FOREWORD

This book about Jesus, the first part of which I am now presenting to the public, has had a long gestation. When I was growing up—in the 1930s and 1940s—there was a series of inspiring books about Jesus: Karl Adam, Romano Guardini, Franz Michel Willam, Giovanni Papini, and Henri Daniel-Rops were just some of the authors one could name. All of these books based their portrayal of Jesus Christ on the Gospels. They presented him as a man living on earth who, fully human though he was, at the same time brought God to men, the God with whom as Son he was one. Through the man Jesus, then, God was made visible, and hence our eyes were able to behold the perfect man.

But the situation started to change in the 1950s. The gap between the "historical Jesus" and the "Christ of faith" grew wider and the two visibly fell apart. But what can faith in Jesus as the Christ possibly mean, in Jesus as the Son of the living God, if the *man* Jesus was so completely different from the picture that the Evangelists painted of him and that the Church, on the evidence of the Gospels, takes as the basis of her preaching?

As historical-critical scholarship advanced, it led to finer and finer distinctions between layers of tradition in the Gospels, beneath which the real object of faith—the figure [*Gestalt*] of Jesus—became increasingly obscured and blurred. At the same time, though, the reconstructions of this Jesus (who could only be discovered by going behind the traditions and sources used by the Evangelists) became more and more incompatible with one another: at one end of the spectrum, Jesus was the anti-Roman revolutionary working—though finally failing—to overthrow the ruling

powers; at the other end, he was the meek moral teacher who approves everything and unaccountably comes to grief. If you read a number of these reconstructions one after the other, you see at once that far from uncovering an icon that has become obscured over time, they are much more like photographs of their authors and the ideals they hold. Since then there has been growing skepticism about these portrayals of Jesus, but the figure of Jesus himself has for that very reason receded even further into the distance.

All these attempts have produced a common result: the impression that we have very little certain knowledge of Jesus and that only at a later stage did faith in his divinity shape the image we have of him. This impression has by now penetrated deeply into the minds of the Christian people at large. This is a dramatic situation for faith, because its point of reference is being placed in doubt: Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air.

Rudolf Schnackenburg was probably the most prominent Catholic exegete writing in German during the second half of the twentieth century. It is clear that toward the end of his life, this crisis surrounding the faith made a profound impression on him. In view of the inadequacy of all the portrayals of the "historical" Jesus offered by recent exegesis, he strove to produce one last great work: *Jesus in the Gospels: A Biblical Christology*. The book is intended to help believing Christians "who today have been made insecure by scientific research and critical discussion, so that they may hold fast to faith in the person of Jesus Christ as the bringer of salvation and Savior of the world" (p. x). At the end of the book, Schnackenburg sums up the result of a lifetime of scholarship: "a reliable view of the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth through scientific effort with historical-critical methods can be only inadequately achieved" (p. 316); "the efforts of scientific exegesis to examine these traditions and trace them back to what is historically credible" draw us "into a continual discussion of tradition and redaction history that never comes to rest" (p. 318).

His own account of the figure of Jesus suffers from a certain unresolved tension because of the constraints of the method he feels bound to use, despite its inadequacies. Schnackenburg shows us the Gospels' image of

Christ, but he considers it to be the product of manifold layers of tradition, through which the "real" Jesus can only be glimpsed from afar. He writes: "The historical ground is presupposed but is superseded in the faith-view of the evangelists" (p. 321). Now, no one doubts that; what remains unclear is how far the "historical ground" actually extends. That said, Schnackenburg does clearly throw into relief the decisive point, which he regards as a genuinely historical insight: Jesus' relatedness to God and his closeness to God (p. 322). "Without anchoring in God, the person of Jesus remains shadowy, unreal, and unexplainable" (p. 322).

This is also the point around which I will construct my own book. It sees Jesus in light of his communion with the Father, which is the true center of his personality; without it, we cannot understand him at all, and it is from this center that he makes himself present to us still today.

To be sure, in the particular contours of my own presentation of Jesus I make a determined effort to go beyond Schnackenburg. The problem with Schnackenburg's account of the relationship between New Testament traditions and historical events stands out very clearly for me when he writes that the Gospels "want, as it were, to clothe with flesh the mysterious Son of God who appeared on earth" (p. 322). I would like to say in response that they did not need to "clothe him with flesh," because he had already truly taken flesh. Of course, the question remains: Can this flesh be accessed through the dense jungle of traditions?

Schnackenburg tells us in the foreword to his book that he feels indebted to the historical-critical method, which had been in use in Catholic theology ever since the door was opened for it by the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943 (p. ix). This encyclical was an important milestone for Catholic exegesis. Since then, though, the debate about method has moved on, both inside and outside the Catholic Church. There have been significant new methodological discoveries—both in terms of strictly historical work and in terms of the interplay between theology and historical method in scriptural interpretation. *Dei Verbum,* the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, made a decisive step forward. In addition, two documents of the Pontifical Biblical Commission communicate

important insights that have matured in the course of debates among exegetes: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Vatican City, 1993) and *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (Vatican City, 2001).

I would like to sketch at least the broad outlines of the methodology, drawn from these documents, that has guided me in writing this book. The first point is that 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 history.

If we push this history aside, Christian faith as such disappears and is recast as some other religion. So if history, if facticity in this sense, is an essential dimension of Christian faith, then faith must expose itself to the historical method—indeed, faith itself demands this. I have already mentioned the conciliar Constitution on Divine Revelation; it makes the same point quite explicitly in paragraph 12 and goes on to list some concrete elements of method that have to be kept in mind when interpreting Scripture. The Pontifical Biblical Commission's document on the interpretation of Holy Scripture develops the same idea much more amply in the chapter entitled "Methods and Approaches for Interpretation."

The historical-critical method—let me repeat—is an indispensable tool, given the structure of Christian faith. But we need to add two points. This method is a fundamental dimension of exegesis, but it does not exhaust the interpretive task for someone who sees the biblical writings as a single corpus of Holy Scripture inspired by God. We will have to return to this point at greater length in a moment.

For the time being, it is important—and this is a second point—to recognize the limits of the historical-critical method itself. For someone who considers himself directly addressed by the Bible today, the method's first limit 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. It attempts to identify and to understand the past—as it was in itself—with the greatest possible precision, in order then to find out what the author could have said and intended to say in the context of the mentality and events of the time. 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. It can glimpse points of contact with the present and it can try to apply the biblical word to the present; the one thing it cannot do is make it into something present *today*—that would be overstepping its bounds. Its very precision in interpreting the reality of the past is both its strength and its limit.

This is connected with a further point. Because it is a historical method, it presupposes the uniformity of the context within which the events of history unfold. It must therefore treat the biblical words it investigates as human words. On painstaking reflection, it can intuit something of the "deeper value" the word contains. It can in some sense catch the sounds of a higher dimension through the human word, and so open up the method to self-transcendence. But its specific object is the human word as human.

Ultimately, it considers the individual books of Scripture in the context of their historical period, and then analyzes them further according to their sources. The unity of all of these writings as one "Bible," however, is not something it can recognize as an immediate historical datum. Of course it can examine the lines of development, the growth of traditions, and in that sense can look beyond the individual books to see how they come together to form the one "Scripture." Nevertheless, it always has to begin by going back to the origin of the individual texts, which means placing them in their past context, even if it goes on to complement this move back in time by following up the process through which the texts were later brought together.

We have to keep in mind the limit of all efforts to know the past: We can never go beyond the domain of hypothesis, because we simply cannot bring the past into the present. To be sure, some hypotheses enjoy a high degree of certainty, but overall we need to remain conscious of the limit of our certainties—indeed, the history of modern exegesis makes this limit perfectly evident.

So far, then, we have said something about the importance of the historical-critical method, on one hand, and we have described its limit, on the other. Something more than just the limit has come into view, though, I hope: the fact that the inner nature of the method points beyond itself and contains within itself an openness to complementary methods. In these words from the past, we can discern the question concerning their meaning for today; a voice greater than man's echoes in Scripture's human words; the individual writings [*Schrifte*] of the Bible point somehow to the living process that shapes the one Scripture [*Schrift*].

Indeed, the realization of this last point some thirty years ago led American scholars to develop the project of "canonical exegesis." The aim of this exegesis is to read individual texts within the totality of the one Scripture, which then sheds new light on all the individual texts. Paragraph 12 of the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on Divine Revelation had already clearly underscored this as a fundamental principle of theological exegesis: If you want to understand the Scripture in the spirit in which it is written, you have to attend to the content and to the unity of Scripture as a whole. The Council goes on to stress the need for taking account of the living tradition of the whole Church and of the analogy of faith (the intrinsic correspondences within the faith).

Let us dwell for the time being on the unity of Scripture. It is a theological datum. But it is not simply imposed from the outside on what is in itself a heterogeneous ensemble of writings. Modern exegesis has brought to light the process of constant rereading that forged the words transmitted in the Bible into Scripture: Older texts are reappropriated, reinterpreted, and read with new eyes in new contexts. They become Scripture by being read anew, evolving in continuity with their original sense, tacitly corrected and given

added depth and breadth of meaning. This is a process in which the word gradually unfolds its inner potentialities, already somehow present like seeds, but needing the challenge of new situations, new experiences and new sufferings, in order to open up.

This process is certainly not linear, and it is often dramatic, but when you watch it unfold in light of Jesus Christ, you can see it moving in a single overall direction; you can see that the Old and New Testaments belong together. This Christological hermeneutic, which sees Jesus Christ as the key to the whole and learns from him how to understand the Bible as a unity, presupposes a prior act of faith. It cannot be the conclusion of a purely historical method. But this act of faith is based upon reason—historical reason—and so makes it possible to see the internal unity of Scripture. By the same token, it enables us to understand anew the individual elements that have shaped it, without robbing them of their historical originality.

"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. There are two further aspects of theological exegesis that I would like to underscore. Historical-critical interpretation of a text seeks to discover the precise sense the words were intended to convey at their time and place of origin. That is good and important. But—aside from the fact that such reconstructions can claim only a relative certainty—it is necessary to keep in mind that any human utterance of a certain weight contains more than the author may have been immediately aware of at the time. When a word transcends the moment in which it is spoken, it carries within itself a "deeper value." This "deeper value" pertains most of all to words that have matured in the course of faith-history. For in this case the author is not simply speaking for himself on his own authority. He is speaking from the perspective of a common history that sustains him and that already implicitly contains the possibilities of its future, of the further stages of its journey. The process of continually rereading and drawing out new meanings from words would not have been possible unless the words themselves were already open to it from within.

At this point we get a glimmer, even on the historical level, of what inspiration means: The author does not speak as a private, self-contained subject. He speaks in a living community, that is to say, in a living historical movement not created by him, nor even by the collective, but which is led forward by a greater power that is at work. There are dimensions of the word that the old doctrine of the fourfold sense of Scripture pinpointed with remarkable accuracy. The four senses of Scripture are not individual meanings arrayed side by side, but dimensions of the one word that reaches beyond the moment.

This already suggests the second aspect I wanted to speak about. Neither the individual books of Holy Scripture nor the Scripture as a whole are simply a piece of literature. The Scripture emerged from within the heart of a living subject—the pilgrim People of God—and lives within this same subject. One could say that the books of Scripture involve three interacting subjects. First of all, there is the individual author or group of authors to whom we owe a particular scriptural text. But these authors are not autonomous writers in the modern sense; they form part of a collective subject, the "People of God," from within whose heart and to whom they speak. Hence, this subject is actually the deeper "author" of the Scriptures. And yet likewise, this people does not exist alone; rather, it knows that it is led, and spoken to, by God himself, who—through men and their humanity—is at the deepest level the one speaking.

The connection with the subject we call "People of God" is vital for Scripture. On one hand, this book—Scripture—is the measure that comes from God, the power directing the people. On the other hand, though, Scripture lives precisely within this people, even as this people transcends itself in Scripture. Through their self-transcendence (a fruit, at the deepest level, of the incarnate Word) they become the people of *God*. The People of God—the Church—is the living subject of Scripture; it is in the Church that the words of the Bible are always in the present. This also means, of course, that the People has to receive its very self from God, ultimately from the incarnate Christ; it has to let itself be ordered, guided, and led by him.

I feel that I owe the reader these remarks about methodology, because they govern my interpretation of the figure of Jesus in the New Testament (cf. the introductory remarks included with the Bibliography). The main implication of this for my portrayal of Jesus is that I trust the Gospels. Of course, I take for granted everything that the Council and modern exegesis tell us about literary genres, about authorial intention, and about the fact that the Gospels were written in the context, and speak within the living milieu, of communities. 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, and I hope the reader will be, too, that this figure is much more logical and, historically speaking, much more intelligible than the reconstructions we have been presented with in the last decades. I believe that this Jesus—the Jesus of the Gospels—is a historically plausible and convincing figure.

Unless there had been something extraordinary in what happened, unless the person and the words of Jesus radically surpassed the hopes and expectations of the time, there is no way to explain why he was crucified or why he made such an impact. As early as twenty or so years after Jesus' death, the great Christ-hymn of the Letter to the Philippians (cf. Phil 2:6–11) offers us a fully developed Christology stating that Jesus was equal to God, but emptied himself, became man, and humbled himself to die on the Cross, and that to him now belongs the worship of all creation, the adoration that God, through the Prophet Isaiah, said was due to him alone (cf. Is 45:23).

Critical scholarship rightly asks the question: What happened during those twenty years after Jesus' Crucifixion? Where did this Christology come from? To say that it is the fruit of anonymous collective formulations, whose authorship we seek to discover, does not actually explain anything. How could these unknown groups be so creative? How were they so persuasive and how did they manage to prevail? Isn't it more logical, even historically speaking, to assume that the greatness came at the beginning, and that the figure of Jesus really did explode all existing categories and could only be understood in the light of the mystery of God? Admittedly, to believe that, as man, he truly *was* God, and that he communicated his divinity veiled in parables, yet with increasing clarity, exceeds the scope of the historical

method. Yet if instead we take this conviction of faith as our starting point for reading the texts with the help of historical methodology and its intrinsic openness to something greater, they are opened up and they reveal a way and a figure that are worthy of belief. Something else comes into clear focus as well: Though the New Testament writings display a many-layered struggle to come to grips with the figure of Jesus, they exhibit a deep harmony despite all their differences.

It is obvious that the way I look at the figure of Jesus goes beyond what much contemporary exegesis, as represented by someone such as Schnackenburg, has to say. I hope it is clear to the reader, though, that my intention in writing this book is not to counter modern exegesis; rather, I write with profound gratitude for all that it has given and continues to give to us. It has opened up to us a wealth of material and an abundance of findings that enable the figure of Jesus to become present to us with a vitality and depth that we could not have imagined even just a few decades ago. I have merely tried to go beyond purely historical-critical exegesis so as to apply new methodological insights that allow us to offer a properly theological interpretation of the Bible. To be sure, this requires faith, but the aim unequivocally is not, nor should be, to give up serious engagement with history.

It goes without saying that this book is in no way an exercise of the magisterium, but is solely an expression of my personal search "for the face of the Lord" (cf. Ps 27:8). Everyone is free, then, to contradict me. I would only ask my readers for that initial goodwill without which there can be no understanding.

As I said at the beginning of this foreword, the present book has undergone a long gestation. I was able to begin work on it during the 2003 summer holidays. Then, in August 2004, I gave chapters 1–4 their final shape. Since my election to the episcopal see of Rome I have used every free moment to make progress on the book. As I do not know how much more time or strength I am still to be given, I have decided to publish the first ten chapters, covering the period from the Baptism in the Jordan to Peter's confession of faith and the Transfiguration, as Part One of this book.

In Part Two I hope also to be able to include the chapter on the infancy narratives, which I have postponed for now, because it struck me as the most urgent priority to present the figure and the message of Jesus in his public ministry, and so to help foster the growth of a living relationship with him.

Rome, on the Feast of Saint Jerome
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JOSEPH RATZINGER, BENEDICT XVI