

FROM THEOLOGY TO PIETY; HISTORICAL-CRITICAL VS. DEVOTIONAL-CRITICAL

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Review of Ratzinger, Joseph. *The God of Jesus Christ: Meditations on the Triune God*. Translated by Brian McNeil. San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 2008. 120 pp.

Ratzinger's task in *The God of Jesus Christ* assumes that something is wrong with the state of theology—it is becoming more and more void of spiritual power that can “address man in his personal life” (9). To remedy the situation and build “a bridge between theology and proclamation, between theology and piety,” Ratzinger wants to “transfer” the doctrine of the Trinity from a “theoretical proposition” about God to “spiritual knowledge” (9). He also wants to do something similar with the Nicene affirmation that Jesus “came down from heaven” and “became a man” (9).

The prayer of Jesus plays a major role in Ratzinger's attempt to build this bridge. This is because Jesus' prayer, as Ratzinger understands it, is the clearest indicator of the nature of Jesus' sonship. The reason Jesus is called “the Son” is because he remains dependent upon the power and love of the Father, and this dependence is his “highest dignity” (72). That Jesus “came down from heaven” means that he simply received and relied upon the life the Father had prepared in advance for him (67). Ratzinger uses the interpretation of Psalm 40 [39]: 5-7 found in the book of Hebrews to conclude that Jesus released his life and handed it back over to the Father—and this is what sonship is all about (67). Being a Christian, then, means imitating this kind of forfeiting of our lives to God and receiving God's presence to dwell in us (68).

The very meaning of being a Christian includes being, like Jesus, “God's son”—that is, “becoming a child” (35). In fact, “the very essence of what it is to be a man,” paradoxically, means “being a child” (71). But what does this mean? For Ratzinger, it means that we joyfully embrace the various ways in which we are dependent on others and in which our life is full of “advance gifts” (70, 36). The very fabric of life is, in a sense, inherited and preconditioned. For example, God does not consult us about whether we would prefer to be male or female, or whether we would prefer that there be more sexes than just two, or whether we would prefer to be given the gift of life—we simply burst into existence with features predetermined about ourselves, then remain completely dependent on the womb, breasts, and care of our mother (36). Our language and gestures by which we express ourselves are predetermined (70). Even “forms of thinking” are also “received” and “imprinted upon” the “human soul” (70-71). Rather than rebel against these “advance gifts” in attempt to reject the way God made things to be in order to delude ourselves into thinking we are somehow “autonomous” and get to determine everything for ourselves, we should gratefully receive and be astonished at life as little children (73-74).

Jesus' prayer characterizes his life in the gospels; especially in Luke, who makes the choosing of the disciples a "fruit" of Jesus' prayer (80). The story of Transfiguration in Luke happens while Jesus prays. For Ratzinger, this means that the "inner foundation of the Resurrection is already present in the earthly Jesus" (81). Ratzinger concludes:

Luke has raised the prayer of Jesus to the central Christological category from which he describes the mystery of the Son. What Chalcedon expressed by means of a formula drawn from the sphere of Greek ontology is affirmed by Luke in an utterly personal category based on the historical experience of the earthly Jesus; in substantial terms, this corresponds completely to the formula of Chalcedon. (82)

This is also confirmed by the fact that Luke, according to Ratzinger, links the confession of faith with Jesus' solitude with the Father—that is, those who were with Jesus could see that he spent much time alone in fellowship and prayer with the Father and therefore understood that he was "the Son" (82). They understood that Jesus' dialogue with the Father was what really "drove" Jesus' existence (82). Through Jesus' resurrection, he admits "human existence" into this dialogue of love so that "we are in God" (84).

If Ratzinger's exegesis is right, he has indeed built a bridge from theology to "spiritual knowledge" of piety. That is, to the degree that Ratzinger's understanding of sonship can be seen to be the very emphasis of the biblical language and picture of sonship, to this same degree Ratzinger has built a solid bridge. His treatment of Luke's account of the calling of the Twelve is not eccentric, but based on recognized themes in Luke: the motif of "the mountain" as a symbol for closeness to God, Luke's emphasis on Jesus' reliance on the Father for his big decisions, when Jesus prays "something significant usually follows" (Bock, 538-40, 866). The emphasis on both prayer and sonship in Luke's account of the Transfiguration makes Ratzinger's emphasis on Jesus' dependence as part of the "essence of his sonship" seem exegetically groundable (81).

Other aspects of Ratzinger's exegesis are less convincing. He appears to be reading too much into Luke's statement that Jesus was "alone" yet "with" his disciples (82). It seems more reasonable to agree with Bock's suggestion that Luke's mention of Jesus being "alone" simply means that he and his disciples were away from the larger crowds (Bock, 840). It is debatable whether Jesus' "seeing" the disciples while in prayer can be stretched to include all the conclusions Ratzinger draws: that the Church is "the" object of conversation between Jesus and the Father, that the Church is not just on Jesus' mind and heart, but is actually "present" with Jesus while he is on the mountain in prayer, that Jesus "sees" the church in the Father, etc. (80).

Evaluation

One of Ratzinger's theological preoccupations is to "rescue" theology or exegesis from being deprived of the kind of spiritual power it has the ability to unleash once informed by Christian faith. In his *Jesus of Nazareth* and "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis" for example, he is trying to rescue exegesis from those who deprive it of its power to speak into the present by anti-supernatural assumptions (*Jesus of Nazareth*, xvi; "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," 16), and here Ratzinger is trying to rescue aspects of theology that have lost their ability to "address man in his personal life" (9). That is, he is trying to rescue what will otherwise be relatively abstract theology that does not have any immediately obvious relevance for piety.

I deeply sympathize with Ratzinger's concern for Christians not to let biblical exegesis or theology become a mere academic or abstract enterprise. Knowledge puffs up. Ratzinger also has many genuine exegetical and theological insights worthy of consideration. Unfortunately, I find his genuine insights clouded with the multiplication of ambiguities, imaginative exegesis, and vulnerable argumentation (Where did he come up with his argument that it is impossible for a "twofoldedness" to ever exist? What does his explanation of this argument amount to? [35]). In spite of this overall judgment, the key argument of the present book about Jesus' sonship appears to have some exegetical merit, even if its overshadowed in the book by devotional contemplations grounded more by inspiration than historical analysis.

Ratzinger's book illustrates how those who participate in biblical studies or historical inquiry with the use of critical methods can be spread across a spectrum from *historical-critical* analysis that consciously roots out anything known to prejudice the practitioner who aims for relative disinterested certainty and sees religious doctrine as a threat to this aim, to *devotional-critical* which imagines the analysis as more of a limited means for connecting with the God of Jesus Christ through meditations. In the latter use of the discipline, historical-critical data is used as fodder for the devotional flame. There is no reconciling these two aims as *chief* ends of the discipline of historical-critical methodology, but as more people turned on to these methods tend to find it harder to keep up the faith, the Pope is providing a way out by pushing readers closer to the *devotional-critical* method, which has a different ultimate aim and places boundaries and controls on the angle of meditation to allow the critical data to play the role of an instrument of religious worship where the devotee tries to move closer to the historical truth without leaving far from the heart's home.

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