquire after him, must seek his face*” (Ps24:6). He further develops this theme in reference to those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” and does so for a couple of pages without redundancy.

The second half of Chapter Four explains that the renewed Torah that the Messiah was expected to bring is actually Jesus, himself, the Word of God in person. Benedict relies heavily on Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner’s interpretation of the Jesus’ message in the Sermon in *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, and weaves insights from it into the chapter as he writes. Neusner’s insights make for rich reading, especially in regard to the meaning and history of the Fourth Commandment, the Sabbath, and societal structures and customs. Building on this background, Benedict moves into more recent exegesis on the Torah itself, explaining the difference between the casuistic law and the apodictic law therein. Benedict concludes that “*In the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stands before us neither as a rebel nor as a liberal, but as the prophetic interpreter of the Torah*” (126).

The writings of St. Cyprian figure prominently in Chapter Five, which Benedict dedicates to the Lord’s Prayer. Early in this chapter, Benedict clearly states that the Lord’s Prayer is “*uttered in the first person plural, and it is only by becoming part of the ‘we’ of God’s children that we can reach up to him beyond the limits of this world in the first place*” (129). While validating the importance and place of personal prayer that arises from the heart, Benedict warns that this kind of prayer, when divorced from the prayer of the community, can easily become subjective, blurring the true image of God until it becomes a reflection of ourselves more than of Him.

Much of the content of Chapter Five will be familiar to the reader who has had a basic education in the Faith, but it offers deeper insights. Benedict does not skip over the struggle some people have with the word “father” because

their fathers were either absent or otherwise poor examples of fatherhood. He does not leave these readers at the mercy of their loss but gives them the solution when he writes, “*We must therefore let Jesus teach us what father really means*” (136). Then, he begins presenting part of Jesus’ teachings about the Father, perhaps to encourage the reader to spend more personal time reading the Gospel accounts.

He also does not avoid the question of addressing God as “Mother.” Using scripture to uncover the beauty of the mother image as used to describe God, and the bodiliness of women that shows it forth – especially the womb as a symbol for God’s compassion – he does not shrink from admitting that “Mother” is never used as a title for God in either the Old or New Testament scriptures. He does mention the relationship between the mother-deities that surrounded the Israelites and the early Church, and their connection to the pantheism that blurs the distinction between God and man, but stops short of proposing that it always leads to pantheism. He dodges the current feminist complaint that this omission of “Mother” as a title for God is a patristic injustice. It is a painful belief with which some Catholics live, and this seems a necessary place for him to show some pastoral concern. Human anthropology strongly supports the truth that the use of the title “Mother” has historically led to pantheism. While this work is not the place for him to expound on this issue, he should at least acknowledge the seriousness of the question by referencing someone whose research gives exhaustive proof of it, such as University of Augsburg’s Manfred Hauke, whose work, *Women in the Priesthood? A Systematic Analysis in the Light of the Order of Creation and Redemption* presents over thirty pages of research specific to this topic.

While covering the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, Benedict – with Cyprians help – does a beautiful job of connecting the manna in the desert to John 6 and the Eucharist, the poverty of the one asking for bread to the poor of the Beatitudes, and Jesus as the Logos to that “word that proceeds from the mouth of God” in Deut 8:3 and Mt 4:4. He also introduces the images of vine, wine, and bread which he will discuss in further detail in Chapter Eight. An explanation of the beginning of *Dei Verbum* (21), “*The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the Body of the Lord . . .*” would, however, be a welcome addition.

While highlighting the importance of forgiveness in the fifth petition, Benedict discusses the particularly difficult time modern man has with the concepts of substitution and expiation in regard to the mystery of the Cross and forgiveness because of his [modern man’s] individualistic view of all humans. This also tends to show itself in the way modern man downplays evil on the one hand, and then uses its horrors to deny God’s goodness on the other. As he moves into the sixth petition, he shifts the focus to God’s goodness in allowing man to experience the trials that help purify his nature. The last petition he links to the first three, for surely we are delivered from evil/the Evil One when God’s name is hallowed, His Kingdom comes and His Will is done

Chapter Six is a short chapter that compares the Twelve Jesus called Apostles, to the other seventy (or seventy-two) disciples who were also sent out by Jesus to minister. The last group is presented as symbolic in number to the offspring of Jacob that went into Egypt with him who represent all of the people of the world. Benedict presents a second tradition that connects the number to seventy scholars – six from each tribe – who represent the twelve tribes and “*the opening of Israel’s faith to the nations*” (180). Ultimately, Luke’s intention for including the seventy with the Twelve in his gospel, Benedict tells us, is to show that the Gospel is for everyone, not just the Jews.

In Chapters 7, Benedict explains the nature and purpose of Jesus’ parables, and then uses biblical exegesis to reveal the depth and beauty of three particular parables from the Gospel of Luke. In the process, he shows the relationship between the gift of the revelation contained in Jesus’ parables and the necessary willingness to receive the revelation required of the hearer. A refusal to be drawn in to the parable is the opposite of seeking God’s face, and therefore leads to the hardening of the heart spoken of in scripture. Benedict presents the prodigal son’s brother as one whose heart is hardened like this partly because he does not understand the freedom he enjoys as a son. His father has to say to him, “*Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours*” (Luke 15:31). Benedict quotes John 17:10 to show us the difference between that son, and Jesus, who knows the freedom he enjoys through his loving obedience to the Father: “*All that is mine is thine, and all that is thine is mine.*”

Chapter 8 expounds on the principle images of Jesus in the Gospel – water, vine and wine, bread, and Shepherd. But before laying out the deeper meaning of these images for his readers, Benedict spends the first 20 pages addressing the attacks against the historicity of John’s gospel caused by modern critical scholarship, challenging Bultmann’s exegesis in particular. At the end of this first section of the chapter, Benedict zeros in on the liturgical character of St. John’s Gospel, opening up for his reader the connections between each of the major Jewish feasts with the “*inner structure of Jesus’ path*” (236) and with “*the foundation on which the edifice of his message rises*” (236). This section is particularly well done by Benedict and sets the stage for the discussion of the images. Another strong and interesting feature of Chapter 8 falls under his explanation of the image, “water.” In this section, Benedict explains the triple basis of all Jewish festivals, and later applies them in detail to the Feast of Tabernacles.

Chapter Nine is the second part of a triduum of concluding chapters that moves the reader from accepting the historicity of John’s gospel and its main images to examining two particular historical events that point to Jesus’ divinity. The last of the three chapters identifies Jesus himself as both the Messiah and the divine Son of God. In

Chapter Nine, Benedict establishes that Peter understood, in his confession and at the Transfiguration, that Jesus was not just human, but also divine. Rich in exegesis, Chapter Nine equips the reader with knowledge that is foundational for understanding how Jesus identifies himself, which is the subject of Chapter 10.

Benedict uses the first two-thirds of Chapter Ten to trace the evolution of the titles “Son of Man” and “The Son” from their meaning in the Old Testament scriptures to Jesus’ own use of them for himself. The chapter and the book reach their conclusion in Benedict’s teaching on Jesus use of “I Am” as a title for himself, about which we learned at the beginning of this review. He draws two main theological conclusions in Chapter Ten. The first is that Jesus uses the three titles to reveal his divinity. The second is that all three titles speak directly to the intimacy of the relationship the Son shares with the Father.

In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict clearly tells his readers that he believes in the humanity and the divinity of Jesus Christ, and in the historicity of the scriptures. He offers no apology for his beliefs, nor does he show any signs of self-consciousness in the face of the contradictory biblical exegesis put forth by liberal scholars. Instead, he confidently presents biblical exegesis that supports his position. At the same time, he both accepts the truths and rejects the errors he finds in the exegesis of the other scholars in an ecumenically respectful manner.

In presenting his own position, Benedict restores the Faithful’s confidence that Jesus Christ is real, and that he desires to be in a relationship with them that will also draw them into the mystery of his own relationship with the Father. Benedict encourages his readers to seek the Lord’s face with confidence. Although Benedict makes it clear that writing *Jesus of Nazareth* is not an act of the Magisterium, both his position and his own scholarly background add weight to his writing. Now when the devotional readers’ faith is threatened by the proclamation of an error that Benedict has addressed, they will say with confidence, “But in his book, the pope said . . . “