

# The Pope's Jesus book and the Christologies of the gospels

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This article maps out recent developments in the exegetical investigation of Jesus. It starts with a discussion of the Jesus book by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, in which 'canonical exegesis' is used to argue that Johannine Christology is also present in the other gospels and that this Christology actually goes back to Jesus. In this way, the book narrows the gap between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. The next section argues for maintaining the multiplicity of images of Jesus as a literary figure that is the fruit of relatively recent approaches: redaction criticism, narrative-semantic analysis and intertextuality. The final section contains a sketch of the current state of research on the historical Jesus and its relevance for Christology. The multiplicity in the literary and historical approaches poses challenges to the further development of Christology.

## Introduction

In 2007, a voluminous book on Jesus of Nazareth was published, written by a systematic theologian, namely Joseph Ratzinger, who, as Pope, adopted the name of Benedict XVI (Ratzinger 2007).<sup>1</sup> His book has now been translated into dozens of languages and is read all over the world. The Pope's Jesus book is the fruit of a distinctly theological exegesis, sometimes resulting from a meditative treatment of Biblical texts, with a great emphasis on the unity of Jesus with the Father. The author shows a strong preference for the canonical gospels, in particular the gospel according to John, in which he perceives the explicit formulation of a particular Christology (namely, Jesus is divine) that, in his opinion, can also be found in the other gospels. It is remarkable that Ratzinger – despite his positive appreciation of the historical-critical method – does not expressly link up with recent developments in the research on the historical Jesus.

This article is structured as follows. In the second section, I will discuss the question of the possibilities and limitations inherent in the method used by Ratzinger in his book and which he refers to as 'canonical exegesis'. In this section, it will emerge that the canonical approach has a certain penchant for unambiguity which is alien to the gospels themselves; a canonical reading interprets the separate texts in the light of Scripture as a whole and therefore tends to rub out mutual inconsistencies and differences. In the third section, I will show how modern exegesis leaves increasingly more room for multiplicity. In that context, I will mention three approaches which, in their application to the gospels, produce a large number of meaningful images of Jesus, namely redaction criticism, narrative-semantic analysis and intertextuality. These images are all equally valid: they are sketch-like designs which balance each other and sometimes contradict each other. In the fourth section, I will sketch the main lines of recent research on the historical Jesus. Historical criticism uses the synoptic gospels (and also other textual and material data) as the starting point to arrive at a reliable biography of Jesus (some scholars include the gospel according to John). I will conclude this contribution by showing the importance of the multiplicity of the images of Jesus in the gospels for the further development of Christology.

## Canonical exegesis in the Pope's Jesus book

The Pope's Jesus book opens with a positive appreciation of the historical-critical method because, according to Ratzinger, it ensures that the Christian faith is not a myth and that Jesus was a real, living person who died on a cross. With this statement, he remains close to Bultmann's (1962:n.p.) 'das Daß seines Gekommenseins', that is, to the bare fact that Jesus really existed. However, does the historical method not have much more to offer? There is almost nothing in Ratzinger's book on the results of recent historical research on Jesus.<sup>2</sup> He does complain that the reconstructions proposed in the last centuries are complex and that the results of the research are highly hypothetical. With his book, he does not wish to continue on that track and add

1. In my footnotes, I will quote from the original German version of the book.

2. Witherington III (1995) offers a description of the Third Quest.



another strange image of Jesus to the already existing series. Instead, he wants to make an attempt to describe the Jesus of the gospels as the true Jesus, as the real 'historical Jesus' and he thinks that exactly this Jesus is a historically more meaningful and convincing figure than the reconstructions we were confronted with in the past centuries (Ratzinger 2007:20–21).<sup>3</sup>

This description has been fiercely criticised by New Testament scholars (see Söding 2007).<sup>4</sup> The problem of Ratzinger's description is that he does not define the concepts 'the real Jesus' and 'the historical Jesus' and that he likes to put the Jesus (why still the singular?) of the gospels on the stage as the historical Jesus. As a result, the generally accepted concepts are completely confused, which hardly contributes to the clarity that he, too, dearly wishes for.

To be able to trace the Biblical Jesus, Ratzinger seeks to link up with the project of so-called canonical exegesis, developed in the United States.<sup>5</sup> This method was already mentioned in the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission of 1993 and was described there as an approach in which the Bible is perceived as an organic whole of testimonies from one large tradition.<sup>6</sup> This view is also reflected in the Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council (number 12).<sup>7</sup> The key principle of the canonical reading is that separate texts must not be interpreted in their historical context but in the context in which they were placed by the religious community of later centuries. This context is the canon, the *corpus* of authoritative writings accepted by the religious community that are decisive for its belief and life. Canonical exegesis reads the Bible and the gospels therefore as a coherent unity that has an intrinsically consistent message, despite all its historical stratifications (Ratzinger 2007:230).<sup>8</sup> The separate writings are interpreted from the broader framework of the canon. That framework did not yet exist when these writings arose but gradually emerged as a result of later decisions.

It is furthermore relevant for Ratzinger's approach that he links the canonical reading to the rereading of the Bible in the later tradition (*Wirkungsgeschichte*). He sees this rereading

3. In German: '[ich wollte] den Versuch machen, einmal den Jesus der Evangelien als den wirklichen Jesus, als den "historischen Jesus" im eigentlichen Sinne darzustellen. Ich bin überzeugt [...] dass diese Gestalt viel logischer und auch historisch betrachtet viel verständlicher ist als die Rekonstruktionen, mit denen wir in den letzten Jahrhunderten konfrontiert wurden. Ich denke, dass gerade dieser Jesus – der der Evangelien – eine historisch sinnvolle und stimmige Figur ist.'

4. In this section, I am indebted to the book edited by Söding (2007). See also Schreiber (2007:355–362).

5. For an introduction into canonical exegesis see Wall (1995:370–393 and 1997:291–312).

6. An English translation of this document can be found in Houlden (1995). There is an extended commentary on this document in Fitzmyer (1995).

7. In the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation Dei Verbum, number 12, two different statements are made: 'The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture.' On the other hand, we read here: 'But, since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture [...] The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account [...]' For an analysis see Bieringer (2002).

8. In his own words: '[wir lesen] die Bibel, und insbesondere die Evangelien, als Einheit und als Ganzheit [...], die in all ihren historischen Schichtungen doch eine von innen her zusammenhängende Botschaft ausdrückt.'

as an unfolding of the potential of meanings locked up in the Biblical texts (cf. Gadamer 1972). In doing so, he shows a strong preference for the writings of the Church Fathers, of whom he has very thorough knowledge. This sometimes has a far-reaching effect on his exegesis of the gospels, for example, in the case of the parables, which he reads from the point of view of patristic exegesis as if they were hidden invitations to believe in Jesus as 'the kingdom of God in his own person' (Ratzinger 2007:227).

That Biblical texts have an intrinsically consistent message in fact appears to mean, in Ratzinger's book, that they can be read from a Christological perspective. He continually gives examples of a Christological interpretation of Old Testament texts, but also many of Jesus' sayings in the gospels are given a Christological overtone. This applies to, amongst other texts, the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer and also the Sermon on the Mount as a whole.

A systematic discussion on the Christology of John does not materialise until the eighth chapter of the Pope's Jesus book, although the view of the fourth evangelist already plays a role in the previous chapters. In synoptic texts, Ratzinger already sees the reflection of the Christology of the fourth evangelist. An example, namely his exegesis of the stories on Jesus' baptism, will explain this. In his discussion of the synoptic versions, he puts more emphasis on the correspondences than on the differences.<sup>9</sup> In his opinion, the three versions complement each other rather than contradicting one another. Subsequently, they are given meanings derived from Paul's baptismal theology (baptism is related to Jesus' death and resurrection) and especially from John 1:29–34 (Jesus is the Lamb of God, the sacrificial lamb that makes reparation for the sins of mankind). Finally the voice from heaven who refers to Jesus as 'my Son' and the Spirit who descends on Jesus like a dove are interpreted as an allusion to the mystery of the triune God (Ratzinger 2007:50).<sup>10</sup>

According to Ratzinger, the Johannine perspective is also found in various parts of the other gospels (or is it projected back onto them?). In fact, it is incorrect to call it the Johannine perspective because the portrait of Jesus that is so characteristic of John (described by Ratzinger as: he is God's eternal Son, he is God as man, he is God and he is one with the Father) goes back to Jesus himself, in Ratzinger's opinion.

To give this exegetically unorthodox view firm ground, Ratzinger presents his own solution to a very complicated issue in New Testament studies, namely the Johannine problem: who is the author of the fourth gospel and how does this document relate to the synoptic versions? On the whole, contemporary scholarship agrees that the fourth gospel has earlier and later traditions and underwent several redactions; in its final form the text of this gospel is a more

9. A detailed discussion of the synoptic versions of the baptism of Jesus can be found in Weren (1999:138–154).

10. In German: '[ich möchte] darauf hinweisen, dass uns hier mit dem Sohn der Vater und der Heilige Geist begegnen: Das Geheimnis des trinitarischen Gottes deutet sich an [...].'



recent text; the hypothesis is gaining ground that its author knew the synoptic versions and sometimes thoroughly recast them in the light of a Christology of his own (Denaux 1992).<sup>11</sup> Ratzinger provides a completely different solution to the literary-historical problem referred to above. On the basis of a few recent exegetical studies,<sup>12</sup> he offers the suggestion – a traditional one, incidentally – that the fourth gospel goes back to an eye-witness of Jesus' life, which guarantees the historical reliability of the content of this text. This eye-witness is not the author himself. Ratzinger considers a presbyter called John, already mentioned by Papias (as quoted by Eusebius), to be the author (cf. 2 Jn 1 and 3 Jn 1). This presbyter may have been a disciple of the apostle of the same name, one of the sons of Zebedee and that would have been the John who witnessed Jesus' public ministry from its earliest beginnings.

I will conclude this section with a brief assessment. The Pope's Jesus book is very consistent, it is extremely perspicacious and it contains many sound exegetical observations. His book closes the gap between the Jesus of history and the Christ of the Church. It is remarkable that he does not pay much attention to the mutual differences between the images of Jesus in the gospels and is strongly inclined to integrate them to form one balanced whole. Furthermore it may be stated that he made one of the New Testament Christologies the norm for all the other ones, namely John's Christology (cf. Haight 2000:41).<sup>13</sup> This perhaps explains why Ratzinger gives little attention to Jesus as a champion of social justice. Exegetes will challenge the favoured position of John's image of Jesus. Another cause for debate is that Ratzinger tends to present the Johannine Christology, by means of a questionable solution to the Johannine problem, as coinciding with Jesus' own understanding of his person and mission.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the results of Ratzinger's canonical reading are wrongly given the status of being the fruit of historical research into Jesus' understanding of himself. This goes beyond the purpose and limits of canonical exegesis, which does not want to read Biblical texts as a source of historical knowledge on Jesus at all.<sup>15</sup>

## The Christologies of the gospels

In New Testament research on Jesus, not only the history behind the text is explored but also the history of the text.<sup>16</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, after Schweitzer's

11. The book edited by Denaux is a fundamental book on this question. From this book it appears that the hypothesis that John knew the synoptic gospels in their final redaction and used them for writing his own gospel has gained influence.

12. In Ratzinger (2007:268–269), the following authors are mentioned: Peter Stuhlmacher, Eugen Ruckstuhl and Peter Dschulnig.

13. Haight makes the following statements: '[...] one christology of itself cannot be an excluding norm for other christologies' and 'one cannot rule out the christologies of Mark or Luke on the basis of the christology of John'.

14. Von Scheliha (1999:29) disputes the usefulness of the philosophical concept which assumes 'daß die spätere kirchliche Christologie, die Trinitätslehre ebenso wie das Zwei-Naturen-Dogma, nur dasjenige explizieren, was im Auftreten des historischen Jesus der Sache nach keimhaft angelegt war'. The New Testament scholar Niebuhr (2007:107), however, rejects any criticism of Ratzinger's solution and disparagingly calls it 'schulmeisterlich'.

15. Ebner (2007:34) here speaks of 'eine Überforderung der kanonischen Exegese, die gemäß ihrer eigenen Definition gerade keine historische Forschung betreiben will'.

16. Here, 'history of the text' refers to the historical development of the text itself to its final form.

scathing judgement on the first phase of the historical research on Jesus (Old Quest), the latter – reconstructing the origin of the sources – was even given precedence over the former. Consequently the evolutionary approach gained the upper hand in New Testament Christology. A well-known example is the research into Jesus' titles (Son of Man, Son of God, etc.), that was aimed at mapping the shifts in the meaning of these designations within various cultural circles (e.g. Cullmann 1966; Hahn 1963). Another example is the three types of Christologies distinguished by Fuller (1972:243–247; see also Brown 1994): the 'two-foci Christology' (focusing on Jesus' authority during his public ministry and to his Parousia), the 'two-stage Christology' (emphasising the earthly Jesus and his exaltation in heaven) and the 'three-stage Christology' (expanding the previous model with Jesus' pre-existence, his existence with God since all eternity). Fuller (1972) presents the three models as consecutive stages in a continuous development and thereby creates a certain unity within the great variety of Christological portraits in the New Testament.

In the works of Hahn and Fuller, the search for unity has turned into a positive evaluation of multiplicity. This positive evaluation is also characteristic for studies carried out from the perspective of redaction criticism. This method emphasises the theological perspective of the final redactors and the socio-religious situation of their communities and by doing so it has created space for diverse images of Jesus, which are mainly coloured in from the redactional, later layer of each of the gospels.

The consistent application of redaction criticism led to the discovery that, in many ways, the redactors are authors in their own right and that their views of Jesus are not only found in the later layers of their books. No, the gospels must be read as a coherent story. This insight paved the way for the application of narrative analysis to the gospels. In this approach, Jesus is studied as a character in a story. Unlike some non-canonical texts, which only contain words of Jesus (e.g. the Gospel of Thomas) or are only about his Passion (e.g. the Gospel of Peter), each of the four canonical gospels contains a more or less complete story of his public ministry, with a real plot (with its own story line), a certain placement in time and space and its own perspectives co-determined by the interests that the author wants to communicate to his audience and that are coloured by the story's cultural setting.

Narrative analysis in combination with semantic analysis can investigate thoroughly how Jesus is characterised in the course of the story by what the narrator makes him say or do, by his interaction with the other characters and by the way in which his supporters and opponents react to him. The evangelists give Jesus the opportunity to profile himself fully: they give him the leading role, let him appear in almost every scene, let him influence the course of the narrative and, in one way or another, make the other characters serve the purpose of showing what he undertakes and what moves him.

We now have a large number of narrative and semantic studies, not only on the gospels but also on other New Testament texts.<sup>17</sup> The result is a rich palette of Jesus images. The many faces of Jesus hang together with the diverse strategies of the narrators and with the socio-religious identity of their audiences.

The narrative-semantic approach concentrates on the separate writings and lets each author tell his or her own story. This concentration on the separate books can never be the highest or final bid because each document is interwoven with other writings. I am referring to the phenomenon of intertextuality here (cf. Weren 1993:9–33). In principle, intertextuality is infinite, but I will restrict myself here to Biblical intertextuality. A study of this phenomenon starts with explicit and implicit quotations from earlier Biblical texts. In my view, the application of this concept is highly productive for the study of the Biblical Jesus: it clearly shows to what extent Jesus as a literary character was made of the stuff of earlier stories and how much the Jesus story is embedded in the ancient story of Israel.

Intertextual research on Jesus resembles canonical exegesis because, in that approach, separate texts are also interpreted in the light of other texts from Scripture. Although their correspondence cannot be denied, I would still like to point out two differences between these two approaches:

- Canonical exegesis perceives Scripture primarily as an organic whole within which the separate texts are bearers of one and the same message. Intertextuality, however, focuses first and foremost on the differences and perceives a later text as a transformation of one or more earlier texts.
- Canonical exegesis easily transfers meanings from text A to text B, even if text A is later than text B. In this way, meanings are attributed to New Testament texts by Ratzinger that emerge from texts by the Church Fathers and Old Testament texts are read with New Testament spectacles. In fact, the distinction between earlier and later is abandoned here; the Bible emerges as one big, coherent system, within which the boundaries between the separate parts become blurred. The concept of 'intertextuality', too, can be applied in such a way that the meanings from one text flow into other ones, irrespective of their position on the timeline. However, exegetes generally reject this uninhibited use of the concept and focus on traceable transformation processes which allow chronology to be observed and anachronisms to be avoided as much as possible.<sup>18</sup>

## Recent developments in the historical research on Jesus

Historical research on Jesus has been done for the past 250 years. The first or Old Quest (1778–1906), with its positivist

and objectivist view of history as a science (in search of pure facts, separate from any interpretation), ended in Albert Schweitzer's scathing judgement that reconstructions presented of Jesus' life were strongly influenced by the contemporary ideals of the researchers; they had created a Jesus in their own image. A period of relative calm ensued (1906–1953: 'No Quest'), in which, under the influence of Bultmann, the interest in the heavenly or kerygmatic Christ prevailed over the interest in the earthly Jesus. During the second or New Quest (1953–1980), the emphasis was on the search for authentic sayings of Jesus, especially by means of the criterion of discontinuity or dissimilarity.<sup>19</sup> Since 1985, we have been experiencing a Third Quest, which has almost run its course by now, but which still produces aftershocks now and then (see Dunn 2003; Meier 2009).

One characteristic of the Third Quest is that research is conducted on the basis of historical or sociological rather than theological interest. The number of sources of our knowledge of ancient Judaism and ancient Christianity has been extended, firstly by the archaeological finds in the areas of Qumran and Nag Hammadi and secondly because also non-canonical texts are included in the research. The approach is usually multidisciplinary or even interdisciplinary, which means that archaeology and the social sciences are of substantial importance. In addition to Jesus' words, there is now also considerable interest in his deeds. The idea that Jesus was a unique person who differed from the Judaism of his day and of later Christianity has been abandoned in favour of the assumption that, as an historical figure, he was deeply rooted in the religious and socio-cultural world of his day. There is still some distance between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, but the chasm is no longer as deep as has often been presumed previously.

That historical research would lead to one universally accepted sketch of Jesus' life has been a utopian dream since the Old Quest. In the Third Quest, multiplicity almost became the norm; the designs showed great diversity. This multiplicity of the images of Jesus can be explained by the now almost universally accepted fact that the researchers operate on the basis of divergent epistemological views and hold various ideas on the possibilities and limitations of historical research.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, we are not faced with one reconstruction of who Jesus truly was, but with different historical Jesuses. Not one single design is free from subjective interpretation and all are constructs that are co-determined by the choices made regarding the sources used or by the criteria on the basis of which words and acts are considered to be authentic or not. Exactly how uncertain historical research is can be deduced from the frequent use of sentences starting with 'it may be', 'it is not impossible' or 'it cannot be excluded' in studies on the historical Jesus.

It may therefore be stated that there are considerable differences in the camp of the research on the historical Jesus. One researcher uses rather broad boundaries, sometimes

17. Examples can be found in Aletti (2005), Longenecker (2005) and Powell & Bauer (1999).

18. A good example of an intertextual approach is Bauckham's discussion of the 'I am' statements in the fourth gospel (Bauckham 2005:148–166).

19. This criterion is discussed by Meier (1991:171–174).

20. Observations on the definitions of the term 'history' and the nature of historical knowledge can be found, for example, in Johnson (1996:81–104).

even so broad that the resulting reconstruction approaches the realm of fiction, whereas another operates within much stricter parameters and can show only relatively meagre results. How big or how small the playing field is depends on choices regarding the following four issues:

- Is it possible, by means of the historical method, to pay attention to the faith in God which inspired Jesus himself? Ratzinger puts forward as an actual historical insight that Jesus was oriented on God and was linked to God.<sup>21</sup> I fully share this point of view; that Jesus was gripped by God belongs to the surest facts of this life. If that given is ignored, the result will be an incomprehensible figure. Attention to someone's faith and to its influence on someone's way of life is essential for a good biography and does not exceed the boundaries of historical research.
- Modern reconstructions of Jesus' life usually end with his crucifixion, because the stories about his resurrection are about an event caused by God that, as such, is beyond the historian's perspective. However, if the indisputable historical fact of Jesus' death on a cross was really the last fact from his life, then a different historical fact would be completely incomprehensible, namely that his disciples united shortly after his death into active local religious communities and tried to win others over to their conviction that Jesus was the Messiah.<sup>22</sup>
- Differences in the depiction of the historical Jesus are also caused by different valuations concerning the reliability of both the canonical and the non-canonical gospels as sources of information on events from the past.
- A final issue is whether the belief that Jesus stands in a unique, filial relationship to God was already expressed by Jesus himself or whether this view matured later in the circle of certain early Christian groups. What the historical Jesus looks like is predominantly determined by the position taken on this issue (see Von Scheliha 1999:22–31).

Research on the historical Jesus is relevant for the further development of Christology. One of the criteria by which Christology wants to be measured is after all its involvement in historical events and in particular its faithfulness to the historical Jesus. At the same time, this is not the only or ultimate criterion because, for the believer, the living Lord is the true Jesus. But that does not mean that the Christian faith is immune to historical criticism or would want to deny established historical knowledge concerning Jesus, for then it would be prey to fundamentalism and ideologisation.

The Third Quest has led to the insight that Jesus was a Jew who must be placed within the multiform Judaism of his time and who himself profoundly believed in the God of Israel.

21. Ratzinger (2007:11–12, referring to Schnackenburg 1993:354): 'Ohne Verankerung in Gott bleibt die Person Jesu schemenhaft, unwirklich und unerklärlich.' In addition to this, Ratzinger (2007:12) says: 'Das ist auch der Konstruktionspunkt dieses meines Buches: Es sieht Jesus von seiner Gemeinschaft mit dem Vater her, die die eigentliche Mitte seiner Persönlichkeit ist [...]'

22. Sanders (1993:276–281) includes the emergence of vital religious communities shortly after Jesus' death in his list of facts from Jesus' life which he considers to be historically reliable. In his opinion, it is a historically undeniable fact that, after his death, Jesus' disciples had special experiences on the basis of which they became convinced that he had been raised by God.

One implication of this insight is that, within Christology, Jesus must be discussed in such a way that the Jewish religion is not devaluated.

## A plea for multiplicity

The Third Quest and the combination of narrative-semantic and intertextual analyses of the gospels lead to a great diversity of images of Jesus. This diversity may be positively valued: the different designs balance each other, they resist harmonisation and prevent one design from dominating the other ones. Even though canon formation in the first centuries was partly a process of exclusion, still, within the series of books that were declared canonical, as many as four texts were included that each contains a separate, continuous story on Jesus and consequently inspired mutually different views of his person and ministry. Given its nature and its own mission, canonical exegesis should in fact eagerly pursue multiplicity.

But does multiplicity not lead to fragmentation and relativism? This is not the case because unity in variety is sufficiently guaranteed by the emphasis placed in all gospels on Jesus' unique relationship with God and his unique position as a revealer and redeemer. This claim, however, raises the question of how Christianity relates to other religions. I already pointed out that this claim may not result in a theological devaluation of Judaism. Within our strongly pluralistic society and culture, another concern is added: how can the Christian recognition of the special position of Jesus be linked to a positive valuation also for religions other than Judaism?

The increased diversification of Jesus images is the result of applying literary methods of Biblical exegesis. They yield a Jesus who is a literary figure and the product of textual montage. In both cases, a character is concerned within a world-in-words. Will Jesus not be relegated to the realm of fiction as a result? This anxious question would be appropriate if narrative-semantic and intertextual analysis had exclusive rights, but such a claim is entirely alien to these approaches. There is sufficient scope for historical research and this has by now conquered strong doubts about the historicity of Jesus and is currently capable of providing a quite generally accepted sketch of the main lines of his life (e.g. Theissen & Merz 1996:493–496).

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