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Hermeneutical and Exegetical Assumptions in the Work *Jesus of Nazareth* by Joseph Ratzinger/ Benedict XVI. Some Examples

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Abstract: This article examines Joseph Ratzinger's trilogy on Jesus of Nazareth, focusing especially on the first volume, shedding light on three of his hermeneutical assumptions. Firstly, there is a consideration of the understanding of the historical reliability of the Gospels. Secondly, there is a focus on the double hermeneutic of the parables, namely, the hermeneutic of history and that of faith. A critical review of Ratzinger's analysis of three Lucan parables (Luke 10:25–37; 15:11–32; 16:19–31) leads to the proposal of a different reading which avoids the allegorical trap and values the argumentative mechanism of the fictitious stories, understood as frontier of the Gospel. Finally, holiness is touched on as an authentic interpretation of Sacred Scripture.

Keywords: Joseph Ratzinger, historical Jesus, parable, Luke 10:25–37, Luke 15:11–32, Luke 16:19–31, hermeneutic of history, hermeneutic of faith

In 2007, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, Joseph Ratzinger (then in office as pope) published a book that had been in the air for some time (Ratzinger 2007), point of arrival of a long personal meditation and first part of a work whose other two volumes appeared in 2011 (Ratzinger 2011) and 2012 (Ratzinger 2012). As can easily be imagined, the volumes, *Jesus of Nazareth*, were a publishing sensation which aroused vast coverage in the media but also a reserved reaction on the part of the academic world.[1] The first volume has generated much more debate than the second or third, but this is not surprising given that it is Ratzinger's "unorthodox" methodological decisions, set out most fully in this volume, that constitute the central issue in the response provoked within New Testament studies.[2]

1 A (not exhaustive) bibliographical survey of the academic reactions to the three volumes can be found in Deines 2013a, 351–53. He has compiled a long list of reactions, published in theological journals by important scholars belonging to various Christian denominations.

2 The opinions of scholars have varied. For example, Brumley writes: "The aim of this book is to help the average reader who approaches Jesus of Nazareth without the benefit of extensive theological or biblical training to get as much out of the work as possible." (Brumley et al. 2008, 5) Vermes highlights a dichotomy: on the one hand, blind faith in the divine Christ without a modern critical methodology, which relegates its adherents to a pre-eighteenth-century, unenlightened perspective; on the other hand, he offers the authentic Jesus who is at last liberated from the mystery enveloping the church's Christ (Vermes 2007). Söding states: "Since a friendship between faith and reason is possible the invitation to friendship Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVI offers in his Jesus book is not the end of debate but the starting point of new research." (Söding 2013, 327)

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What are the hermeneutical and exegetical assumptions of this mature work of the great German theologian who had risen to the chair of Peter? A complete survey would require a long analysis, impossible in the brief space of an article. I shall limit myself to highlighting three assumptions, developing in the analysis specially the second, with particular attention to the exegesis of Luke's parables. It follows that I will mainly focus on the first volume of the trilogy.

1. Ratzingers' "Foreword" as Status Quaestionis Reserches on Jesus Live

Our starting point is the "Foreword" to the first volume in which Ratzinger offers his own survey of twentieth-century research on the life of Jesus. He identifies the central problem as the rift between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith," a rift that is increasingly deep. In this connection, he quotes a great master of German catholic exegesis, Rudolf Schnackenburg, who, almost at the end of his life, wrote a book on the life of Jesus: *Die Person Jesu Christi im Spiegel der vier Evangelien* (1993). After a rigorous use of the historical-critical methods, Schnackenburg arrived at the sad conclusion that "a reliable view of the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth through scientific effort with historical-critical methods can be only inadequately achieved." (Ratzinger 2007, Foreword) In the face of this situation, Ratzinger proposes three considerations; rather, he sets out three methodological options. The first is the choice to employ the historical-critical method. He declares:

> The historical-critical method—specifically because of the intrinsic nature of theology and faith—is and remains an indispensable dimension of exegetical work. […] The *factum historicum* is not an interchangeable symbolic cipher for biblical faith, but the foundation on which it stands: *Et incarnatus est*—when we say these words, we acknowledge God's actual entry into real history. (Ratzinger 2007, Foreword)

The second consideration is to recognise the limitations of the historical-critical method.

> The method's first limitation is that by its very nature it has to leave the biblical word in the past. It is a *historical* method, and that means that it investigates the then-current context of events in which the texts originated. […] To the extent that it remains true to itself, the historical method not only has to investigate the biblical word as a thing of the past, but also has to let it remain in the past. (Ratzinger 2007, Foreword)

The third consideration is, more, a consequence: we have to read the Bible as Sacred Scripture, as a whole, according to the principle of canonical exegesis. He states: "'Canonical exegesis'—reading the individual texts of the Bible in the context of the whole—is an essential dimension of exegesis. It does not contradict historical-critical interpretation, but carries it forward in an organic way toward becoming theology in the proper sense." (Ratzinger 2007, Foreword) At the conclusion of this *Foreword* Ratzinger ends up saying: "The main implication of this for my portrayal of Jesus is that I trust the Gospels" (Ratzinger 2007, Foreword); and he adds: "I have tried, to the best of my ability, to incorporate all of this, and yet 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 […] 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." (Ratzinger 2007, Foreword) This idea is repeated in the second and third volumes. In the introduction to his treatment of the Last Supper in the second volume, he writes: "The New Testament message is not simply an idea; essential to it is the fact that these events actually occurred in the history of this world: biblical faith does not recount stories as symbols of meta-historical truths; rather, it bases itself upon history that unfolded upon this earth." (Ratzinger 2011, ch. 5) And at the beginning of the third volume, he declares: "What Matthew and Luke set out to do, each in his own way, was not to tell 'stories' but to write history, real history that had actually happened, admittedly interpreted and understood in the context of the word of God. […] The infancy narratives are interpreted history, condensed and written down in accordance with the interpretation." (Ratzinger 2012, ch. 2)

2. Historical Reliability of the Gospels

It is unnecessary to say that these considerations aroused a considerable series of reflections, some of them critical. What we intend to discover are the assumptions behind them.

Firstly, it is clear that, in the groove of the whole of the western tradition, Ratzinger distinguishes between history and historiography (Gilbert 2008). The critical view is an essential part of the historical project because whoever is seeking to recount history does not want to be taken for a liar or confused with a simple teller of tales. Right from its beginnings, identified in Herodotus and especially in Thucydides, history has been established in its principles and its foundations with the stamp of criticism. In other words, it goes without saying that the problems presented by texts like the Gospels demand to be understood and explained critically from the historical point of view, that is, by means of an appropriate application of a critical method. What lies at the heart of the debate evoked by Ratzinger is nothing

other than history, history as a reality of theology and the Christian faith in the name of the principle of the incarnation. In fact, if history is set aside, the Christian faith is diminished and another form of religion is created. If history is so important, therefore, and the only way to approach it critically is the historical-critical method why does the latter appear to be insufficient? The problem which is strongly denounced by Ratzinger in the *Foreword* to the first volume, concerns precisely the Jesus of history and the Gospels as historical works and so written by historians. How, then, are we to escape this *impasse*? To take up the words of Schnackenburg, why can we achieve only inadequately a reliable view of the historical figure of Jesus? We believe that the problem does not lie so much in the historical-critical method and its application. The problem lies further back, namely, in the fact that we are dealing with works from antiquity. The historians at the service of the biblical faith are men of their time, like their concepts and historical practice, with all the limitations that we recognise as such today. In other words, the historical project of the evangelists does not coincide with the historical truth as we can reconstruct it today in our time with methods and techniques unknown to the ancients. In this way, the history of Jesus available to us reveals not a few limits: there are areas of shadows and of half-light. Thus, we can hope for further discoveries, we can certainly make progress in our methods of research, and we can refine our epistemological rigour, but it is part of our very condition to be limited also by difficulties in reaching, if not the fullness of historical knowledge, then, at least, a sufficient or satisfactory knowledge. In this way, the exegetes and all the historians of the Bible have simply carried out their work in a rigorous and honourable way obtaining secure results about Jesus, even if these are necessarily minimalist.

In fact, the composition of the Gospels was not inspired by archival interests since they devote no attention to biographical elements (age, physical aspect, anecdotes). That does not mean to say that the evangelists were not interested in the Jesus of history nor that they were unaware of the distance between Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ of faith. The single fact that there are different accounts signals the evangelists' awareness of the unique character of those events. In any case, the specific nature of the Gospels is to offer a theological reading of what Jesus did: this is their hermeneutical dimension without which the texts are being interpreted in an irrelevant perspective. However, the identity of the Christ of faith cannot be grasped outside the accounts which bring back to us the life of the man from Nazareth. Christological discourse is established precisely from the starting point of those accounts (the fourfold evangelical attestation). In other words, the knowledge of the living Lord is measured against that very singular past story which is absolutely hard-core. This conforms with the incarnation. However, it is also true that the figure of Jesus escapes historical research in a certain way in the sense that honest historical research, with a critical basis and a rigorous methodology, ends up by saying little about him. Paradoxically, this does not represent a limitation but, rather, an advantage because it prevents any

possible capture by an ideology. Antiquity is full of such captures (one thinks of Gnosticism) but even the present day is not immune to them (Marguerat 2008).

One understands why Ratzinger does not abandon the historical-critical method, on the one hand, and, on the other, integrates it with different approaches: he wishes to write a work that is not so much on the historical Jesus (it would be reduced to a small thing), but on the Jesus of the Gospels. In this connection, it is useless to hide that the great theologian who became pope is well aware of and discusses with great shrewdness the literature (especially the German) up to the nineteen-eighties while he is less informed on the so-called "Third Quest." As is well known, one of the most significant works in this area, namely, John Paul Meier's *A Marginal Jew*, opens with a volume completely given over to methodology. Here, precisely in the first pages, he clarifies the distinction between the *real* Jesus (inaccessible, like all the figures in antiquity) and the *historical Jesus* (product of a critical reconstruction) (Meier 1991, 21–40). Ratzinger's language is markedly different but also less precise to the point of laying himself open to criticism (Deines 2013b, 353–406).

3. Ratzinger's Hermeneutic of History and Hermeneutic of Faith (Luke 10:25–37; 15:11–32; 16:19–31)

A second hermeneutical assumption operating in the three volumes comes from *Dei Verbum*. The Second Vatican Council had emphasised the need to interpret a text taking account of the literary genre and the historical context, but it also declared: "But, since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out. The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith." (*DV* 12).

In other words, we must combine two kinds of hermeneutic: the historical and that of faith (Gadenz 2019, in particular 83–90). Ratzinger maintains: "this combination of two quite different types of hermeneutic is an art that needs to be constantly remastered. But it can be achieved, and as a result the great insights of patristic exegesis will be able to yield their fruit." (Ratzinger 2011, Foreword) Thus, the choice is to combine the results of historical-critical exegesis and the great patristic and medieval tradition, so uniting the historical hermeneutic and that of faith.

A relevant example is his analysis of the parables (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7). Presenting three fictitious stories by Jesus in Luke's Gospel (the parables of the Good Samaritan, of the Merciful Father, of Dives and Lazarus), Ratzinger recalls the great interpretative turning point which took place at the end of the nineteenth century at the hands of Adolf Jülicher who, in his work in two volumes (*Die Gleichnisreden*

Jesu, 2 ed., 1910), distinguished clearly between parable and allegory but, above all, defined the parable as an "argumentative mechanism." Undoubtedly, the great German exegete, whose insights remain fundamental to this day, was a man of his time, a debtor to liberal theology and its presuppositions which today are recognised to be inadequate. Ratzinger also records the teaching of Joachim Jeremias and Charles Harold Dodd, followed by an attempt at a reading according to the assumptions of canonical exegesis. He writes: "Jesus' disturbing explanation of the point of his parables, then, is the very thing that leads us to their deepest meaning, provided—true to the nature of God's written word—we read the Bible, and especially the Gospels, as an overall unity expressing an intrinsically coherent message." (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7) Proceeding with the argument, he ends up saying: "In this sense, the parables manifest the essence of Jesus' message. In this sense, the mystery of the Cross is inscribed right at the heart of the parables." (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7)

3.1. Parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Luke 10:25–37)

The example of the parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Luke 10:25–37) is a clear application of this double hermeneutic. As is well known, there have been two great readings of this parable (Crimella 2009, in particular 59–133). The first interpretation is that of the patristic tradition: starting from Origen, it reads this fictitious story in an allegorical sense. The great Alexandrine writes: "The priest is the Law, the Levite is the prophetic word, the Samaritan is Christ who took flesh from Mary; the beast is the body of Christ; the wine is his word which instructs and corrects; the oil is the word of philanthropy and mercy or piety; the inn is the Church."[3] In the school of Origen, Augustine and then many others have repeated, developed and amplified these thoughts, always in the groove of allegory, sometimes even touching on allegoresis.[4] The parable's second interpretation is the contextual one developed by historical-critical exegesis (Zimmermann 2015, in particular 543–46). The exegete recalls the verisimilitude of the geographical location of the parable (Jerusalem stands at 800 metres while Jericho is in the Great Rift Valley) and the dangerous nature of that road (of which Josephus informs us[5]). Often, the problem of the ritual purity of the priest and Levite in the face of the blood and/or death of the victim is called to mind (Jeremias 1977, in particular 202; Meier 2016, in particular 199–209). Above all, emphasis is placed on the off-putting choice of the hero of the story: a Samaritan, belonging to a schismatic group who were certainly not loved

3 Origen, *Fragmentum 168 in Lucam* 10–14 (Origenes 1959, 296).

4 *Allegory* is a rhetorical and poetic technique; *allegoresis* is an exegetical method (Klauck 1978, in particular 354–61; Erlemann 2017, in particular 38–44). Historically there has been no clear distinction between allegory and allegoresis (Fusco 1983, in particular 85–89).

5 Cf. Josephus, *Jewish War* 4,474 (LCL 487, 297): "The country from Jericho to Jerusalem is desert and rocky."

by the Jews. His attitude, his interior feelings, his choices show a profound concern for the wounded man. Ratzinger comments: "Struck in his soul by the lightning flash of mercy, he himself now becomes a neighbour, heedless of any question or danger. The burden of the question thus shifts here. The issue is no longer which other person is a neighbour to me or not. The question is about me. I have to become the neighbour, and when I do, the other person counts for me 'as myself'" (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7).

Uniting the historical reading and the patristic interpretation produces a hermeneutic which holds together the Christological and the anthropological dimensions. Ratzinger claims: "We can safely ignore the individual details of the allegory, which change from Church Father to Church Father." (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7) However, he then adds: "But the great vision that sees man lying alienated and helpless by the roadside of history and God himself becoming man's neighbour in Jesus Christ is one that we can happily retain, as a deeper dimension of the parable that is of concern to us." (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7)

It is superfluous to say that the biblical scholar has more than one reservation about this interpretation. In fact, in wishing to combine the two hermeneutics (the historical and the one of faith), it takes the path of allegory. How do we escape from this dilemma? Firstly, I believe that we must take seriously Jülicher's fundamental insight, namely that the parable is an argumentative mechanism (Erlemann 1999, 11–19). In other words, precisely because it is a narrative, the parable provides clues, plays on ambiguities and so sharpens the interest of the readers, inviting them to the intellectually gratifying activity of searching for clues, for the solution to the riddles. Vittorio Fusco, one of the greatest Italian scholars of the parables offers this fitting definition: "The parable is a fictitious story employed as an argumentative-dialogic strategy which operates in two stages: first, on the basis of the internal logic of the story, stimulating a certain valuation and then, by virtue of the analogy of structure, transferring it to the reality intended by the parabolist." (Fusco 1991, 1085) The parables, that is, do not contain the *kerygma*, but refer to it. Through the parables, Jesus really enters into dialogue with people. He does not repeat the call to faith to them but proposes to their intelligence something on which to reflect. They represent only a stretch of the road which can lead as far as the threshold of the announcement which remains intact in its fragility, almost in its nudity. In this sense, the parables are the "frontier" of the gospel, the place where the gospel enters into dialogue with people. The parable is not the salvific event but refers to it (Fusco 1983, 165).

In particular, with regard to the parable of the Good Samaritan, I believe that it is possible to escape from the *impasse* between the two hermeneutics by taking seriously the fact that the fictitious story is an argumentative mechanism. Moreover, by applying the criteria of narrative analysis, it is possible to ask: from what point of view did Jesus tell this parable? Perhaps from that of the Samaritan? Certainly not.

His point of view is that of the wounded man (Marguerat 2012, in particular 206–9). In other words: everything happens through the eyes of the victim. That is, the parable is not pointing to the exemplary nature of the Samaritan but is seeking to bring the hearer (and the reader) into the skin of the victim, not the traumatic but splendid experience of this man without a face and without a name. Some clues indicate that this is precisely the strategy. First clue: the man attacked by the brigands has no identity; he is without a name and without a description. That is, he is a member of the human race. Such an open identity can only facilitate his identification with the reader. Second clue: the priest and the Levite pass by without stopping. Why? The narrator does not give a single reason. Why this silence? Because the point of view adopted by the narrator is that of the wounded man, and the story reveals only what he can know. The victim observes only that the priest and the Levite (recognisable by their dress) are not concerned about him. The wounded man makes only this bitter observation without being able to explain it because he is a victim! Third clue: the parable abounds in details only when they are available to the traveller; and that man knows well what the Samaritan has done for him. The details are precise: oil and wine on the wounds, beasts, inn, money. In short: the reader sees through the eyes of the victim. Fourth clue: the final question that Jesus puts to the doctor of the Law: "Which of these three seems to you to have been the neighbour of the one who fell among the thieves"? (Luke 10:36), is the key to understanding from what point of view the parable is being told. In fact, it is enquiring about the identity of the neighbour no longer from the point of the donor (that was the perspective of the doctor of the Law) but from that of the beneficiary. The status of the neighbour is decided from the point of view of the wretched situation of a victim, not from a theoretical definition. To enable the reader to grasp the reversal of the question about the neighbour a story was needed which made the reader enter into the skin of a human being in that desperate condition. It is the point of view adopted by the parabolist which provokes in the reader the reversal of perspective. In the end, like the doctor of the Law, he can only respond with what is evident: when I am put in a state of need, whatever my identity, I expect that another will recognise himself as my neighbour.

In the face of this reading, which completely avoids allegory and values the point of view from which the parable is told, the consequences are enormous whether in the anthropological or the Christological and theological perspectives. The reasoning which the parable has led the hearers-readers to carry out brings them to draw a conclusion which certainly recovers the whole of the history of salvation and is open to that salvific announcement which the same Gospel of Luke is preserving and proclaiming.

3.2. Parable of the Prodigal Son (cf. Luke 15:11–32)

The comment on the parable of the Prodigal Son (cf. Luke 15:11–32) has a strongly actualising, almost homiletic character. In connection with the sudden brutalisation of the younger son who is reduced to being a swineherd, Ratzinger claims:

> Those who understand freedom as the radically arbitrary license to do just what they want and to have their own way are living in a lie, for by his very nature man is part of a shared existence and his freedom is shared freedom. His very nature contains direction and norm, and becoming inwardly one with this direction and norm is what freedom is all about. A false autonomy thus leads to slavery: In the meantime history has taught us this all too clearly. (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7)

Also, with regard to the great turning point in the narrative, the moment when the younger son becomes aware of the difference between his own condition and that of his father's hired servants, Ratzinger comments:

> His change of heart, his "conversion," consists in his recognition of this, his realization that he has become alienated and wandered into truly "alien lands," and his return to himself. What he finds in himself, though, is the compass pointing toward the father, toward the true freedom of a "son." The speech he prepares for his homecoming reveals to us the full extent of the inner pilgrimage he is now making. (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7)

Hints at the Fathers and their exegesis are not lacking. For example, in connection with the father's embrace and the orders he gives to the servants on behalf of the prodigal, Ratzinger writes:

> The lost son they take as an image of man as such, of "Adam," who all of us are—of Adam whom God has gone out to meet and whom he has received anew into his house. In the parable, the father orders the servants to bring quickly "the first robe." For the Fathers, this 'first robe' is a reference to the lost robe of grace with which man had been originally clothed, but which he forfeited by sin. But now this "first robe" is given back to him—the robe of the son. The feast that is now made ready they read as an image of the feast of faith, the festive Eucharist, in which the eternal festal banquet is anticipated. (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7)

So, in order to resolve the dialectical tension between the historical hermeneutic and the hermeneutic of faith, Ratzinger takes the road of allegory. Here, the biblical scholar entertains more than one doubt. I do not intend to explain here all the details of this rich Lucan parable but simply to restate a fundamental hermeneutical principle, namely, the argumentative character of the parable

(Ostmeyer 2015). It is possible to read in a way that prescinds from all kinds of allegory but values the mechanism of the story, that is, the linear nature of the reading process, and so the gradual and layered hermeneutic of the reader who gathers one element after the other. Following this pattern strictly, that is, valuing the fictitious account, the father of the parable is not the Father of Jesus just as the younger son is not the sinner, and so on.

A rigorous narrative reading indicates at least two fundamental aspects (Fusco 2003). First, the expression with which the narrator introduces the young man's dialogue with himself (cf. Luke 15:17) does not represent a conversion. A careful analysis shows that this signifies only "looking at himself within, becoming aware of something," without reference to an axiological or religious change (Wolter 2008, in particular 533–34). Also, on close examination, the words that the words he speaks to himself (cf. Luke 15:18) do not represent a conversion (Aletti 2022, in particular 458); on the contrary, they are the sign of a crafty and base calculation. Through a statement that is manifestly manipulative, while the younger son declares the loss of his own filial dignity, in reality, he is aiming to convince his parent to make the choice which appears to him as the most advantageous solution. In other words, his admission of fault is simply made to serve his subsequent request. In fact, he evokes his particular condition with the aim of establishing a new relationship with his father, no longer characterised by the relation of sonship but rather by the purely economic criteria of hired service (Aletti 1998, in particular 236). The conclusion of his statement even has the form of a formal notice: he will no longer be a son but a hired workman. Undoubtedly, the leap here is profound, but – and it is good to recall it – from the youth's point of view, it is a gain. In fact, if as son he can no longer assert his rights, the status of hired worked will at least be able to assure him of his daily bread. The psychological aspect of the relationship is ignored. The father is reduced to the role of potential employer, exactly like the owner of the pigs, with the unique difference that he is able to offer conditions that are economically advantageous. In other words, the younger son would like to transform his relationship with his father into a relationship of subjection by desiring that his parent take on the role of his employer.

Secondly, the reaction and the words of the elder son are to be assessed carefully (cf. Luke 15:29b–30) (Crimella 2009, in particular 304–14). The strength of his protest is entirely played out on the double parallelism between what he has done for his father (by contrast with the younger one) and what the father has done for the younger son (and not for him). The first contrast is played out on the temporal dimension: the older son has worked for numerous years whereas the younger one has simply reappeared like that after a prolonged absence. Then, there is a second contrast of an axiological type; the older son has served his father faithfully and with devotion without disobeying a single order; the prodigal, on the other hand, has wasted the family fortune, even destroying the very life of his father. A third

contrast is bound up with the relationships: one son hangs out with friends with whom he would like to have organised a party; the other consorts with prostitutes. The fourth contrast is economic and emerges from a comparison of the animals: the kid is a small beast, quite common and cheap; the fatted calf, on the other hand, is a valuable animal, kept for great occasions. The fifth contrast sheds light on the father's actions whose symbolic value is undoubted: on the one hand, he has never given even a small gift to the elder boy; on the other hand, he has had the fatted calf slaughtered to celebrate the return of the younger one. The extremely severe judgement on the father is tacit and not at all explicit. The older son limits himself to citing incontrovertible facts (Aletti 2022, in particular 461–64): no one can contest his devotion, and the parent (accused so directly) can certainly not deny the claims of the older son. Moreover, the picture of the younger one is not far from reality although harsh and, in a certain sense, a caricature. Then, the slaughter of the calf is a fact under the eyes of all. However, it is the links between the different facts which oblige the hearers/readers to draw precise consequences, and these all concern none other than the father. The speech of the elder son has shown what he has in mind. Everything is built on a relationship with the father in terms of giving-having, service-reward: he has given so much to his father and has the right to receive; the other has not given anything, therefore he ought to receive nothing. That is, the elder will reprove his parent's behaviour for subverting the principle of retributive justice according to which the just must be rewarded and the wicked punished. Such an accusation shows that the older brother has lived his relationship with his father precisely according to this principle, and now, in the face of the manifestation of a radically different logic, it seems to him that the world is crumbling. It follows that, although his existence is different from that of the younger brother (he stays at home, works and is dutiful), he nevertheless lives the relationship with his parent in terms that are purely retributive. All those years at home have not enabled him to escape from the interpretative pattern of a servile relationship, bound up, that is, with service and reward. However, between this view, entirely focused on the relationship of exchange, and the economic one of the younger son, there is not a great difference.

In other words, Luke's subtle narrative skill intends to present the two brothers as two drops of water: if the younger loses himself outside by leaving the home (like the sheep of the first parable [cf. Luke 15:4–7]), the older loses himself inside (like the coin in the second parable [cf. Luke 15:8–10]); that is, both lose themselves but, above all, both have a relationship with their father that is only of a "commercial" type, bound up with giving and having, with the best return possible, without any affective bond with the parent.

If this is the argumentative mechanism of the parable, what consequence does the reader draw from it?

To justify his reading, which combines the historical hermeneutic with that of faith, Ratzinger asks: "For the Christian, the question now arises: Where does Jesus

Christ fit into all this? Only the Father figures in the parable. Is there no Christology in it?" (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7) He resolves the question with a reference to Augustine who declares: "The arm of the Father is the Son" (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7), and he concludes: "Attention to the historical context of the parable thus yields by itself an 'implicit Christology'." (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7)

Once again, the biblical scholar finds himself in difficulty inasmuch as the Christological reading of the parable is the result of an allegorical procedure which is inappropriate from the methodological point of view. On closer examination, however, the text itself contains an expression which combines the parable and the macro-account, providing the interpretative key to the fictitious narrative. It is the father's final response to the elder son: "But it is necessary to celebrate and rejoice for this your brother was dead and has returned to life, was lost and has been found!" (Luke 15:32). The key word is *deî* ("it is necessary") (Crimella 2009, in particular 319–21). This is a word which, in Luke, indicates the necessity of the passion of Jesus (as can be inferred from Luke 9:22; 13:33). Thus, the reference to necessity does not pass unobserved, above all in the final *sententia* of the fictitious story. If, that is, Jesus' itinerary, passing through the necessity of the passion, has no other explanation than his love that is faithful to the very end, so too the case of the passionate love of the father of the parable. In the one as in the other, there is unquestionably something of the "extravagant," something, namely, that escapes human logic: but both the parable and the gospel story intend to reveal exactly the logic of God in Jesus. In this sense, the way of Jesus illuminates the parable and is illuminated by it.

3.3. Parable of the Rich Reveller and Poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31)

The third parable considered by Benedict XVI is that of the rich reveller and poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) (Leonhardt-Balzer 2015; Szredka 2019). Again, Ratzinger's theological reading arrives at the Christological nucleus. He writes:

> Do we not recognize in the figure of Lazarus—lying at the rich man's door covered in sores – the mystery of Jesus, who "suffered outside the city walls" (Heb 13:12) and, stretched naked on the Cross, was delivered over to the mockery and contempt of the mob, his body "full of blood and wounds"? […] He, the true Lazarus, *has* risen from the dead – and he has come to tell us so. If we see in the story of Lazarus Jesus' answer to his generation's demand for a sign, we find ourselves in harmony with the principal answer that Jesus gave to that demand. (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 7)

We find a profound irony in this parable (Bock 1997). In fact, what Abraham refuses to permit the rich man's brothers, the parable provides for its readers. What is not permitted in the story is actually procured by the story: hence the irony. The brothers are not allowed to know what happens in the afterlife. However, the audience and

the reader are offered knowledge of the world after death precisely through this parable. They hear the cry from beyond the grave and the information of the patriarch as a warning which calls on them to take a logical and consistent decision in the here and now.

The patriarch Abraham reveals to the rich man and the reader the point of view of God, and it is precisely this revelation that appears to be the surprise of the parable (Lehtipuu 1999, in particular 97–100). Against every request for extraordinary signs from the afterlife, the patriarch refers to the only sign available in the here and now, namely, the Law and the prophets. In obedient listening to the revelation of God attested in the Scriptures that were given to the people of Israel is found the truth to be sons of Abraham, a truth which wealth had hidden from the eyes of the rich man who was blind before poor Lazarus. In brief, the Law and the prophets teach how to relate to wealth and the poor, thus enabling the heart to open to the newness of Jesus' revelation.

However, there is also an even more subtle effect (Erlemann 1999, in particular 240–50; Crimella 2009, in particular 423–24). If the resurrection from the dead assumes a clear Easter significance, there is a second ironical swerve: what Abraham refuses to do, God has done in Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is much more than a return from the dead to offer a warning to the living; it cannot even be compared with those resuscitations attested in the Old Testament and performed by Jesus himself as signs. That is, the readers, therefore, come to find themselves in a situation exactly opposite to that of the brothers. They reject Moses and the prophets and would not let themselves be persuaded even by the revivification of someone from the dead. The readers, on the other hand, are moulded by the very same evangelical account to obey the Scripture of Israel and grasp its central fulcrum in the mystery of Jesus' resurrection. In other words, if the brothers (and the audience) had the Scriptures of Israel, the reader has much more baggage, enlarged by what the gospel account is transmitting to him. That is why the patriarch's appeal resonates with still greater urgency in their ears, namely, as an urgent call to conversion.

So then, Ratzinger's interpretation of the Lucan parables opens up the way to a wide discussion which enables us to grasp the infinite riches of the fictitious stories of Jesus, riches which do not cease to amaze every reader of the Gospel. The examples we have considered show that the historical-critical method, which is absolutely necessary, has not managed to elaborate a satisfactory interpretation of Jesus' parables. One thus understands Ratzinger's embarrassment and his recovery of the patristic categories. In our opinion, the philosophical studies of Paul Ricoeur on symbolic and parabolic language, the lucid contributions of Jacques Dupont (1977) and the fundamental output of Vittorio Fusco (1983) have brought about a notable step in the interpretation of the parables, a step which combines the two hermeneutics evoked by Ratzinger, that of history and that of faith, with an insistence on the argumentative mechanism.

4. Third Ratzinger's Hermeneutical Presupposition

Finally, we shall offer a simple mention of a third hermeneutical presupposition. Ratzinger claims: "The saints are the true interpreters of Holy Scripture. The meaning of a given passage of the Bible becomes most intelligible in those human beings who have been totally transfixed by it and have lived it out. Interpretation of Scripture can never be a purely academic affair, and it cannot be relegated to the purely historical." (Ratzinger 2007, ch. 4) This is an idea very dear to the theologian who became pope. As Pontiff, he took it up again in *Verbum Domini* where he affirms: "The interpretation of sacred Scripture would remain incomplete were it not to include listening to *those who have truly lived the word of God: namely, the saints*." (*VD* 48) In the first volume of the trilogy, Ratzinger interprets the first beatitude by means of the example of St Francis of Assisi, while, in *Verbum Domini*, he comments on the call of the rich young man by referring to the desert Father, Anthony of Egypt, whose life is told by St Athanasius.

The principle is well known and widespread in the life of the Church. The saints are those who have lived a personal and intense following of the Lord, thus carrying out an exemplary listening to the Word of God, and, precisely for this reason are held out a model for believers. On second thoughts, this third principle is a development of the previous one, namely, the combination of the hermeneutic of faith with that of history with reference to the holy people of God.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we must recognise that Ratzinger's undertaking was a cultural and ecclesial event which had the merit of focusing the attention strongly on Jesus. The absolutely singular nature of the author (certainly the famous and revered theologian, Joseph Ratzinger, but also the then-reigning Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church, Benedict XVI) led to a maelstrom of debates, thus allowing a concentration on the figure of Jesus albeit to differing degrees and with opposing results.

Writing in *La Civiltà Cattolica* a review of the first volume, the then Archbishop Emeritus of Milan, Carlo Maria Martini, put it like this: "This book is, therefore, a passionate testimony of a great scholar — who today also has a place at the highest level of the Catholic Church — to Jesus of Nazareth and his significance for the history of humanity and for the perception of the true figure of God." (Martini 2007, in particular 536)

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