



Resolving the Dualism between Exegesis and Theology: Joseph Ratzinger and the Rediscovery of Tradition.

A case study of the Purification of the Temple (Jn 2:13-25).

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Introduction

A frequent concern in the writings of Joseph Ratzinger has been the relationship between exegesis and theology, and thus what the correct hermeneutical principles for exegesis should be. Perhaps one of his principal contributions in this field was the proposal that a deeper appreciation of the theological concept of Tradition, and thus of the historical nature and development of Christian theology, and the key role of the Fathers in this process, provided a means to counter what he saw as a worrying *de facto* dualism separating ‘scientific’ exegesis and dogmatic theology in even Catholic Biblical scholarship.

Our article aims to examine this aspect of Ratzinger’s thought by focusing on the episode of the Purification of the Temple in Jn 2:13-25

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as a case study. Our methodology is relatively simple: we begin by comparing Origen's exegesis of the passage with that of various representatives of the historical critical method in order to highlight the markedly different styles and results of two different methods, and then conclude by analysing how Ratzinger mediates between the two approaches by placing the genesis of biblical texts within the wider dynamic of Revelation and Tradition.

1. The Dualism between Exegesis and Theology

1.1. A constant theme in the thought of Ratzinger

Ratzinger's dialogue with exegetical studies can be framed – both chronologically and conceptually – by two emblematic magisterial pronouncements: the beginning of his academic career was marked by conciliar discussions regarding the Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (1965), whereas almost half a century later, as Benedict XVI, he summoned a synod of bishops devoted to the theme of '*The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*,' and then penned the post-synodal exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010). Unsurprisingly, therefore, the amount of literature he devoted to the theme of the relationship between Scripture, Revelation, Tradition, and Exegesis between these two dates is fairly substantial and includes the following important works:

1. A study on the relation between Revelation and Tradition, originally published together with K. Rahner in 1965¹;
2. A commentary on the Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation *Dei Verbum*, first published in 1967²;

¹ K. RAHNER - J. RATZINGER, *Revelation and Tradition*, Burns and Oates, London 1966. Re-published in J. RATZINGER, *God's Word: Scripture - Tradition - Office*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2005, 41-67.

² Cf. H. VORGRIMLER, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Burns and Oates, London 1968.

3. A series of articles and conferences during the 1970's which were gathered together and published in his 1982 work *Theologische Prinzipienlehre*³;
4. The Erasmus lecture regarding the state of modern exegesis delivered in New York in 1988⁴;
5. His work on the life of Jesus published in three separate volumes from 2007 to 2012⁵.

One of the constant themes in these writings is what Ratzinger termed a dangerous and increasing “barrier” between ‘scientific exegesis’ and the ‘spiritual interpretation’ of Scripture. In *Principles of Catholic Theology*, for example, he had warned that while in *Dei Verbum* the

affirmation of the historical-critical method stands in peaceful juxtaposition to affirmation of interpretation on the basis of the tradition and faith of the Church, this twofold affirmation conceals the antagonism of two basic attitudes that are diametrically opposed to one another in both origin and purpose⁶.

According to Ratzinger, the conciliar fathers were actually aware of these opposing tendencies, but simply chose to re-affirm the value

³ J. RATZINGER, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1987.

⁴ J. RATZINGER, *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1989. Re-published in J. RATZINGER, *God's Word...*, 91-126. It is worth noting that both Vanhoye and Ruppert hold that this conference of Ratzinger was one of the key reasons why the Pontifical Biblical Commission started its study on the theme a year later; the PBC eventually published its document in 1993 (cf. A. VANHOYE, “L’interpretazione della Bibbia nella Chiesa: Riflessione circa un documento”, *Civiltà Cattolica* 145 (1994), 3-15; L. RUPPERT, “Kommentierende Einführung in das Dokument” in *Die Interpretation der Bibel in der Kirche: das Document der Päpstlichen Bibelkommissuin vom 23.4.1993 mit einer kommentierenden Einführung von Lothar Ruppert und einer Würdigung durch Hans-Josef Klauck*, Vol 161, Katholisches Bibelwek, Stuttgart 1995, 9-61; PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, LEV, Rome 1993).

⁵ J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, Doubleday, London 2007; J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth II: Holy Week: From the entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, Doubleday, London 2011; J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth III: The Infancy Narratives*, Image Books, New York 2012.

⁶ J. RATZINGER, *Principles...*, 135.

of each method without solving the problem of their reconciliation⁷. Their proposal of peaceful co-existence did not bear lasting fruit in Ratzinger's estimation however: he saw the tension between the two approaches only growing in the years after the Council, with duality – which can be productive – degenerating into dualism. By 2010, in fact, Benedict was worried enough to include a stark warning about the state of exegesis in *Verbum Domini*, a document of the Ordinary Magisterium of the Church:

We should mention the serious risk nowadays of a dualistic approach to sacred Scripture. To distinguish two levels of approach to the Bible does not in any way mean to separate or oppose them, nor simply to juxtapose them. They exist only in reciprocity. Unfortunately, a sterile separation sometimes creates a barrier between exegesis and theology, and this occurs even at the highest academic levels⁸.

1.2. A Case Study: the Purification of the Temple (Jn 2)

The vastly differing interpretations of the episode of the purification of the Temple in Jn 2 provided by the kind of historical-critical exegesis that Ratzinger was familiar with, and the spiritual exegesis of the Fathers, provides a good example of this situation.

We can begin by citing, as examples of the historical-critical method of exegesis, the commentaries of Strathmann⁹ and Haenchen¹⁰ in this regard. We choose these authors not because they represent current academic commentaries on John, but because they represent the type of scholarship that Ratzinger would have been aware during the first parts of his theological career. The course that exegesis has followed in the intervening 35 to 60 years is a fascinating question that brevity forces

⁷ For the positive value of exegesis, see *Dei Verbum* n12; for the theological approach to Scripture, see for example *Dei Verbum* n9.

⁸ BENEDICT XVI, *Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation 'Verbum Domini' on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*, LEV, Vatican City 2010, n35.

⁹ H. STRATHMANN, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen 1951.

¹⁰ E. HAENCHEN – R. W. FUNK – U. BUSSE, *Gospel of John: A Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1-6*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1984.

us to leave aside for the moment; to what extent Ratzinger was aware and appreciative of this change is yet another question that further study needs to be devoted to. What concerns us, therefore, is not so much the state of today's Johannine exegesis, and the historical path it has taken to get there, but simply the question of what Ratzinger perceived to be the limits of historical-critical exegesis and how he attempted to solve the problem using a reception-history oriented approach.

Given these methodological limitations, and returning to the exegesis of Strathmann and Haenchen, we can make the following observations regarding their interpretation of purification of the temple: 1) the episode is related in the narrative form and is present in the four Gospels (Jn 2, Mt 21 and //); 2) it would be difficult to deny the historicity of this gesture which was so provocative that it provided one of the major accusations levied against Jesus during his trial (see Mt 21:61 and //); 3) there is a contradiction between John, who places the episode at the beginning of Jesus' public life, and the synoptic gospels, who place it immediately before the Passion which requires 'harmonization'. Strathmann and Haenchen therefore largely limit their discussion to two main themes: 1) the exact moment during Jesus' ministry in which the event took place, and 2) the actual historical words (*ipsissima verba*) that Jesus spoke on the occasion¹¹. Based on pre-formed conceptions regarding Jesus' identity and mission, they then claim that Jesus' intention in purifying the Temple could only have been either to reform its cultic practices or to plant the seeds of political revolution¹², with any attempt to grapple with the profound theological interpretation of the episode, which John himself provides in vv 21-22, completely ignored. Strathmann writes, for example, that Jesus' enigmatic answer to the

¹¹ See for example the introduction to this passage in the *Hermeneia* series: "The Gospel of John comes into contact with the synoptic tradition for the first time at this point: Mark 11: 11 *, 15-17 *, 27-33*/Matt 21:12f.*, 23-27*/Luke 19:45f.*, 20:1-8*. It will pay us to compare these three versions and to investigate whether the history of this segment of tradition comes into view. There is the further question of whether and how the Johannine version of this history fits into the picture. Only then may we ask after the historical value of this tradition in general and of the Johannine version in particular. Finally, the modern critical resolution of this question itself constitutes a problem, which will take us down to the current views of this pericope" (E. HAENCHEN - R. W. FUNK - U. BUSSE, *Gospel of John...*, 186).

¹² For example, ZAHN, who makes the following comment on Jn 2:17 in the above mentioned work: "The violent demeanor of Jesus also appears to the disciples to be that of a Zealot and thus dangerous" (quoted in E. HAENCHEN - R. W. FUNK - U. BUSSE, *Gospel of John...*, 189).

Jews query regarding the reason for his behaviour, ‘Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up again,’

understood in its literal sense, is tantamount to a sarcastic refusal of the demand for a sign; indeed, the apparent availability to fulfill it is subordinated to a condition unacceptable to the Jews: that of destroying what constitutes their pride, the splendid edifice of the Temple built by Herod¹³.

The attempt to historically reconstruct the words of Jesus, and to derive the ‘literal meaning’ of the text in this way, thus leads to a rather blatant example of theological reductionism. We would do well to ask, in fact, whether the words of Christ express *only* a simple refusal of sign, and why the theological perspective and interpretation of John has been so completely shunned. The cultic aspect is certainly also present in John’s account of the episode, but is this the only or even the principal meaning of the passage?

The style and questions posed by this type of historical-critical exegesis cannot, in fact, be further from those of the Church Fathers. In Origen’s famous *Commentary on Saint John*, for example, the theological and spiritual speculation that Jn 2:13-25 occasions reaches truly extraordinary heights:

Both, however, (I mean the temple and Jesus’ body) according to one interpretation, appear to me to be a type of the Church, in that the Church, being called a “temple,” is built of living stones, becoming a spiritual house “for a holy priesthood,” built “upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus being the chief corner stone.” And through the saying, “Now you are the body of Christ and members in part,” (we know) that even if the

¹³ H. STRATHMANN, *Das Evangelium*, 110 (our translation). Along the same lines, the *Hermeneia* commentary notes: “With Jesus’ action in the temple *the Evangelist has in mind only Jesus’ rejection of Jewish worship*. The question of the Jews is aimed at the justification for this reform, and the justification consists entirely of the authentic worship in Spirit and in truth that Jesus can and does reveal. The event is comprehensible only on this interpretation; and so is the strangely weak reaction of the Jews to Jesus’ intervention in the temple service, as the Gospel of John reports it” (E. HAENCHEN - R. W. FUNK - U. BUSSE, *Gospel of John...*, 185, emphasis added).

harmony of the stones of the temple appear to be destroyed, [or,] as is written in Psalm 21, all the bones of Christ appear to be scattered in persecutions and afflictions by the plots of those who wage war against the unity of the temple by persecutions, the temple will be raised up and the body will arise on the third day after the day of evil which threatens it and the day of consummation which follows. For the third day will dawn in the new heaven and the new earth, when these bones, the whole house of Israel, shall be raised up on the great day of the Lord, once death has been conquered. Consequently, the resurrection of Christ too, which followed from his passion on the cross, contains the mystery of the resurrection of the whole body of Christ. But when this resurrection of Christ's true and more perfect body takes place, then the members of Christ, the bones which at present are dry as seen in relation to what will be, will be brought together, bone to bone and joint to joint, for none of those who have been deprived of joint will attain to the perfect man, "to the measure of the stature of the fullness" of the body "of Christ." And then the many members will be one body, when all who are the many members of the body become one body¹⁴.

Origen's analysis thus applies the Pauline idea of the Church as the body of Christ (cf. Col 1) to the words of Jesus, and then constructs a new eschatological meaning of the phrase "third day" by playing with the temporal succession of the earthly life of Christ, the time of the Church, and the Parousia, simultaneously inserting all of this into a new interpretation of Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (cf. Ezek 37).

The evident fact that this 'spiritual' interpretation goes far beyond the original intention of the author leads, however, to questions regarding its value and its relation to the type of historical-critical interpretation we looked at before. One solution, of course, could simply be to show that this 'spiritual' reading does not oppose the literal one; Origen would have fully agreed with a reconciliation of this type since in his opinion the spirit does not invalidate the letter¹⁵. *Verbum Domini*, in

¹⁴ ORIGEN, Commentary on the Gospel according to John, Books 1–10, LXXX, *The Fathers of the Church*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC 1989, 305-307.

¹⁵ Cf. H. DE LUBAC, *Histoire et esprit: L'intelligence de l'écriture d'après Origène*, Aubier-Montaigne, Paris 1950.

the passage that immediately follows its warning on dualism in exegesis, actually suggests the validity of this approach when it speaks about the “interrelation” and the “interplay” between the different senses of Scripture¹⁶. Without negating the legitimacy of this approach, Ratzinger chose to focus his attention on exploring another avenue of resolution, one which essentially springs from his notion of revelation as historical, and which when applied to our case study would imply asking the following questions: How did Origen arrive to his interpretation? What was its value for the Church of his time? Does it still have value for the Church of today? The itinerary we will follow in order to answer these questions together with Ratzinger will take the form of a journey in time: it begins with Origen, travels backwards in time to the person of Christ himself (cf. 2. *From the Text to the Words and to the Event itself*), and then leaves the Christ-Event to follow the natural course of history and describe the development of Revelation (cf. 3. *The four Stages in the Formation of Christian Theology*). It will thus become clear how Ratzinger’s solution to the problem of dualism between exegesis and theology revolves around his understanding of Tradition.

2. From the text to the words and to the event itself

The first step in our historical exploration will be to trace the chain of authoritative authors backwards – from Origen to the beloved disciple, traditionally identified with John the apostle – and thus gain access to the substance of the words of Jesus and the Christ-Event itself in all its splendour and profundity.

2.1. The relative value of Origen

Let us begin with Ratzinger’s assessment of the value of the Fathers of the Church as outlined in his *Theologische Prinzipienlehre* where a whole chapter is dedicated to “the importance of the Fathers for the establishment of the faith”:

¹⁶ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Verbum Domini*, nn. 36-38.

Scripture and the Fathers belong together as do word and answer. The two are not identical, are not of equal importance, do not possess the same normative power. The word is always first; the response, second – the order is not to be reversed. Yet, despite the difference between them and the fact that they permit no intermingling, the two concepts are also not to be separated. Only because the word has found its answering word [*Ant-wort*] does it continue to be a word and to become effective. [...] Hence the word exists only in conjunction with – by means of – the response. This is true also of the word of God, Scripture¹⁷.

In Ratzinger's theology, therefore, the importance of the Fathers in determining the Canon of the Scriptures, in composing the first Symbols or Creeds of Faith, in modelling the liturgy as a lived response of the community to the proclaimed Word, and in bringing about the Gospel's encounter with Greek philosophy is based on much more than their antiquity: "the fact that they stand near *in time* to the origin of the New Testament does not necessarily prove that they are *inwardly* close to it"¹⁸ he says. Instead, it is based on the fact that Christianity possesses a historical form which was "irrevocably" shaped by the theology of the Fathers, by their "proto-response"¹⁹ to the New Testament. "Even if the response is criticized or rejected", Ratzinger concludes, "it is still the horizon from which the word is to be understood"²⁰.

The true value of this "word of answer" can best be appreciated by examining two differing approaches toward hermeneutics. The first of these has its roots in the so-called 'Romantic' school of interpretation begun by Schleiermacher (d. 1834), which held that the interpreter of a text needs to try and overcome the distance that separates him from the original author by entering into the world of that author; this principle, which does not in itself negate the idea that the New Testament texts were originally written in a context of faith, led to the attempt to explain how these texts were written: Schleiermacher's aim was to uncover the making of a text by the author. Thus, the general trend of research

¹⁷ J. RATZINGER, *Principles...*, 147.

¹⁸ J. RATZINGER, *Principles...*, 145. The emphasis is from the original text.

¹⁹ J. RATZINGER, *Principles...*, 148.

²⁰ J. RATZINGER, *Principles...*, 148.

after him was focused on the process separating the writings of the New Testament from the public ministry of Jesus. It was, however, unfortunately combined with a rationalistic turn toward the historical and linguistic sciences as the only means to determine the desired original context. We will examine this underpinning and its consequences later in this paper; for the moment it suffices to highlight how the combination of these approaches meant that an enormous amount of attention was given to discovering the words of Jesus himself (*ipsissima verba*) behind their narration in the Gospel texts, or in other words, purified of all secondary mediation on the part of the evangelists.

According to the positivist historians of the nineteenth century who sought the famous ‘historical Jesus’ as opposed to the ‘Christ of faith’, to use the expression of Strauss in 1865, the theology of the first Christian community thus constituted a layer that needed to be peeled away in the exegetical process in order to access the original. According to this approach towards hermeneutics, Origen’s commentary on Jn 2 – which uses the Pauline theology of the Mystical Body in an eschatological perspective that is completely foreign to the initial context of Purification of the Temple - would thus actually constitute a gross misunderstanding of the text and a stumbling block to its correct interpretation today.

The type of philosophical hermeneutics espoused by Gadamer (d. 2002), on the other hand, takes a very different approach to the question of interpretation²¹; according to him, comprehension depends on our historical-linguistic world which provides us with the ‘prejudices’ with which we comprehend. At the same time, however, Gadamer was adamant that we are not imprisoned within this world of our prejudices: the text too, he says, has its own horizon and our reading of it thus involves a fusion of horizons in which our prejudices are challenged and changed; a history of interpretation involving the co-determination of text and reader is thus constituted in a ‘hermeneutic circle’. The important point here is that Gadamer questioned the very possibility of a neutral and disinterested – or a so-called ‘scientific’ – approach

²¹ It is interesting to note that Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* was published in 1960, precisely the years in which Ratzinger’s reflection on the question of biblical interpretation was being formed. Further study is needed to examine whether Gadamer actually influenced Ratzinger or whether their convergence in some points is mere coincidence.

to interpretation. The history or tradition of the interpretation of a text now actually takes on a positive and indispensable role in the hermeneutic process: it is not a layer, or series of layers, to be done away with, but the horizon within which interpretation takes place.

Applying this model to the question of Biblical hermeneutics, therefore, the faith of the Church would no longer be considered a source of error to be eliminated when reading a Biblical text, but as the horizon - dominated by the figure of Christ - in which the Fathers of the Church interpreted the texts of Scripture, with their own interpretation irrevocably giving shape to the horizon within which later interpretations would take place. The fact that Origen uses Pauline theology to grapple with the Gospel of John is thus perfectly legitimate: as an expression of the same horizon of faith it was natural for Origen to bring it into dialogue with the words of Jesus reported in the episode of the purification of the Temple.

It is worth pointing out that while Ratzinger never explicitly endorsed the particulars of Gadamer's approach, he does share affinities with it. Take for example his repeated affirmation that "every human reason is conditioned by a historical standpoint so that reason pure and simple does not exist"²², and that the idea of "pure objectivity is an absurd abstraction"²³ because reason always has "a wax nose"²⁴, shaped by the historical context in which it lives and embedded within traditions. Ratzinger thus clearly rejected the possibility of the kind of neutral and 'objective' interpretation that the historical-critical analysis he was familiar with strived for; instead, given the fact that interpretation always takes place within a horizon and that conflicting interpretations grounded in conflicting interpretative horizons could be chosen from, his interest lay in asking how to make that choice of horizon.

It is precisely here, when we come to consider the New Testament writings, that the peculiar nature of the Fathers of the Church finds its place, and where Ratzinger supplemented the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer with a theological approach: the Fathers find their place in the 'we' of the Church, he says, because they helped to clarify

²² J. RATZINGER, "Commentary on *Gaudium et Spes*" in H. VORGRIMLER (ed.), *Commentary on the Documents of VCI*, Vol V, 120.

²³ J. RATZINGER, *God's Word...*, 101.

²⁴ J. RATZINGER, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, Ignatius, San Francisco 2005, 37.

the Catholic faith in its first fundamental historical steps. This faith, which was historically shaped by their proto-response, thus becomes the “proper horizon” within which Scripture is to be interpreted. As Ratzinger puts it:

The word is greater than any response. That is why the effort of theology and of the Church to understand what was in the beginning must be constantly renewed, must not be allowed to dry up at any point. At the same time, we must not forget the inseparability of word and response, must not forget that we cannot read or hear the word except in conjunction with the response, which has first received the word and is indispensable for its existence. Even if the response is criticized or rejected, it is still the horizon from which the word is to be understood²⁵.

2.2. A collection of authoritative teachings

John 2:13-25 is based on the testimony of the “beloved disciple”²⁶ - even if its final redacted form was possibly the fruit of a school that formed around and after him - regarding the words, the actions, and the mystery of Christ; in order to follow our itinerary we must therefore pass from the stage of the Fathers to that of the Apostles. As we have already pointed out, in fact, the Fathers too had a legitimate horizon within which they approached their task of interpretation: this horizon, in addition to being influenced by the particular cultural models of the time, was dominated by their access to the Christ event as mediated by the communities that preceded them, with their authoritative teachings and life in faith (liturgy, institutions, etc.). They were not representatives of private ‘hermeneutic schools’ which would have interpreted the Biblical texts according to individual options, as the previous recourse to Gadamer might lead to imagine.

Ratzinger’s study of the concept of ‘apostolic succession’ and ‘apostolic tradition’ is key to understanding this point. The life of the

²⁵ J. RATZINGER, *Principles...*, 147-148.

²⁶ We cannot consider the problem of the identification of this “beloved disciple” with John the apostle here; for our argument, it suffices to consider that he was an eyewitness that transmitted his experience to a community through his preaching handed down in a writing.

Church in the second century was in fact dominated by the struggle against Gnosticism with its hidden teachings or ‘traditions’ on Christ and God, and the Church’s reply was to contrast the “true apostolic tradition of the Church with the pseudo-apostolic tradition of Gnosis”²⁷. The question therefore became determining what was truly apostolic in character, and the way this was done was by identifying

congregations in which the apostles themselves had been at work or that had received letters from the apostles. Within these congregations, the line could be traced back, as it were, to the mouths of the apostles themselves; the man who was now at the head of the congregation could trace his spiritual ancestors, by name, back that far²⁸.

Ratzinger concludes that: “We can see quite clearly here how in fact succession is equal to tradition: succession is holding fast to the apostolic word, just as tradition means the continuing existence of authorized witnesses”²⁹. Apostolic tradition and apostolic succession thus define each other: “the succession is the form of the tradition and the tradition is the content of the succession”³⁰.

This *successio/traditio*, he continues, is not preceded by a Biblical theology: “For the understanding of the New Testament as ‘scripture’, and thus any possible formulation of a New Testament biblical principle, is no earlier than the determination of the principle of *successio/traditio*”³¹. Apostolic tradition preceded, therefore, the formation of the texts of the New Testament, and thus formed the ‘horizon’ of authentic interpretation in order to distinguish what was authentically Christian. Applied to the struggle of the Church against the Gnosis, this principle lead to the formation of the canon, both as a *rule* for interpretation and as a *collection* of authoritative writings:

²⁷ J. RATZINGER, *God’s Word...*, 23.

²⁸ J. RATZINGER, *God’s Word...*, 24.

²⁹ J. RATZINGER, *God’s Word...*, 24.

³⁰ J. RATZINGER, *God’s Word...*, 28.

³¹ J. RATZINGER, *God’s Word...*, 25.

Before the idea of a “canon” of New Testament Scripture had been formulated, the Church had already developed a different concept of what was canonical; she had as her Scripture the Old Testament, but this Scripture needed a canon of New Testament interpretation, which the Church saw as existing in the *traditio* guaranteed by the *successio*³².

The faith horizon within which the Church Fathers interpreted Scripture is thus revealed as this “*traditio* guaranteed by the *successio*”. If we return to our example, therefore, we can say that Origen is aware that he is both a recipient and a transmitter of a testimony about the words and actions of Christ that goes back to the beloved disciple, an eyewitness of the original Christ event. His interpretation is thus a testimony of faith born from spiritual contemplation that is meant to be at the service of the Mystery of Christ and the life of the Church, within whose faith, as guaranteed by the canon of tradition, he inserts himself. This vision stands in stark contrast to the far more horizontal and human approach to the gospels that the historical-critical method adopts.

We should also note in conclusion that this process of *traditio* and *successio*, started by the Apostles and received by Origen, is evidenced in various passages from the fourth Gospel. In our case study text, for example, we read that: “*When therefore He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture, and the word which Jesus had spoken*” (Jn 2:22); this is thus quite clearly the beginning of our process, indicating both what will be transmitted and by whom. At the end of the passage another step in the process is highlighted: “*This is the disciple who bears witness of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his witness is true*” (Jn 21:24). Origen would be the next generation after this “we”.

2.3. From the writing of John to the words of Jesus

We have thus observed the importance of the community of faith stretching back from the Church Fathers to the apostles. Can we go further back to Christ himself? In recognizing the influence of the believing

³² J. RATZINGER, *God's Word...*, 26.

community on the formation of the writings of the New Testament, the historical-critical method is of course justified in questioning our capacity to reconstruct the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus. It should come as no surprise, for example, that the *Jesus Seminar*, with its peculiar methodology of voting to decide on the historicity of the sayings of Jesus, totally rejected the historical authenticity of Jn 2:16: “The saying and context have obviously been Christianized in the Fourth Gospel. The Fellows agreed overwhelmingly to a black designation”³³.

But is the question of the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus what is really at stake here? Ratzinger points out, in fact, how the rigid restriction of the notion of historicity implied in search is actually a highly questionable one:

If ‘historical’ is understood to mean that the discourses of Jesus transmitted to us have to be something like a recorded transcript in order to be acknowledged as ‘historically’ authentic, then the discourses of John’s Gospel are not ‘historical’. But the fact that they make no claim to literal accuracy of this sort by no means implies that they are merely ‘Jesus poems’ that the members of the Johannine school gradually put together, claiming to be acting under the guidance of the Paraclete. What the Gospel is really claiming is that it has correctly rendered the substance of the discourses, of Jesus’ self-attestation in the great Jerusalem disputes, so that the readers really do encounter the decisive content of this message and, therein, the authentic figure of Jesus³⁴.

Applying this to our study, we can conclude that the text of John faithfully transmits not necessarily the *ipsissima verba* but the “substance” of Jesus’ words. The evangelist has truly perceived and transmitted the intention and the thought of Christ to us, with the gospel text remaining the authentic access we have to the ‘real Jesus’, the Jesus who John knew and believed in, the Jesus who he wanted to transmit to us:

³³ R.W. FUNK - R.W. HOOVER, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1993, 407. This “black designation” means that: “Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition” (R.W. FUNK - R.W. HOOVER, *The Five Gospels*, 36).

³⁴ J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth II...*, 229.

“We are declaring to you what we have seen and heard, so that you too may be in communion with us...” (1Jn 1:3).

2.4. From words to the event

We should not limit ourselves to the words of Christ however; we must also consider the facts or historical events involved, and grasp the relation between ‘word’ and ‘event’ thus implied. The text of John, in fact, refers to a historical event – the purification of the temple – which is then referred to another historical event – the death and resurrection of Christ, his Passover – for a correct interpretation. Strathmann’s take on this is illuminating:

What interests the evangelist in this passage is therefore not a visual description of the event of the purification of the Temple; this is why the passage omits any questioning about the origin of the fact and its consequences (which do not appear in any way). Here too, the interest of the author is not historical, but dogmatic: Jesus means the end of the cult of the Temple [...] Jesus is the surpassing and the end of the cult of the Temple³⁵.

The opposition with the Fathers of the Church is once again evident here: in the type of interpretation that Strathmann typifies, the words of Christ manifest only a vague intention to found a new cult; any passage beyond the plane of the announcement is strictly forbidden. On the contrary, Origen refers explicitly to the final resurrection, which he regards as a real event that will take place at the ‘end of history’; according to him, it is because the words of Christ literally designate his own resurrection that they can typologically constitute a pledge of our eschatological resurrection.

Ratzinger tackled precisely this problem in the 1988 Erasmus lecture in New York that we have already mentioned; in analysing the philosophical assumptions of the historical critical method he pointed out that:

³⁵ H. STRATHMANN, *Das Evangelium*, 111, our translation.

For Dibelius, Bultmann, and the mainstream of modern exegetics, the event is something irrational; it lies in the realm of sheer facticity, which is made up of chance and necessity. The fact, then, as such, cannot be a vehicle of meaning. Meaning lies only in the word, and when events themselves seem to be vehicles of meaning, they must be regarded as illustrations of the word and as referring back to it³⁶.

This is the true core of the dualism between exegesis and theology that Ratzinger wanted to counter: on the one hand modern philosophy, marked by Kant, claimed that only the external appearance, or phenomenon of a reality, could be known, while on the other hand the Catholic faith insists on the capacity of the human mind to know a reality – what Kant would have called the *noumenon* – in itself. The epistemological question is of course related to the metaphysical one: events can have meaning in and of themselves, regardless of man's recognition or appreciation of this meaning, because God can imbue it in them. For Ratzinger, in fact, revelation is not just the transmission of divine truths that incidentally uses history as a secondary instrument; if it were, speech would have pre-eminence over the event. Rather, he places himself squarely within the perspective of *Dei Verbum*, which asserts:

This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words [*gestis verbisque*] having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words [*res verbis significatas*], while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them³⁷.

Commenting on this passage, the French theologian de Lubac³⁸ writes:

³⁶ J. RATZINGER, *God's Word...*, 118-119.

³⁷ *Dei Verbum*, n2.

³⁸ H. de Lubac, the famous French theologian, was an important figure at the Council. His opinion of the much younger Ratzinger is garnered from the following observation he made in his *Carnets du Conseil*: "We should also at least invite Dr. Joseph Ratzinger, a theologian as peaceful and benevolent as he is competent, to collaborate on the redaction of the schema" (H. DE LUBAC, *Carnets du Concile - II*, Cerf, Paris 2007, 431). Ratzinger's appreciation of the work of de Lubac and the influence it had on his own thought is well known; in his autobiography he

[*Gesta*] are not only facts, nor merely acts. They are acts, but only inasmuch as they produce their effect; they are operations, but inasmuch as they objectify themselves in works (*opera*, which will later be repeated twice); and these are events, but inasmuch as they are the objective result of certain acts, as caused by a Personal Agent³⁹.

De Lubac therefore rightly insists on the real action of God in the world, which he designates as “events” precisely to indicate that Christian theology cannot limit itself to considering words – even if they are from God. This is the effective remedy for the dualism we are analysing. While the hermeneutics inspired by the historical-critical method we have been outlining tends to limit itself to the subjective aspect of hermeneutical work (words), Catholic doctrine insists that faith, which is subjective insofar as it is exercised by man, nevertheless allows him to adhere to objective facts (events). Ratzinger explains why the two aspects must remain united, denouncing the dualism that separates them:

Word and event must be regarded as equally original if we wish to remain within the Bible’s own perspective. The dualism between word and event, which banishes the event into wordlessness – that is, of meaninglessness – in reality deprives the word, too, of its power to communicate meaning, because it is then left standing in a world empty of meaning. This leads to a docetic Christology, in which reality – that is, the concrete bodily existence of Christ and of man in general – is removed from the realm of meaning. With that, the essence of the biblical witness is missed⁴⁰.

noted that: “*Catholicism*, perhaps Henri de Lubac’s most significant work [...] was for me a key reading event. It gave me not only a new and deeper connection with the thought of the Fathers but also a new way of looking at theology and faith as such. Faith had here become an interior contemplation and, precisely by thinking with the Fathers, a present reality” (J. RATZINGER, *Milestones: Memoirs, 1927-1977*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1998, 98).

³⁹ H. D. LUBAC, *La révélation divine*, Cerf, Paris 1983, 66, our translation.

⁴⁰ J. RATZINGER, *God’s Word...*, 120-121.

Paradoxically of course, it is precisely this meaning of the event itself which provides the ultimate justification for a corrected historical-critical method espoused by Ratzinger:

The historical-critical method – specifically because of the intrinsic nature of theology and faith – is and remains an indispensable dimension of exegetical work. For it is of the very essence of biblical faith to be about real historical events. It does not tell stories symbolizing suprahistorical truths, but is based on history, history that took place here on this earth. The *factum historicum* (historical fact) 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 history⁴¹.

It is also worth noting with Ratzinger that the evangelist who gives the greatest importance to the incarnation is precisely the beloved disciple, and that he would be regarded as ‘historically reliable’ even according to the criteria of current historical science. The trend of current exegesis on the fourth Gospel decisively supports this view; the internal contradictions that previous historical-critical commentaries needed to resort to in order to defend their conclusions only serve to highlight the contradictions inherent to modern thought processes themselves. For while idealist philosophy hardly provides the instruments needed for reflecting on historical events in their objectivity, positive science admits only ‘brute facts’ without interpretation as legitimate. The consequences of this rupture within the historical domain are dramatic, and have been disastrous for theology.

2.5. Some final philosophical considerations

In spite of its necessity, it is thus clear that the historical-critical method that Ratzinger criticized and which we have outlined above with reference to the episode of the purification of the Temple in Jn 2 cannot be absolutized; it not only does not exhaust the interpretative task but also has internal limits and dangers which need to be recognized.

⁴¹ J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth I...*, xv.

According to Ratzinger, the most important of these limits is the fact that the historical method “presupposes the uniformity of the context within which the events of history unfold” and “must therefore treat the biblical words it investigates as human words”: its specific object “is the human word as human”⁴². As a result, it must necessarily, as part of its very method, leave aside the hypothesis that the Bible is the Word of God, that its deepest author is God himself, and that it refers to real events accomplished by God in history.

This means in the first place that the method limits itself to considering individual books of Scripture; the unity of all these writings as one “Bible” is “not something it can recognize as an immediate historical datum”⁴³. Furthermore, when the concentration on the human, which the method embraces as a necessary part of its methodology, is combined with the philosophical presupposition that only the human is truly historical, the consequences are far-reaching. As Ratzinger states:

The real philosophic presupposition of the whole system seems to me to lie in the change in philosophy brought about by Kant, [... with the consequent] restriction to what is positive, what is empirical, to the ‘exact’ sciences, in which by definition what is entirely different, the wholly other, a new beginning on a new plane cannot occur⁴⁴.

In other words, when the historical-critical method embraces a Kantian inspired rationality, which reduces truth to the positive and empirical and collapses any mention of God to the level of subjective experience, it easily becomes a method aimed at removing any “irrational remnant” that would come from the idea that God was actually acting in historical events. But since God and divine action permeate the entire Biblical account of history, what this implies is a process of unravelling the various threads of history, “in such a way that you can ultimately hold in your hand what is ‘actually historical’ – that is, what is purely human in the events”⁴⁵. Any possibility of God truly breaking

⁴² J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth I...*, xvi-xvii.

⁴³ J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth I...*, xvii.

⁴⁴ Cf. J. RATZINGER, *God's Word...*, 112-113.

⁴⁵ J. RATZINGER, *God's Word...*, 92.

into our world, of God revealing himself to us, which is what Christian faith is built on, is thus *a priori* rejected in this system. As a result Scripture becomes no more than a document that describes the beliefs and experiences of the sacred authors at the time of their writing, and exegesis becomes the attempt to go behind these interpretations and discover the ‘human-historical event’ behind the ‘theological’ descriptions of it on the one hand, and to explain how it got confused with the idea of God on the other. The adoption of religious thought from the Mediterranean world and Hellenistic culture by Israel and then the early Church is usually blamed⁴⁶. A radical discontinuity between historical event and theological interpretation, and hence between event and word – preached and written – is thus presupposed by the method.

It is thus this Kantian presupposition of the historical critical method that must be re-examined, Ratzinger says, and the only way to do this is through a “criticism of criticism,” which would involve an analysis of “critical thought’s potential for self-criticism,” and a “diachronic reading” of its conclusions⁴⁷. This type of evaluation, Ratzinger continues, would discover – as we have already pointed out – that there is no such thing as a pure or autonomous reason, and that the idea of “pure objectivity is an absurd abstraction”⁴⁸. On the contrary, he says, reason always has “a wax nose”⁴⁹; it is always shaped by presuppositions. It lives in historical contexts, and is embedded within traditions; these contexts and traditions shape the view that reason has of reality and of itself and that is why reason needs the help of historical analysis to recognize its own limitations⁵⁰. This fact not only demonstrates that the Enlightenment ideal of strict scientific certainty is absolutely impossible, even in our knowledge of the natural world, Ratzinger says, but it also shows us that the positivist way of thinking is itself historically conditioned! Reason’s limitation to the empirical, a process in which Kant played a prominent role, is not, in other words, a discovery about the very ‘nature’ of reason, but a historically conditioned viewpoint about what reason is and what

⁴⁶ Cf. J. RATZINGER, *God’s Word...*, 92.

⁴⁷ J. RATZINGER, *God’s Word...*, 100.

⁴⁸ J. RATZINGER, *God’s Word...*, 101.

⁴⁹ J. RATZINGER, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 37.

⁵⁰ Cf. J. RATZINGER, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2004, 136.

its capacities are. The idea that reason has no ability to speak about being, and about God itself, is thus nothing but one particular idea about reason: it marks the absolutization of the method of the natural sciences, but without sufficient justification for that choice.

Instead of this particular type of rationality, another one is required for Scriptural interpretation according to Ratzinger: a rationality that not only does not exclude the possibility that God could speak in human words in the world, but that actually accepts this as a fact based on faith. The exegete, in other words, in order to adequately perform the interpretative task, must approach Scripture with the rationality of faith, within the living tradition of the Church. Event and interpretation, event and word thus need to be considered equally original⁵¹: it is the written word of Scripture that both interprets and describes historical events that is inspired, and not the ‘pure historical event in itself.’

To conclude by returning to our example of the Purification of the Temple (Jn 2), therefore, we can affirm that we are confronted with the words of Jesus which certainly go beyond a simple verbal expression: his action is a symbolic one, going back to the tradition of the Prophets of Israel (see Jer 7). But debates regarding the historical materiality of these *verba* miss the essential point: Christ’s *verba* refer to an event, designated by the ‘destruction’ and ‘recovery’ of the Temple (*gesta*). The anchoring in history is thus twofold: the gospel may allude to the destruction of the Temple by Titus in 70, but especially to the Passion and Resurrection, which is the central event of all history, to this divine act (*gesta*) which grounds and confirms the whole fourth gospel (*verba*). Once again, the text of our passage suggests this duality: “*After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken*” (Jn 2:22).

3. The four stages in the formation of Christian theology

Having completed our journey from Origen back to the Christ-Event, we must complete the circle by moving forward in time. We will describe the historical process of Revelation as outlined by Ratzinger

⁵¹ Cf. J. RATZINGER, *God’s Word...*, 118-119.

in his 1965 essay on the relation between Revelation and Tradition. We can in fact, Ratzinger says, discern four fundamental historical stages in the way a Biblical text was interpreted within the Biblical framework itself, and this structure, in which the concept of Tradition clearly emerges, thus also explains the foundation for an authentic ecclesial interpretation of a text. Jn 2:13-25 actually demonstrates the presence of these four stages quite clearly, and thus provides a concrete example of how Ratzinger's hermeneutical principles can be applied in order to bridge the gap between the spiritual exegesis of the Fathers and historical-critical exegesis.

3.1. First stage: "An OT Theology of the OT"

Biblical scholarship in the last decades has drawn attention to the fact that, even before the arrival of Christ, texts of the Old Testament were subject to innovative interpretations that often went beyond their 'literal meaning'⁵². There is thus an "Old Testament theology of the Old Testament" Ratzinger says,

which the historian ascertains within the Old Testament and which has of course already developed a number of overlapping layers even there, in which old texts are reread and reinterpreted in the light of new events. The phenomenon of texts growing and developing in new situations, of revelation developing through a new interpretation of the old, quite substantially shapes the inner structure of the Old Testament itself⁵³.

A fairly simple example of this first stage in theology would be the oracle of the New Covenant in Jer 31:31-34: while making explicit reference to the Sinai Covenant, it simultaneously modifies its theology. OT texts are in fact sometimes rather fluid in their material expression and in their external organization; several were modified in the centuries immediately preceding the coming of Christ, and books were formed

⁵² See, for example : M. A. FISHBANE, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988.

⁵³ J. RATZINGER, *God's Word...*, 60.

by regrouping writings according to much later theological designs such as the appearance of the first groupings of TaNaK (Law-Prophets-Writings, cf. Sir 1:8-10). We would therefore expand Ratzinger's description, while retaining his fundamental insight, and speak of 'Judaic theologies concerning the realities of the Old Testament'. A plurality of theologies is not hard to find within the Judaic people before the destruction of the second Temple, and the proliferation of apocalyptic works is a further sign of this.

This 'theological melting pot' of Judaic theologies also undoubtedly influenced our text of the purification of the Temple. The figure of the prophet Jeremiah is clearly meant to appear in the background of Jesus' cleansing action (cf. Jer 7), for example, as are the classic themes of the opposition between worship and social justice (cf. for example Is 1:10-20), and of the prophetic criticism of established authority (cf. Ezek 34). The response that it took "*forty-six years to build the Temple*" (Jn 2:20), which recalls the predominant role of the Temple in the religious life of Israel, is another sign of this "theology of the Old Testament" in evolution (cf. Is 2).

3.2. Second Stage: "A NT Theology of the OT"

Having dealt with the OT theology of the OT, Ratzinger continues his exploration of the historical stages of theology in the following manner:

*There is a New Testament theology of the Old Testament, which does not coincide with the Old Testament's own inner theology of the Old Testament, though it is certainly linked to it in the unity of the *analogia fidei*. [...] it is a new interpretation, in the light of the Christ-event, which is not produced by mere historical reflection on the Old Testament alone. By effecting such a change in interpretation, it is not however doing anything completely foreign to the nature of Old Testament, approaching it only from the outside; rather, it is continuing the inner structure of the Old Testament, which itself lives and grows through such reinterpretations⁵⁴.*

⁵⁴ J. RATZINGER, *God's Word...*, 61.

The episode of the purification of the Temple shows three signs of this second stage: (i) the disciples recall Psalm 69 (“*zeal for your house will consume me*”, cf. Ps 69:9, Jn 2:17) and its words thus acquire a new meaning for them; (ii) the Temple of Jerusalem becomes a prefiguration of the Body of Christ through the typically Johannine technique of double meaning (cf. Jn 2:21); (iii) after the Resurrection, the disciples “*believed the Scripture and the word Jesus had spoken*” (Jn 2:22), i.e. they now interpret the Old Testament in the light of the Christ-Event.

The same phenomenon is mentioned by Luke during the apparition of the Risen Lord to the disciples in Jerusalem: “*Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures*” (Lk 24:45); the transition to a new Christian interpretation of the ‘Scriptures’ in light of the Christ-Event, and in particular in light of the paschal mystery, is thus once again made clear. In our example of the purification of the Temple, John explicitly emphasizes this point: “*When therefore He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered... and they believed...*” (Jn 2:22). A new, innovative interpretation of the past is triggered by the event of Christ. Ratzinger presents this as follows:

Just as the two covenants differ in their nature, as covenant, so also the fact of Scripture is not given in the same way each time. That is seen quite clearly in the New Testament Scriptures themselves, when they understand by ‘Scripture’ only the Old Testament, which is and remains for them ‘the Scripture’, the meaning of which, so they believe, has come to light in the Christ-event. They do not set a new Scripture over against or alongside the old Scripture; rather, they set the Christ-event, as the Spirit that interprets Scripture, over against the *one* Scripture, that is, the Old Testament⁵⁵.

3.3. Third Stage: “A NT Theology of the NT”

A third stage in the development of theology, closely related to the second, emerges at this point:

⁵⁵ J. RATZINGER, *God's Word...*, 53-54.

There is a New Testament theology of the New Testament – which corresponds to the Old Testament theology of the Old Testament: that is, it is the theology that the historian can derive as such from within the New Testament; that, too, is in turn characterized by and derives its structure from the same kind of growth, by the new understanding of the old in a new situation⁵⁶.

The Purification of the Temple in Jn 2 bears witness to this stage of theology as well. Let us recall that the text is essentially a testimony of faith going back to the beloved disciple that is probably dated after the writings of St. Paul and the synoptics, by which time a well-developed Christian theology of a new cult in the person of Jesus has been established. The comparison with the Temple does not end with the parallel of ‘destruction / reconstruction’, therefore, but also suggests - as Strathmann has correctly understood - the establishment of this worship “in spirit and truth” as promised to the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn 4:24).

What we are witness to, therefore, is a growth in understanding of the Christ event within the NT itself, a fact that is hardly surprising and which is referred to by John in our text: “*When he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that He had said this, and they came to believe the Scripture and the word Jesus had spoken*” (Jn 2:22). It is only after the paschal mystery and the coming of the Holy Spirit that the disciples begin to understand the full import of Christ’s actions, and this post-paschal faith is explicitly offered as a counter-example to the insufficient ‘faith’ produced by Jesus’ action at the time: “*While he was in Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover, many began to believe in his name when they saw the signs he was doing. But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all, and did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well*” (Jn 2:23-25).

The internal logic and finesse of Ratzinger’s commentary on Jn 2 in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* is thus made evident:

In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ actual words are rendered thus: ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up’ (2:19). [...] His ‘sign’

⁵⁶ J. RATZINGER, *God’s Word...*, 61.

is the Cross and Resurrection. The Cross and Resurrection give him authority as the one who ushers in true worship⁵⁷.

Ratzinger's method in this chapter is in fact worth paying attention to. He first refers to the event of the purification of the Temple, a fact reported on by all four Gospels - note the importance of history, the *factum historicum* - and then identifies the words of Jesus as the synoptics report them to us. Only then does he move on to the Gospel of John with its theology of the sign, distinguishing the testimonies regarding the account from the fact itself, and careful pointing out how the diversity of witnesses explains a diversity of testimonies without the historical event itself disappearing behind this multiplicity. This approach allows him to explain that the words of Christ (*verba*) reported by John refer to the historical reality of his paschal mystery (*gesta*), and that, contrary to several commentaries like those we have cited, the cultic aspect is dependent on this event.

3.4. Fourth Stage: "An Ecclesial Theology of the NT"

The last stage in the historical development of theology that Ratzinger points out allows us to bridge the gap that many authors posit between the New Testament and patristic theology, and has already been outlined in its essential structure in the previous section of this paper. As Ratzinger states:

There is an ecclesial theology of the New Testament, which we call dogmatics. It relates to the New Testament theology of the New Testament in the same way as the New Testament theology of the Old Testament relates to the Old Testament theology of the Old Testament. The particular "extra" element that accordingly distinguishes dogmatics from biblical theology is what we call, in a precise sense, tradition. Here, too, we should note once again that the ecclesial theology of the New Testament, even though it is not simply identical with the inner, historically ascertainable New Testament theology of the New Testament, as it can be ascertained

⁵⁷ J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth I...*, 21.

historically, but reaches out beyond this, is nonetheless not something merely exterior to it. For here, too, within the New Testament itself, begins the ecclesial process of interpreting what has been handed down; the ecclesial theology of the New Testament reaches back, as a process, right into the midst of the New Testament, as could be shown most clearly, for instance, in the history of the synoptic tradition⁵⁸.

It is important to recall that the four stages we have outlined here are not chronologically successive in the strict sense of the term: the concept of Tradition used by Ratzinger is that of *Dei Verbum*, and refers to the Apostles' transmission of the Gospel, which is Christ himself (cf. n7-8). In its beginnings, this ecclesial theology or tradition thus precedes the formation of the writings of the New Testament - the hagiographers drew on this Sacred Tradition to compose their writings - and guarded by apostolic succession it was passed down after the sacred authors to arrive to us today. In a beautiful General Audience on the meaning of Tradition, Benedict thus defined Tradition as:

the river of new life that flows from the origins, from Christ down to us, and makes us participate in God's history with humanity. [...] Tradition is the living Gospel, proclaimed by the Apostles in its integrity on the basis of the fullness of their unique and unrepeatable experience: through their activity the faith is communicated to others, even down to us, until the end of the world. Tradition, therefore, is the history of the Spirit who acts in the Church's history through the mediation of the Apostles and their successors, in faithful continuity with the experience of the origins⁵⁹.

As we have already seen, the Fathers of the Church act as the authoritative witnesses of this Tradition because of the historical importance their 'response' gave the 'word'; *Dei Verbum* thus states that "The words of the holy fathers witness to the presence of this living tradition,

⁵⁸ J. RATZINGER, *God's Word...*, 61-62.

⁵⁹ BENEDICT XVI, *General Audience, Wednesday May 3, 2006*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20060503.html.

whose wealth is poured into the practice and life of the believing and praying Church” (n8). This reference to the Fathers of the Church allows us to return to Origen’s interpretation and understand his use of Ezek 37, even though its inclusion is initially a surprising one.

Corresponding to the first stage of theology, we note how the vision of the dry bones (Ezek 37) had already been interpreted in an eschatological key by a Qumran writing, *Pseudo-Ezekiel*, which posed the question of the recompense the righteous who had died in times of persecution would receive. Origen’s eschatological reading of Ezek 37 is thus in keeping with other ancient Jewish apocalyptic traditions; except that in light of the Christ-event he now transforms this into a description of the final resurrection, corresponding to Stage 2 in our historical process.

From the third “NT theology of the NT” stage, Origen inherits the literal meaning of Jn 2, which establishes a relationship of prefiguration - fulfilment between the Temple in Jerusalem and the physical body of Christ. The Alexandrine, inspired by Pauline theology, adds a third term to this typology, according to a ternary mode of thought that is typical of him⁶⁰: from the shadow (the stone edifice), to the image (the physical body of Jesus), to reality (the mystical body of Christ, the Church). Note that this corresponds in Origen’s presentation to three moments based in historical events: the disappearance of the Judaic cult with the destruction of the Temple in 70; the advent of worship “in spirit and truth” by the paschal mystery of Christ; and the final and universal resurrection of the members of the Mystical Body at the end of time. The relationship established by Ratzinger between biblical theology and dogmatic theology, where the latter transcends the former without being external to it, thus shines forth in all its splendour here; clearly it is only within the legitimate analogy of faith that the interpretation of Origen acquires its value.

From the theological point of view, we must therefore interpret the words of Christ, as John transmits them to us, within the faith of the community, which plays the essential role of revealing the full meaning

⁶⁰ de Lubac has shown how three-term groups are recurrent in Origen’s thought: Tripartite anthropology (body, mind, spirit), tripartite typology (Old Testament, Gospel, Christian mystery), the triple sense of Scripture (literal, mystical, spiritual). Cf. H. DE LUBAC, *Histoire et esprit...*, 139-149.

of the written word. The balance of Ratzinger's interpretation of John 2 in *Jesus of Nazareth* moves precisely in this direction:

Yet this saying [*destroy this temple...*] has an ever deeper significance. As John rightly says, the disciples understood it in its full depth only after the Resurrection, in their memory – in the collective memory of the community of disciples enlightened by the Holy Spirit, that is, the Church. The rejection and crucifixion of Jesus means at the same time the end of this Temple. The era of the Temple is over. A new worship is being introduced, in a Temple not built by human hands. This Temple is his body, the Risen One, who gathers the peoples and unites them in the sacrament of his body and blood. He himself is the new Temple of humanity⁶¹.

The four stages in the formation of Christian theology that Ratzinger outlined in 1965 thus allows us to appreciate the steps in his interpretation of John 2 in 2011: he faithfully collects and explains the “theology of the NT” - the meaning intended by John - by recovering certain elements of historical analysis. Then he delicately opens up this perspective to “ecclesial theology”, employing key terms from the theology of the mystical body and the Eucharist. In his own way, Ratzinger is moving towards a patristic interpretation similar in inspiration and method to that of Origen, while remaining within Johannine theology. The two methods of interpretation recognized by the Council as legitimate – historical methodology and the theological approach – are thus not only respected but also brought into an admirable balance. Ratzinger has thus provided us with an astonishing and yet simple example of how to satisfy the dual criterion he had himself set out for Catholic theology:

On this basis, one would have to assert something like a dual criteriology in matters of faith: on one hand, there is what the early Church called the “rule of faith”, and with it the regulatory function of official witnesses vis-a-vis Scripture and its interpretation – that *praescriptio* of anyone holding Scripture as a possession, about which Tertullian justly observed that it excludes any kind of

⁶¹ J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth II...*, 21-22.

arbitrary playing off of Scripture against the Church. On the other hand, however, there is also the limitation of the *littera scripturae*, the literal meaning of Scripture as this can be ascertained historically, which, as we have said, represents in no way an absolute criterion, that is, a criterion existing in and for itself, but rather a relatively independent criterion within the dual counterpoint of faith and knowledge. Whatever can be known unambiguously from Scripture, through academic study or through simply reading it, has the function of a real criterion, against which even the pronouncements of the Magisterium must be tested⁶².

Conclusion

Debates regarding the interpretation of Scripture are not insignificant. The fact that Ratzinger chose to dedicate so much energy and attention to this theme both during his career as a theologian and during his Petrine ministry shows how deeply and profoundly these debates have influenced the life and faith of the People of God. After noting the prevalence of a dualism between exegesis and theology in *Verbum Domini*, Benedict had in fact continued with the following warning:

All this is also bound to have a negative impact on the spiritual life and on pastoral activity; as a consequence of the absence of the second methodological level [theological approach], a profound gulf is opened up between scientific exegesis and *lectio divina*. This can give rise to a lack of clarity in the preparation of homilies. It must also be said that this dichotomy can create confusion and a lack of stability in the intellectual formation of candidates for ecclesial ministries. In a word, where exegesis is not theology, Scripture cannot be the soul of theology, and conversely, where theology is not essentially the interpretation of the Church's Scripture, such a theology no longer has a foundation⁶³.

⁶² J. RATZINGER, *God's Word...*, 66.

⁶³ BENEDICT XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 35.

But the theologian Ratzinger did not rest content with pointing out just how dramatic this state of affairs was; he also offered conceptual instruments to resolve the problem. Convinced that we need to fully recognize both the value and the limitations of the historical critical method, and above all question the validity of its philosophical presuppositions when applied to the area of theology, Ratzinger pointed out the advantages of philosophical hermeneutics techniques when used within the bounds of necessary theological discernment. He thus furnishes us with many examples of an *ars interpretandi* exercised within the communion of ecclesial faith, as the example of the purification of the Temple in St John so aptly demonstrates. The primary instrument he uses in this interpretative task is that of the relation between revelation and tradition: by outlining how there are successive stages in the comprehension of a text that build on each other within the unity of the faith in the revelatory process itself, and by including an ecclesial theology of the New Testament in this process together with a recognition of the irrevocable importance of the Fathers as proto-response in its formation, he sets the stage for a more complete use of reception history as a valid hermeneutic principle of Scripture.

As was already mentioned at the start of this article, the results of our analysis should be compared and combined with current scholarship on the Gospel of John; the question of how far exegesis today has advanced in its reply to the Ratzingerean critique of the historical-critical method of interpretation could thus also be answered. Exegesis, patristics, and dogmatic theology should in fact all work hand in hand in the interpretative process; Ratzinger's evaluation of the type of exegesis that he believed dominated scholarship as recently as the late 1980's may no longer be entirely applicable regarding to the state of exegesis today, but his writings constitute a warning against the excesses of that method and a solution based on Tradition that promises to bear much fruit in the future.

Summary: This paper examines the relationship between exegesis and theology in the writings of J. Ratzinger/ Benedict XVI. Using the episode of the Purification of the Temple in Jn. 2 as an example, we contrast Origen's exegesis of the passage with that of several representatives of the historical-critical method, thus illustrating and analysing Ratzinger's concern about what he has called a dualism between historical-critical exegesis and dogmatic

theology. We then show how Ratzinger attempts to mediate between the two approaches by placing the genesis of biblical texts within the wider dynamic of Revelation and Tradition. His thesis of the existence of four fundamental historical stages in the interpretation of a Biblical text within the framework of the Bible itself, in which the concept of Tradition emerges clearly, lays the foundation for an ecclesial interpretation of a text and bridges the gap between the type of spiritual exegesis carried out by the Fathers and historical-critical exegesis.

Key Words: Ratzinger, exegesis, hermeneutics, Tradition, Revelation, historical-critical method, Purification of the Temple

Sommario: Questo articolo esamina il rapporto tra esegesi e teologia negli scritti di J. Ratzinger / Benedetto XVI. Usando l'episodio della Purificazione del tempio in Gv 2 come un esempio, contrapponiamo l'esegesi di Origene con quella di diversi rappresentanti del metodo storico-critico, illustrando e analizzando così la preoccupazione di Ratzinger riguardo ciò che lui ha chiamato un dualismo tra l'esegesi storica - critica e la teologia dogmatica. Mostriamo quindi come Ratzinger cerca di mediare tra i due approcci collocando la genesi dei testi biblici all'interno della più ampia dinamica della Rivelazione e la Tradizione; la sua tesi sull'esistenza di quattro fasi storiche fondamentali nell'interpretazione di un testo biblico all'interno della stessa Bibbia, in cui emerge chiaramente il concetto di Tradizione, pone le basi per un'interpretazione ecclesiale di un testo e colma il divario tra il tipo di esegesi spirituale svolta dai Padri e l'esegesi storico-critica.

Parole chiave: Ratzinger, esegesi, ermeneutica, Tradizione, Rivelazione, metodo storico-critico, Purificazione del Tempio