



Joseph Ratzinger's Christological-Pneumatological Exegesis of the Old Testament

NINA SOPHIE HEEREMAN 

St. Patrick's Seminary & University, nina.heereman@stpsu.edu

Abstract: In his posthumously published collection of essays, Pope Benedict calls on the new generation of biblical scholars to develop methodological criteria for a “pneumatological exegesis” of the Old Testament. As a first step in this direction, the present article seeks to summarize Joseph Ratzinger's/Benedict XVI's own theological reflection on the matter as we find it amply expounded both in his scholarly work and in his magisterium. First, Ratzinger's understanding of revelation and of the place of both the Church and Scripture therein will be explained. Secondly, Ratzinger's criteria for an interpretation of Scripture suited to revelation will be presented, with special emphasis on the way in which he both incorporates and goes beyond DV 12 with the help of systematic theology. In closing, Ratzinger's own practice of Christological-pneumatological exegesis of the Old Testament is exemplified with an outline of his biblical Mariology.

Keywords: Christological-Pneumatological exegesis, Old Testament exegesis, unity of Scripture, theological methodology, biblical Mariology, Scripture, Revelation, Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, Scripture hermeneutic, immaculate conception, wisdom

In his posthumously published collection of essays, *What is Christianity?*,¹ written after his resignation from the Petrine office, Pope Benedict charged the Church's exegetes with the following task: It will be, he wrote, the task of the new generation to create the conditions—including the methodological conditions—for “a ‘Pneumatological’ exegesis that understands the Old Testament as a way toward Jesus Christ.” (Benedict XVI 2023, 117)

Taking the contemporary difficulty of understanding the New Covenant priesthood in relation to its Old Testament precursor as an example, he points to the deeper underlying problem affecting exegesis today. According to Benedict, then, biblical exegesis in general is influenced by a Lutheran hermeneutic, “based on the contrast between Law and Gospel, between justification by works and by faith,” (Benedict XVI 2023, 115)² that pits the Law and the Prophets against the New Testament. The Church, on the other hand, has never adopted such a hermeneutic. As her

¹ The original was published in Italian (Benedetto XVI 2023). I will be citing from the English translation (Benedict XVI 2023).

² See also Benedict XVI 2023, 114: “The relation between the two Testaments is described as a dialectic of Law and Gospel, a dialectic attenuated, however, by the fact that in the Old Testament itself, besides the Law, there is the *promissio* (promise) that refers to the future Gospel.”

rejection of Marcion proves, she has always regarded such a position as heretical. “The idea of the law, the Torah, as God’s action *ex contrario*,” Ratzinger explains, “is totally foreign to the early Church and directly opposed to its fundamental relation with the Old Testament. For this reason, the *sola fide*, as understood by Luther, was never taught in the early Church. Instead, the relation between the Testaments was thought of as a passage from a material to a Pneumatological understanding (see 2 Cor 3).” (Benedict XVI 2023, 116) Today, however, “the spirit of modernity, and the historical-critical method derived from it, finds itself more at ease with Luther’s solution than the Catholic one, because a ‘Pneumatological’ exegesis which understands the Old Testament as a way towards Jesus Christ, is almost inaccessible to it.” (Benedict XVI 2023, 117) The New Testament, by contrast, is clear “that Jesus thought, not along the lines of a radical *sola fide*, but rather along the lines of a fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets in his own journey and in his being.” (Benedict XVI 2023, 117) “It will be the task of the new generation,” Ratzinger concludes, as if entrusting us with his last will and testament, “to create the conditions—methodological as well—for a renewed understanding of what was just said.” (Benedict XVI 2023, 117) According to Pope Benedict it is imperative to recuperate what he calls “a *Christological-Pneumatological exegesis*” (see Benedict XVI 2023, 118): a hermeneutic capable of articulating the passage from a material to a pneumatological understanding of the Old Testament.

As Pope Benedict often did when he apologized for not being able to offer a full-fledged solution within the limited space of an article, he offered a sketch of the solution. Like a skilled master-builder, Joseph Ratzinger laid a foundation solid enough for us to build on. Or rather, he reminded us of the foundation that Jesus Christ himself has laid. If Jesus himself exercised a Christological-Pneumatological exegesis of the Old Testament, as was so evidently the case on the road to Emmaus (cf. Luke 24), then we do well in following suit.

For those acquainted with Ratzinger’s thought and writings, it is obvious that he did not wait to write his testament to make this point. The recuperation of a hermeneutic worthy of the sacred text is a topic that had accompanied him since the earliest days of his theological studies. As he acknowledges, it was the work of Henri de Lubac that first opened his mind to a Pneumatological exegesis of the Old Testament.³ His subsequent study of Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei* during his doctoral work was also decisive in helping him understand the relationship between the Old and New Testament upon which the entire theology of the Church Fathers rests. He realized that

³ “Der entscheidende Schritt [...] war für mich, den Zusammenhang von Altem und Neuem Testament verstehen zu lernen, auf dem die ganze Vätertheologie beruht. Diese Theologie hängt an der Auslegung der Schrift: der Kern der Väterexegese ist die von Christus im Heiligen Geist vermittelte *Concordia testamentorum*. Auf dem Weg zu dieser Erkenntnis hatte mir entscheidend Lubac’s Werk, ‘*Corpus mysticum*’ geholfen.” (Ratzinger 2011, 52)

the core of patristic exegesis is the unity between the two Testaments as mediated by Christ in the Holy Spirit.

Another decisive step in the development of Ratzinger's exegetical hermeneutic was the study of the concept of revelation in St. Bonaventure that he undertook in writing his habilitation (see Ratzinger 2009b, 53–659). This work led him to a rediscovery of the distinction between revelation and scripture and of the participation of the Church as the receiving subject in the act of revelation. Ratzinger famously drew on this rediscovery during the Second Vatican Council, where he argued for the rejection of *De fontibus*, the preparatory schema on divine revelation, and helped craft *Dei Verbum* in its place.⁴ From then on, divine revelation and the role of Sacred Scripture in it remained at the centre both of his theological work and of his magisterium as a pope. One is hard-pressed to find a modern Catholic systematic theologian whose thinking and mode of expression are more biblically informed than that of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI.

In what follows, I will (1) first provide a sketch of Joseph Ratzinger's understanding of revelation, which deeply informs the way he approaches the Scriptures. In a (2) second step, I will summarize the axioms he deduces from that understanding for an exegesis adequate to revelation. (3) Third, I will close by highlighting the importance of recuperating a Christological-Pneumatological exegesis of the Old Testament using the example of Ratzinger's approach to Mariology.

1. Revelation and Scripture

Ratzinger's exegetical hermeneutic is deeply shaped by his conviction that revelation and Scripture are not synonymous. The distinction between revelation and Scripture raises the question of the role of Scripture in the transmission of revelation, which in turn leads to that of the Church's role in relation to the Scriptures and their proper interpretation. These three topics will be treated here in that order.

1.1. The Distinction Between Revelation and Scripture

The Council's recuperation of the ancient axiom that Jesus Christ alone is the fullness of revelation, whereas both Scripture and tradition are not themselves sources of revelation per se, but only its mediators, owes a great deal to Ratzinger's defense of the older tradition during the conciliar debates.⁵ While modern parlance uses

⁴ See the fascinating account in Seewald 2020, 508–28, 559–79, and Ratzinger 1998, 120.

⁵ While Ratzinger's work on Bonaventure had certainly prepared him to make this contribution, the decisive insight was gained through his research on the Council of Trent in response to Geisemann's theory

the term “revelation” to refer “to all the revealed contents of faith,” to the point that “it has even become a part of linguistic usage to refer to Sacred Scripture simply as ‘revelation,’” such an identification, as he reminded the Council Fathers, “would have been unthinkable in the language of the High Middle Ages.” (see Ratzinger 1998, 108) For the medieval theologians, the term revelation “refers to the act in which God shows himself, not the objectified result of this act.” (Ratzinger 1998, 108) In other words,

revelation signifies all God’s acts and utterances directed to man; it signifies a *reality* of which Scripture gives us *information* but that *is* not simply Scripture itself. Revelation goes beyond Scripture, then, to the same extent as reality goes beyond information about it. We could also say that Scripture is the material principle of revelation ... but is not that revelation itself. (Ratzinger 2008b, 51)

Revelation properly speaking thus designates the process of God’s self-communication to man, which has its beginning in God’s self-disclosure to the people of Israel and culminates in the paschal mystery of the incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ. The Council fully adopted this view, declaring in *DV 2* that Christ is “both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation.” For this reason, it is easy to understand that the reality to which the Scriptures bear witness, namely the person of Jesus Christ, far surpasses the written testimony thereof.⁶ This needn’t mean, of course, that Scripture itself isn’t a communicative act, only that it is not so apart from Christ revealing himself through it (while remaining greater than it).⁷

In order to explain how revelation comes about, Ratzinger adds a second point that is very much a fruit of his engagement with the medieval theologians, St. Bonaventure in particular, and that has important consequences for his approach to exegesis. Self-communication, even among human beings, is not complete until it is received by a subject to whom it is directed. “And because this is so,” Ratzinger explains, “the receiving subject is always also part of the concept of ‘revelation.’ Where

of the material sufficiency of Scripture. See “On the Interpretation of the Tridentine Decree on Tradition,” in Rahner and Ratzinger 1966, 50–78. See also Ratzinger 1998, 124–31.

⁶ See also Ratzinger 2005a, 82: “For revelation is not a collection of statements—revelation is Christ himself. *He* is the Logos, the all-embracing Word in which God declares himself and that we therefore call the Son of God. This one Logos, of course, has communicated himself in normative words, in which he presents to us what is distinctively his. Yet *the Word* is always greater than *the words* and is never exhausted by the words.”

⁷ See Ratzinger 2005a, 82, n. 12: “This statement is not intended to mean that Scripture is merely an account, without any substance, of facts that remain entirely outside of it. Rather ..., the view that the reality of revelation is a reality of the word—that in the word, the proclamation of the reality of revelation comes to me—should remain fully valid. It nonetheless remains true that the mere word before us, available to us, is not yet itself the reality of revelation, which is never just ‘available’ to us. What is said here is simply intended to point to the difference between the word and the reality that occurs within it, a difference not abolished by the nature of revelation as word.”

there is no one to perceive 'revelation,' no *re-vel-ation* has occurred, because no *veil* has been removed. By definition, revelation requires a someone who apprehends it." (Ratzinger 1998; see also Ratzinger 2008b, 108) The mode of perception of divine revelation, however, is faith. Thus,

you can have Scripture without having revelation. For revelation always and only becomes a reality where there is faith. The nonbeliever remains under the veil of which Paul speaks in the third chapter of his Second Letter to the Corinthians. He can read Scripture and know what is in it, can even understand at a purely intellectual level, what is meant and how what is said hangs together—and yet he has not shared in the revelation. Rather, revelation has only arrived where, in addition to the material assertions witnessing to it, its inner reality has itself become effective after the manner of faith. (Ratzinger 2008b, 51)

From this premise, Ratzinger argues that "the person who receives it also is a part of the revelation to a certain degree, for without him it does not exist. You cannot put revelation in your pocket like a book you carry around with you. It is a living reality that requires a living person as the locus of its presence" (Ratzinger 2008b, 51).

Reflecting on the ground just covered, Ratzinger then identifies two directions in which "revelation goes beyond the fact of Scripture ... : a. As a reality that has its basis in God, it always extends upward into God's action. b. As a reality that happens to man in faith, it extends, as it were, beyond the mediating fact of Scripture, too" (Ratzinger 2008b, 53; see also Ratzinger 1998, 53). For this reason,

revelation precedes Scripture and becomes deposited in Scripture but is not simply identical with it. This in turn means that revelation is always something greater than what is merely written down. And this again means that there can be no such thing as pure *sola scriptura* ... because an essential element of Scripture is the Church as understanding subject, and with this the fundamental sense of tradition is already given. (Ratzinger 1998, 108)⁸

⁸ It is beyond the scope of this paper to define tradition. For a short explanation of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, see Ratzinger 2012, 476–77: "Es ist einerseits sichtbar geworden, dass es Überlieferung im Sinn eines von Anfang an vorliegenden Bündels von selbstständigen Einzelwahrheiten nicht gibt; es ist aber gleichzeitig sichtbar geworden, dass es auch Schrift ohne Überlieferung nicht gibt. Das gilt in mehrfacher Hinsicht. Zunächst bedeutet dies, dass die Schrift den Niederschlag des vorher mündlich in der ältesten Christenheit tradierten darstellt. Sodann ist aber zu bedenken, dass dieser immer schon bekannte Sachverhalt durch die neuere exegetische Erforschung eine überraschend erweiterte Bedeutung gewonnen hat. Es hat sich nämlich gezeigt, dass die älteste Gemeinde Worte und Taten des Herren nicht wie archivarisch abgeschlossene Größen weitergegeben hat. Vielmehr hat sie aus der Überzeugung heraus, dass der Herr kein Toter, keine den Archiven der Vergangenheit Angehörige Größe, sondern durch den Heiligen Geist als der Auferstandene in der Kirche lebendig ist, dass überkommene Gut zugleich neu auslegt und auf die jeweilige Situation der Kirche hin entfaltet. Überlieferung erscheint hier nicht als mechanische Weitergabe, sondern als dynamischer Prozess oder anders gesagt: in der Heiligen Schrift selbst ist das überliefernde Entfalten aufgrund der der Kirche übertragenen Auslegungsvollmacht vorhanden; Überlieferung ist nicht nur äußere Voraussetzungen, sondern inneres Bauprinzip der Schrift."

1.2. The Role of Scripture in Revelation

How, then, should we define the role of Scripture within this complex process of divine self-communication to the living and perceiving subject of God's covenant people? Ratzinger sheds light on this specifically Christian problem by drawing our attention to the different roles that Scripture plays within the Old and New Covenant, respectively. He observes: "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." (Ratzinger 2008b, 53) For the New Testament, the term "Scripture" refers exclusively to the Old Testament, which has lost nothing of its authoritative status. Rather, its meaning has only now become apparent in the Christ-event (Ratzinger 2008b, 53, with reference to Schrenk 1933, 767–69). Thus, the authors of the New Testament "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 Testament." (Ratzinger 2008b, 53–54) That is, the entire New Testament is a single re-reading and reinterpretation of the Old Testament in light of the Christ-event. This fundamental concept, Ratzinger observes,

also determines the form of the oldest creedal statements and without [it] they cannot be understood: The formula that "Jesus" is the "Christ" signifies quite simply that the Christ-message of the Old Testament has come to fulfillment in the historical Jesus; that you can understand who Jesus is on the basis of the Old Testament and see what the Old Testament means in the light of the Christ-event. (Ratzinger 2008b, 53–54)

One can easily trace this understanding of the Christ-event as the fulfilment of the Scriptures, along with the resulting mutual illumination of old and new, throughout the entire New Testament. It is, however, nowhere so clearly expressed as in the already quoted passage from Second Corinthians about the veil covering the law until one turns to Christ (2 Cor 3:4–18). It is here that the methodological foundation for a *christological-pneumatological* exegesis is being laid. In it the Apostle Paul "contrasts the Old and the New Covenants as *gramma* and *pneuma*—that is, as Scripture and Spirit (2 Cor 3:6–18)—and calls the Lord the Pneuma who makes Scripture comprehensible and who is its meaning, its true, living (not merely literary) content (2 Cor 3:14–18)." (Ratzinger 2008b, 54)

Paul's intention in this passage is precisely not to abrogate the value of Israel's Scripture. On the contrary, Ratzinger explains, Paul sees in the Christ-event the fulfillment of a theological development that can already be observed within the Old Testament; this development is expressed in the promise of a new covenant as envisioned in Jer 31:31–34. Now that the risen Lord has returned through the gift of his Spirit,

no Scripture is needed any more, because the law is written in the heart; no one needs teaching from the outside any more, because God himself teaches men. John is expressing the same idea, starting from Deutero-Isaiah (54:13), when he depicts the age that has begun with Christ as the age in which everyone is taught by God himself [1 John 2:20–21]; and Peter's speech at Pentecost, handed down to us in Acts (2:14–36), develops the same idea on the basis of Joel (3:1–5). In every case, the age that dawned with the Christ-event appears as the answer to a series of hopes that expected the coming age to render Scripture, in an ultimate sense, quite superfluous through the immediate presence of the divine teacher in man himself. (Ratzinger 2008b, 54)

For Paul, as for the early Church, Christ is the fulfillment of Israel's hopes for a definitive interpretation of the law that would be accompanied by its spiritualization. That is, Christ is the meaning of what we call the Old Testament, he is—as Ratzinger puts it—“its true, living (not merely literary) content.” (Ratzinger 2008b, 54)

From this Ratzinger concludes that “in the new order of salvation that begins with Christ, ‘Scripture’ holds a different place from what it had in the Old Covenant.” (Ratzinger 2008b, 55) Leaving aside the question of whether or not the New Testament gives an accurate account of the Old Testament's self-understanding, the New Testament view is that “the Old Testament appears as ‘Scripture’ in the proper sense, which has attained its true significance through the Christ-event by being drawn into the living sphere of the reality of Christ.” (Ratzinger 2008b, 55) For this reason, even though the New Testament itself was eventually counted as Scripture, the term “Scripture”—according to Ratzinger—can “no longer have that conclusive and exclusive sense that, in Paul's view, was attributed to it in the Old Testament.” Rather, the New Testament, taken as Scripture, has become “the instrument for opening up the old dispensation into the spacious sphere of the Christ-event.” (Ratzinger 2008b) The New Testament then, as Ratzinger sees it, is

as it were, the arrested process of the new interpretation of Scripture on the basis of Christ. In any case, it carries with it no intention of becoming independent, of closing itself into literal exegesis, but can only have a continuing existence *within the spiritual reality of Jesus Christ*, who remains with his own every day until the end of the world (Mt 28:20), who through his going away in and through the Cross has come again in the Holy Spirit (as John explains it) and, through the Spirit, reveals to the disciples what they would once have been unable to bear when the Lord was still visibly dwelling among them (Jn 16:12f.). (Ratzinger 2008b, 55–56)

Can Ratzinger's designation of the NT as “the arrested process of new interpretation of Scripture on the basis of Christ” do full justice to the difference between the divinely inspired words of the New Testament and even the most venerable interpretation of it? Even assuming this to be the case, it remains that his central point

is crucial for understanding the role of Scripture in the life of the Church: The New Testament has become the instrument for the opening up of the Old Testament “into the spacious sphere of the Christ-event.” While Scripture might have signified the fullness of revelation for the Old Covenant, in the new dispensation the focus shifts: The fullness of revelation is Christ, who remains present in his Church and through the Spirit guides the Church into an ever-deeper understanding of both Testaments in the light of his paschal mystery.⁹

1.3. The Role of the Church

Having asserted the distinction between Revelation and Scripture, we now turn to the role of the receiving subject, which is the Church. As seen above, Christ is the fullness of revelation who has definitively handed himself over to the Church on the day of Pentecost. This constitutes the Church as the custodian, interpreter and *tradent* of the revelation she has herself received from the one whose living body she now is.¹⁰

The New Testament describes the act of receiving revelation, that is: the act by which “the reality of Christ is appropriated to us,” using the term “faith” (Ratzinger 2008b, 57). By the act of faith, “the individual meets Christ and, in him, enters into the sphere of his saving power.” (Ratzinger 2008b, 57) By thus entering into the sphere of Christ, however, the individual believer also becomes part of the body of Christ, which is the Pauline expression for “the community of believers—the Church—who

⁹ As already suggested above, my own view is that revelation understood as a communicative act is inseparable from revelation understood as content that can be clearly formulated (whether in Scripture or by the Church). Both aspects, God’s self-communication and the objective content of that communication, coincide in the incarnate Logos, the unfolding of whom is the mission of the Holy Spirit.

This suggests the following complement: Although the letter—especially that of the New Testament as the hermeneutical key to the Old Testament—refers beyond itself to the living Christ encountered in the Spirit, it does so in virtue of its own inner dynamism as a kind of verbal icon; hence the letter’s abiding significance as a (living) foundation of all spiritual reading. To be sure, the Spirit enjoys a certain free transcendence of the historically delimited flesh of Christ. Even so, as John 16 suggests, this free transcendence serves the Spirit’s own desire to unfold with creative fidelity the treasures of wisdom already contained *ab initio* in that same historically delimited flesh.

A final point: One of the great merits of modern exegesis is to have discovered that the verbal icon represented by the biblical text is itself the fruit of a genesis (as well as of an inspiration from above). As such, the letter of the Old Testament is bound up with the gradual incarnation of the divine word out of the womb of God’s people, while the New Testament letter recapitulates this process by letting the Word made flesh be re-born, as it were, in verbal-iconic form out of the heart of the Church.

¹⁰ Ratzinger 2007, xxi: “The connection with the subject we call ‘People of God’ is vital for Scripture. On the 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.”

represents the presence of Christ in this world,” a presence into which he is gathering mankind and through which he enables them to share in his mighty presence (Ratzinger 2008b, 57). From this Ratzinger concludes

that believing is entering into the abode of Christ, into the abiding reality of Christ, to which Scripture bears witness but which Scripture itself by all means *is not*. What may further be concluded from that is that the presence of revelation essentially has to do with the realities of “faith” and “Church”, which for their part—as now becomes clear—are closely connected with each other. (Ratzinger 2008b, 57–58)

Ratzinger continually returns to this distinction between revelation and Scripture to help us understand that the latter can give access to the revelation it communicatively mediates when read and interpreted in faith by one who is a part of the body of Christ. Only thus is the reader properly located within the intended receiver of God’s inexhaustible self-revelation and self-gift.¹¹

Moreover, Ratzinger’s affirmation of the identity of the Church as the primary receiver and the tabernacle of God’s self-revelation implies, in turn, the Church’s involvement as an author of Scripture who, therefore, has a word to say concerning its proper interpretation. This latter point follows, on the one hand, because the individual authors can write under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit only insofar as they are members of Christ’s risen body.¹² On the other hand, “only the subject from whom this literature is born – the pilgrim people of God – makes this literary collection, with all of its variety and apparent contrasts, *one single book*.” (Ratzinger 2002)

The Church, then, is both the tabernacle of revelation (understood as the self-gift of the Risen-Lord in the Holy Spirit) and as an author of Scripture.¹³ As we will

¹¹ See also Ratzinger [Benedict XVI] 2011, 22: “For by its very nature, ... faith is a process of gathering. To accept it means to allow oneself to be gathered in. It means becoming Church, for the word *ecclesia*, both etymologically and historically, means precisely this: assembly. We could demonstrate the same things in terms of the other fundamental New Testament designation for the Church: the Body of Christ. Faith means emerging from the isolation of one’s own existence and becoming “one body” with Christ, that is, an existential unity with him. And this always means: existential unity of all who have become ‘one body’. This ‘Body’ alone is the abode of his ‘Spirit’. The Body is the acting subject of the Word.”

¹² See Wicks 2008, 278–79: “[The biblical writer] is certainly God’s ‘organ,’ but he is this at quite a definite place in history, that is, only by being at the same time ‘organ’ of the Body of Christ and of the people of God in their covenant with God.”

¹³ “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.” (Ratzinger 2007, xxi)

see in the next section, this double role and identity has important implications for the shape of an exegesis suited to revelation.

2. An Exegesis Suited to Revelation

Insofar as Scripture and revelation are distinct, Ratzinger explains, “Scripture, *in order to be revelation* is in need of an interpretation suited to revelation.”¹⁴ From his doctoral dissertation on the People of God in St. Augustine until his last scholarly contributions written as Pope Emeritus, Ratzinger sought to explicate the methodological requirements for such an exegesis. Anyone acquainted with his methodology will easily recognize a fine summary of it in the *post-synodal* apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (nos. 29–49), where we thus find it invested with magisterial authority. It is, however, helpful to go back to his work as a theologian to illuminate his papal teaching on the matter.

How does Ratzinger/Benedict XVI envisage an exegesis that receives Scripture as it is meant to be received, namely, as the divinely inspired witness to God’s self-revelation? He does not re-invent the wheel. Rather, he takes up the Council’s short methodological instructions in *DV* 12 and fleshes them out in a more systematic fashion. Accordingly, in his own contribution to the Synod on the Word of God, later taken up into *Verbum Domini*, he proposes two main levels of interpretation (see Benedict XVI 2008). This proposal corresponds to the classical teaching on the two senses of Scripture, the literal and the spiritual. Pope Benedict, however, prefers to refer to two different methodological levels, the historical-critical and the theological.¹⁵

2.1. Historical-Critical

First, given that revelation involves a historical process of divine-self communication, an exegesis suitable to revelation must be historical. This, in fact, is a requirement of

¹⁴ “Schrift ist das Materialprinzip der Offenbarung, die als solche hinter der Schrift bleibt und sich nicht in der Schrift restlos objektiviert, weswegen Schrift, um Offenbarung zu sein, der offenbarungsgemäßen Interpretation bedarf” (Ratzinger 2009a, 711) (*emphasis added*). This does not mean that Scripture becomes revelation only after it is interpreted. The point is rather that, already in its objective constitution as a vehicle of revelation, Scripture is ordered to a recipient interpreter, namely, the Church.

¹⁵ See *VD* 34: “Only where both methodological levels, the historical critical and the theological, are respected, can one speak of a theological exegesis, an exegesis worthy of this book.” In the same document, however, Pope Benedict also fully endorses the classical terminology. He writes: “[T]he Pontifical Biblical Commission’s definition of the spiritual sense, as understood by Christian faith, remains fully valid: it is ‘the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it. This context truly exists. In it the New Testament recognizes the fulfillment of the Scriptures. It is therefore quite acceptable to re-read the Scriptures in the light of this new context, which is that of life in the Spirit.’”

Scripture's own character as an historical witness to an historical revelation. Ratzinger has always insisted on the necessity of the historical-critical approach, despite his sometimes strident critique of the philosophical presuppositions adopted by many of its practitioners and his strictures against its reductive imprisonment in a purely immanent worldview.¹⁶ In his inaugural lecture at the University of Münster in the year 1963, he even speaks of the need for something like "an office of watchman for exegesis [*Wächteramt der Exegese*], which investigates the literal sense and thus preserves the connection with the *sarx* of the Logos against every kind of Gnosis."¹⁷ Ratzinger himself makes this point abundantly clear, and there is no need to elaborate it further. Suffice it to quote his most recent statement on the matter. When delineating the Magisterium's guidelines for biblical studies, he writes in *VD* 32:

Before all else, we need to acknowledge the benefits that historical-critical exegesis and other recently-developed methods of textual analysis have brought to the life of the Church. For the Catholic understanding of sacred Scripture, attention to such methods is indispensable, linked as it is to the realism of the Incarnation: "This necessity is a consequence of the Christian principle formulated in the Gospel of John 1:14: *Verbum caro factum est*. The historical fact is a constitutive dimension of the Christian faith. The history of salvation is not mythology, but a true history, and it should thus be studied with the methods of serious historical research" (Benedict XVI 2008). The study of the Bible requires a knowledge of these methods of enquiry and their suitable application.

While vehemently affirming the desirability and necessity of historical-critical exegesis, Ratzinger/Benedict, repeatedly reminds us that an *exegesis suitable to revelation* can never be limited to the application of the methods of historical and literary analysis.¹⁸ Rather, because revelation always transcends the text, and so cannot be extracted from the text alone, it needs to be interpreted from within its *Sitz im Leben*, which is the living body of Christ, the Church (see Benedict XVI 2006). Using

¹⁶ See extensively Ratzinger 2008a; moreover *VD* 35.b and Ratzinger 2002.

¹⁷ "From this perspective, it is essential that, just as there is an office of watchman for the Church and for her inspired witness, so also there be an office of watchman for exegesis, which investigates the literal sense and thus preserves the connection with the *sarx* of the Logos against every kind of Gnosis. In that sense there is then something like an independence of Scripture, as a self-sufficient and in many respects unambiguous criterion vis-à-vis the teaching office of the Church. There is no doubt that Luther's insight was correct and that not enough space was accorded it in the Catholic Church because of the claims of the teaching office, whose inner limitations were not always perceived clearly enough." (Ratzinger 2008b, 66)

¹⁸ In this Ratzinger is of one mind with the Biblical Commission, which in its 1993 document on *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, states: "In their work of interpretation, Catholic exegetes must never forget that what they are interpreting is the *word of God*. Their common task is not finished when they have simply determined sources, defined forms or explained literary procedures. They arrive at the true goal of their work only when they have explained the meaning of the biblical text as God's word for today." (Pontifical Biblical Commission 1993, III, C, 1)

a metaphor dear to him, Ratzinger explains why historical critical exegesis is not sufficient to reach the level of revelation when interpreting the biblical text:

Revelation is not a meteor fallen to earth that now lies around somewhere as a rock mass from which rock samples can be taken and submitted to a laboratory analysis. Revelation has instruments; but it is not separable from the living person to whom it is communicated. Its goal is always to gather and unite men, and this is why the Church is a necessary aspect of revelation. If however, revelation is more than Scripture, if it transcends Scripture, then ‘rock analysis’—which is to say, the historical-critical method—cannot be the last word concerning revelation; rather the living organism of the faith of all ages is then an intrinsic part of revelation. (Ratzinger 1998, 127; see also Ratzinger 2005b, 33)

This living organism of the faith of all ages to which revelation was communicated and which has passed it on to us is called the Church. She is born from the Word and gives us the Word.¹⁹ In Ratzinger’s understanding of revelation, therefore, the Church is “an intrinsic part of revelation,” because she is the one who first received it and who first put it into writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit poured out on her. From this he concludes unambiguously that an “authentic biblical hermeneutics can only be had within the faith of the Church.” (VD 29)²⁰

2.2. Theological

This brings us to the second and central point of the present paper: Ratzinger/Pope Benedict’s call to transcend the material letter and to read it in the *pneuma* who inspired it. In accord with DV 12, Pope Benedict insists on three additional “fundamental criteria for an appreciation of the divine dimension of the Bible, which

¹⁹ See Ratzinger [Benedict XVI] 2011, 19: “*Ecclesia* does not simply exist already, but, rather, it is created by the Word in the first place. The Word is constantly there in order to call people together to himself and thereby to make them into the *Ecclesia*. The New Testament *Ecclesia* is not something preexisting; it is an open-ended entity that comes into being through the word of proclamation.”

²⁰ See also Ratzinger [Benedict XVI] 2011, 22–23: “The Bible, too, being the basic form and basic norm of all preaching, is an ecclesial word and hence can be understood *as* Bible only within the context of Church. To construe Bible merely as something opposed to Church is ultimately a fiction: after all, the Bible comes into existence only as the expression of a common faith. It is becoming increasingly clear to us that inspiration is not an individual charismatic process but, rather, an essentially ecclesial and historical process embedded in the whole process of tradition, genre history, and redaction. Only in the shared process of believing one after the other, of entering by faith into the faith history of Israel and into the turning point therein that occurs with Jesus does that tradition which is recorded in the Bible come about. And again, only through shared listening, critical views, and disputes do the most diverse pieces of literature become a canon, an ecclesial happening. The human subject of the Bible is the Church; she is at the same time the place of the transition from human spirit to *Pneuma*, to the Spirit of the common Body of Jesus Christ and, thus, generally the place in which inspiration is possible. Hence, although academic study of individual bits of Scripture can arrive at very important insights even apart from the Church, *as* Bible it can only be understood ecclesially and only in terms of its acting subject, without which it would not be Bible at all...”

he enumerates in *VD* 34: “1) the text must be interpreted with attention to *the unity of the whole Scripture*; nowadays this is called canonical exegesis; 2) account is to be taken of the *living Tradition of the whole Church*; and, finally, 3) respect must be shown for *the analogy of faith*.”

These three criteria are not three levels of meaning after the manner of the classical threefold spiritual sense. Rather, by the very fact that Scripture can appear and function as such only within the living Tradition of the Church, which shares in unifying Scriptures’ diverse constituents out of one common creed, all three criteria are necessarily operative at once.

It is on this methodological level that Benedict’s call for a Christological-pneumatological interpretation of the Old Testament comes into play. As Benedict rightly says, attention to the unity of Scripture is seen to be a feature of what is nowadays called canonical exegesis. Canonical exegesis, however, is an umbrella term for any hermeneutic that approaches the Bible as a unified whole—even without regard for the faith or the Church as its unifying subject. By contrast, Christological-pneumatological exegesis refers specifically to the re-reading of the Old Testament in light of the Christ-Event. We could thus call it a sub-category of canonical exegesis in the descriptive sense. But we could also call it the ideal of canonical exegesis in the normative sense.

The following points need to be addressed: a) What allows us to read a certain biblical text, written by a concrete historical author at a specific time in history, in the light of a text that might be much older or much younger, and to do this without imposing an artificial connection extrinsic to the original author’s attention? And b), what justifies re-reading an Old Testament text in the light of an historical event which the NT testifies to? How do we avoid distorting its literal sense in the process?

a. The Unity of Scripture

“The basic and primary presupposition of theological exegesis is therefore the conviction that Scripture—the multiplicity of its authors and its long historical genesis notwithstanding—is *one* book having a real, intrinsic unity in the midst of its various tensions.” (Ratzinger and Balthasar 2005, 39) The presupposition of this unity is not arbitrary; it is not imposed from the outside on a set of otherwise unconnected texts. Rather, it rests

upon the firm belief that Scripture is ultimately the work of a single author, who has both a human and a divine aspect. That is, it comes out of one historical subject, the people of God, which, despite all the changes of its history, always retained its inner self-identity. When this people speaks, not casually and superficially, but from the center of its identity, it speaks in the stages of its own history, yet always as one and the same subject. (Ratzinger and Balthasar 2005, 39)

When Ratzinger speaks of “the one historical subject, the people of God,” he is, of course, referring to the unity of the Old and New Covenant people, who are essentially one because—in the Christian understanding—Christ is the fulfillment of all the hopes of Israel. In the saving events of his Passover and the founding of the Church, Christ did not create a new people but renewed Israel according to the flesh through an eschatological transformation in the Spirit. The result is a “new Israel” that, far from replacing the old, sacramentally anticipates its destiny—while remaining rooted in the old thanks to the enduring presence of the Twelve, upon which the Church is founded.

Although the Christ-Event introduces an absolute novelty into history, then, it does not cause a discontinuity in the people of God (cf. Rom 11:16–24; Acts 3:23; Gal 6:16). For this reason, the Fathers would speak about the *ecclesia ab Abel*. The unity of the two people of God, Old and New, is to be found in Christ, who thereby also constitutes the unity of the two Testaments. Ratzinger can therefore refer to the Old and New Covenant people as the “continuity of a subject which organically traverses the whole of history and which remains one with itself throughout its own transformations.” (Ratzinger 1995b, 95)

This leads to the second, properly divine aspect. “The inner identity of the people of God” that expresses itself in the Scriptures “is based upon the guidance of the one Holy Spirit.” (Ratzinger and Balthasar 2005, 39) Thus, “[w]hen the core of this identity makes itself heard, it is not simply a man or a people that is speaking—it is God speaking in human words; it is the one Spirit speaking, the one Spirit who abides as the inner power guiding the people through its history.” (Ratzinger and Balthasar 2005, 39) Therefore, Benedict concludes, “these writings form one Scripture which can only be properly understood if they are read in the *analogia fidei* as a oneness in which there is progress towards Christ, and inversely, in which Christ draws all history to himself; and if, moreover, all this is brought to life in the Church’s faith.” (Benedict XVI 2006)

The movement of the Spirit towards the fulfillment of the Scriptures in Christ can already be observed within the Old Testament itself. It is particularly evident in the ongoing process of *Fortschreibung*, along with the constant *Relecture* of earlier books in later writings throughout the Second Temple Period. In this process, which is also referred to as inner-biblical exegesis (see Fishbane 1985), it is evident that

the texts develop in a process of reflection, of cultivation, of new understanding, a process that goes beyond every individual author. Yet precisely in this process of advancing, which relativizes all the individual authors, a profound transcendence is at work: in this process of advancing, of purification, of development, the inspiring Spirit is active, who guides actions and events in the Word and, in the events and actions, propels back to the Word. (Ratzinger 2005a, 147–49)

Ultimately, “the whole Old Testament is a journeying with the Word of God. Only in the process of this journeying was the Bible’s real way of declaring itself formed, step by step. Consequently we ourselves can only discover where this way is leading if we follow it to the end. In this respect—as a way—the Old and New Testaments belong together.” (Ratzinger 1995b, 9–10)

Of course, it is only in hindsight that the direction in which the Spirit was leading becomes fully evident. That is why the New Testament (cf., e.g., 2 Cor 3) insists that ultimately the Old Testament is fully comprehensible only when read in light of the Christ-event. Ratzinger is unmistakably clear on this point:

For the Christian the Old Testament represents, in its totality, an advance toward Christ; only when it attains to him does its real meaning, which was gradually hinted at, become clear. Thus every individual part derives its meaning from the whole, and the whole derives its meaning from its end—from Christ. Hence we only interpret an individual text theologically correctly (as the fathers of the church recognized and as the faith of the church in every age has recognized) when we see it as a way that is leading us ever forward, when we see in the text where this way is tending and what its inner direction is. (Ratzinger 1995b, 9–10)

In order to recognize the way in which the Old Testament is on its way towards a future fulfilment, the exegete must make the passage from letter to spirit which was effected by the Christ-Event and towards which the entire Old Testament tended of its own inner dynamism.

b. From the Letter to the Spirit

Throughout his work, Ratzinger returns again and again to this basic Christian principle: The fundamental axiom of an exegesis suited to revelation requires “reading it [Scripture] in its entirety and in view of its overall trajectory.” (Ratzinger [Benedict XVI] 2022, 33) That is, and he is quite clear on this point, “we do not read the Old Testament by itself and for its own sake, but always with the New Testament and through the New Testament.” (Ratzinger [Benedict XVI] 2022, 33) Or, as he observes on a different occasion, we no longer read the Old Testament as if it were complete in itself, “but always with Christ and through Christ ... We read it with him in whom all things have been fulfilled and in whom all of its validity and truth are revealed.” (Ratzinger 1995b, 15–17)

This way of reading the Old Testament is, of course, first attested in the New Testament, the whole purpose of which, according to Ratzinger, is “to show the authentic explanation of the Old Testament writings in the events relating to Jesus Christ.” (Benedict XVI 2023, 59) In the Christian understanding, the New Testament “authentically elucidates the way to explain the Old in terms of Jesus.” (Benedict XVI 2023) It not only delivers the methodology, but also defines for us the reason why this approach to the Old Testament is at once *Christological and pneumatological*. Three key passages merit mention in this respect.

First, Jesus himself announced the transition from the Old Covenant worship, with its temple and cult, to a new spiritual worship in a New Covenant. As Ratzinger explains,

[i]n his saying about the Temple being destroyed and rebuilt in three days [cf. John 2:19–21], Jesus had foreseen the event of the destruction of the Temple and announced a new form of divine worship, which was to be centered on the offering of his Body. In this way and at the same time, the Sinai covenant was brought to its definitive form and became the New Covenant. In this same way, however, the worship was extended to all believers, thus giving to the promise of land its definitive meaning. It was therefore evident to Christians that the preaching of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, signified the God-given turning point of time, and consequently the interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures in light of Jesus Christ was, so to speak, legitimized by God himself. (Benedict XVI 2023, 59)

Significantly, the fourth Evangelist reports that it was only after the Resurrection that the disciples understood the saying about the reconstruction of the Temple; only then did they believe in the Scriptures and in the word Jesus had spoken. It was the Spirit of the risen Lord who now reminded them of this word and taught them the spiritual understanding of the Old Testament (cf. John 14:26).

Secondly, we must recall the famous passage in Luke 24, which is a paradigm of all Christological exegesis. On their journey to Emmaus, Jesus guides the disciples on an interior journey on which he rereads the Old Testament with them.

In this way, they learn to understand in an entirely new way the promises and hopes of Israel and the figure of the Messiah. Thus they discover that the destiny of the Crucified and Risen One, who is mysteriously traveling with the disciples, is foreshadowed in these books. They learn a new reading of the Old Testament. This text describes the formation of the Christian faith in the first and second centuries and thus describes a path that should always be sought out and traveled. (Benedict XVI 2023, 71)

The point Ratzinger emphasizes in this passage is that Luke 24 is not merely an account of what happened once on the day of the resurrection, but also and primarily the pattern of a path that must “always be sought and traveled” by any disciple truly desirous of understanding the Scriptures.

Finally, 2 Cor 3:4–18, though already cited above, merits another mention in the present context. Here Paul coins the terminology about the passage from the letter to the spirit, that is, from the *gramma* of the Old Covenant to the *pneuma* of the New Covenant (cf. vv. 6–8); here, too, he identifies the opening up of the Scripture’s Christological meaning as a work of the Spirit. Indeed, he describes the Lord as being *himself* the Pneuma—the personal pneumatic or spiritual Meaning—who not only makes Scripture legible, but also reveals himself to be its true and living content

(Ratzinger 2008b, 54). “Christology and Pneumatology,” Rudolph Voderholzer explains, “are closely related in this passage, but they do not coincide. Whosoever turns towards Christ, turns towards the power of the Spirit of the resurrected Lord. And it is the Spirit that gives life, who eventually effects a spiritual, that is, Christological understanding of the Scriptures [i.e. the Old Testament].” (Voderholzer 2013, 137; my own translation)

Basing himself on this New Testament passage, Pope Benedict designates the re-reading of the Old Testament in light of the Christ-event as a “Christological-Pneumatological” interpretation. On the one hand, “it could also be called ‘allegorical’ from a historical perspective,” as the Fathers used this term to describe the Christological meaning of the Old Testament (Benedict XVI 2023, 125). The term “allegory,” however, lends itself to a profound misunderstanding in a modern context, where it is mostly used to designate a literary expedient for making an ancient text applicable to a new purpose. For the transition from the literal to the spiritual reading of the Old Testament in light of Jesus Christ is precisely *not* just a literary device, but a reality brought about by “a historical transition that corresponds to the internal logic of the text.” (Benedict XVI 2023, 125) Hence Ratzinger’s option for a terminology meant to highlight unambiguously “the profound novelty and the clear motivation of the new Christian interpretation.” (Benedict XVI 2023, 125) At the same time, Ratzinger’s terminology serves to identify the primary agents of this interpretation. It is the risen Lord himself, the fullness of revelation, who remains present in his Church; it is also he who through his Spirit guides the community of believers into an ever deeper understanding of everything written in the law and the prophets in relation to God’s ultimate self-revelation in his Passion, death, and Resurrection.

3. Mariology Ties the Knot Joining Old and New²¹

In closing, let us consider a concrete example of how Ratzinger himself applies a *christological-pneumatological* exegesis in developing a theological argument. The Marian dogmas are no doubt among the most contentious in the ecumenical debate, and they are seemingly the hardest to argue from Scripture. Yet, by adopting a christological-pneumatological reading of the Old Testament, Ratzinger is able to show how these dogmas are deeply rooted in the biblical theology of Israel. Even more, he is able to show how Mary’s role in the divine economy reveals an astounding analogy to the Church’s participation in revelation. Not only is Mary the Church in person and as a person, she is also the indissoluble hinge between the Old and New Covenant People and the two Testaments they respectively represent. While Christ

²¹ Ratzinger 1983, 31.

is the fulfillment of the Old Testament's hopes, Mary is the perfect conception and reception of its words thanks to her act of conceiving and bearing the one Word that was expressed in them all. As the true Ark of the Covenant, she carries in her person both Old and New Testament in perfect unity.

3.1. Mary, the Personification of Israel

It is a lesson in methodology to watch Ratzinger at work. Faced with the modern objection that Mary plays only a marginal and seemingly ambiguous role in Jesus's public life, and that the New Testament creed has no place for her, he argues that a Mariology emerges from Scripture when the New and Old Testaments are read in light of each other.²² He proceeds by first pointing out that the New Testament's main Marian passages, foremost her *Magnificat*, are entirely woven of Old Testament citations. Among these, he identifies three strands of Old Testament tradition: 1) the formerly sterile mothers of Israel (e.g. Hannah, Sarah), 2) the Daughter Zion theology, and possibly 3) the figure of Eve (Ratzinger 1983, 13, with reference to Braun 1953, and Wennemer 1954). Taking these traditions as a "guide into the Old Testament," he uncovers there a theology of woman which he considers indispensable to its entire structure (see Ratzinger 1983, 13). Contrarily to a widely held prejudice that the Old Testament's chief concern was "to exclude woman from theology, from the language of God," Ratzinger shows that the opposite is the case (Ratzinger 1983, 14). In the manifold types of women, be they mothers, virgins, wives, widows or savior figures, the people of Israel is embodied as a woman (see Ratzinger 1983, 21): "The great women of Israel represent what this people itself is. The history of these women becomes the theology of God's people and, at the same time, the theology of the covenant." (Ratzinger 1983, 21) This has important consequences for revelation. Since the prophets began to interpret the covenant in terms of a marriage between God and Israel, it became clear that "to God is joined, not a goddess, but, as in his historical revelation, the chosen creature, Israel, the daughter Zion, the woman." (Ratzinger 1983, 23) Ratzinger concludes that

[t]o leave woman out of the whole of theology would be to deny creation and election (salvation history) and thereby to nullify revelation. In the women of Israel ... is expressed most purely and most profoundly *what creation is* and what election is, what "Israel" is as God's people. And because election and revelation are one, what ultimately becomes apparent in this for the first time is who and what God is. (Ratzinger 1983, 23–24)

²² "Methodologically, one can approach this question in one of two ways, backwards or forwards, so to speak: either one can read back from the New Testament into the Old or, conversely, feel one's way slowly from the Old Testament into the New. Ideally both ways should coincide, permeating one another, in order to produce the most exact image possible." (Ratzinger 1983, 11–12)

Who God truly is, is revealed not in an abstract void, but only in and through the actual history of God's merciful dealings with his unfaithful but beloved spouse, Israel. This Old Testament development of a theology of woman, however, remains incomplete until "[i]t acquires its definitive meaning for the first time in the New Testament: in the woman who is herself described as the true holy remnant, as the authentic daughter Zion, and who is thereby the mother of the savior, yes, the mother of God." (Ratzinger 1983, 24)

3.2. Mary, Man's Yes to God

So far, Ratzinger has proceeded by identifying the Old Testament allusions in the New Testament portrait of Mary and fleshing out the inner-biblical development of a theology of woman/Israel within the Old Testament. But he also takes a step beyond a strictly canonical reading, thus proving himself the true master of the methodology proposed in *DV* 12. By reflecting theologically on the liturgy's traditional association of Mary with the Old Testament figure of Wisdom, he takes seriously the Church's confession of faith in the ongoing presence of Christ in her worship. In the liturgy, the ultimate *Sitz im Leben* of Scripture, it is the Risen Lord himself who continues to open the mind of the Church "to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:45). Ratzinger accordingly engages in a *christological-pneumatological* exegesis of Old Testament Wisdom as it appears within the tradition of the Church's liturgical celebrations. This enables him to follow out the *analogia fidei* into the heart of God's revelation concerning Mary.

The New Testament's identification of Wisdom with Christ, he points out, cannot exhaust the prefiguration contained therein. There is a remainder that "resists total integration into Christology." (Ratzinger 1983, 26–27) Wisdom, as presented in the Bible, "appears as God's first creature in whom both the pure, primordial form of his creative will and the pure *answer*, which he discovers, find their expression ... Creation answers, and the answer is as close to God as a playmate, as a lover." (Ratzinger 1983, 25) It is no coincidence, "no empty grammatical phenomenon in antiquity's vivid awareness of language," that Wisdom is personified as feminine. Rather, Wisdom "stands on that side of reality which is represented by the woman, by what is purely and simply feminine. It signifies the answer which emerges from the divine call of creation and election. It expresses precisely this: that there is a pure answer and that God's love finds its irrevocable dwelling place within it." (Ratzinger 1983, 26–27)

Viewed from the standpoint of the New Testament, the Old Testament figure of Wisdom "refers, on one side, to the Son as the Word, in whom God creates," as the Prologue of John's Gospel powerfully affirms. On the other hand, however, it also refers "to the creature, to the true Israel, who is personified in the humble maid whose whole existence is marked by the attitude of *Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*. Sophia refers to the Logos, the Word who establishes wisdom, and also

to the womanly answer which receives wisdom and brings it to fruition.” (Ratzinger 1983, 27) In Mary’s perfectly pure and unconditional *yes* to God’s election, she has brought to fruition God’s covenant with Israel. Finally, God’s love has found an “irrevocable dwelling place” in creation. It is by the very same “*yes*” that the New Covenant itself has already been irrevocably accepted and received.

3.3. Mary, the Real-Typological Unity of Scripture

Mary embodies the unity of the Two Testaments in her own person. This unbroken unity of Old and New Covenant, which reflects a logic of perfect fulfillment, is powerfully demonstrated in Ratzinger’s biblical explanation of the immaculate conception.

One major objection to the doctrine of the immaculate conception is based on the Protestant insistence on the universal need for grace, understood solely as justification of the sinner. If, unlike any other human being, Mary were able to offer a whole-hearted, unconditional *yes* in answer to God’s call, “pure grace, the unmerited justification of the sinner,” would be called into question (Ratzinger 1983, 63). Here too, Luther’s stark opposition between Law and Gospel comes into play. The question thus imposes itself: Is there room for a correspondence between God’s and man’s action in the history of salvation? Behind this question ultimately stands another one: Is there room for grace to be effective, to be fruitful of the answer to grace? The question can be resolved only if the unity of the two Testaments is taken into consideration.

Building on the work of the Franciscan theologian Bernhard Langemeyer, Ratzinger draws attention to the fact that the Old Testament prophets, along with their proclamation of judgement, always promised that a “holy remnant” would be saved. Saint Paul even takes up this promise and sees it fulfilled in that part of Israel which has come to accept Jesus as the Christ/Messiah (cf. Rom 11:5). “Holy remnant,” Ratzinger explains, “means that continuity does not rest in God’s will alone while destruction and contradiction occupy the field of history,” as Luther would have it, “but that there is continuity *in* history too: God’s word is not spoken in vain.” (Ratzinger 1983, 64) Rather, the grace operative in God’s word comes to fruition in Mary. In her “the corporeal offspring of the chosen people coincides perfectly with the faith in the promise given to this people.” (Langemeyer 1967, 314; cited in Ratzinger 1983, 64) As a result, “God is not the only actor in history, as if history were only his monologue.” Rather, in Mary’s *fiat* God “finds a response that is *truly* a response.

As the holy remnant Mary signifies that in herself Old and New Covenants are really one. She is entirely a Jewess, a child of Israel, of the Old Covenant, and as such a child of the full covenant, entirely a Christian: Mother of the Word. She is the New Covenant in the Old Covenant; she is the New Covenant *as* the Old Covenant, *as* Israel: thus no one

can comprehend her mission or her person if the unity of the Old and New Testaments collapses. (Ratzinger 1983, 65)

Ratzinger's allusion to the early Church's axiom that the New Testament is hidden in the Old and the Old is revealed in the New is thus no empty word-play. Rather, it conveys the astounding observation that the Church's firm belief in the unity of Scripture is embodied in the one in whom the Church herself is perfectly personified.

Conclusion

Taking up Pope Benedict's urgent plea to develop the methodological conditions for a Christological-pneumatological exegesis of the Old Testament, this article has attempted to extract from Ratzinger's own work the fundamental principles necessary for the task. In order to do so, we needed to clarify his understanding of the role of Scripture in the process and transmission of divine revelation. It is precisely the distinction between revelation and Scripture that necessitates an exegesis going beyond merely historical-critical investigation to attain God's ever-living communicative act that is mediated through the Scriptures. Ultimately, the New Testament presents Christ as the exegete who through his Spirit opens up the mind of the Church to understand the Scriptures. The Church, thereby, assumes a double role. She is the locus of the Risen Lord, the bearer of the fullness of revelation, so that whoever accepts his revelation by faith is drawn into the realm of his presence. Secondly, as the receiving subject of revelation, she is also the human author of the Scriptures, and for this reason she is an authoritative voice in its proper interpretation. Moreover, as human author, the Church lends unity to the otherwise diverse and distinct books.

All these factors must be taken into consideration when developing an exegesis suited to its object. The basic principles have already been given in *DV 12*, but as Pope Benedict laments, they have rarely been put into practise. He therefore reminds us that an exegesis worthy of the Sacred Page must go beyond the merely historical-critical. It must read the Scriptures from within the Church's faith, as a unity, in continuity with the Tradition, and in accord with the analogy of faith. Particularly with regard to the Old Testament, we must acknowledge that it carries within itself a movement towards its fulfillment in Christ. Consequently, it needs to be re-read constantly through its appropriate hermeneutical lens, which is the Christ-Event as recorded in the New Testament. For a Christian, Christ is the key to the Old Testament, and the New Testament read from within the living faith of the Church is the instrument for opening up its "seal."

Lastly, as an example of Ratzinger's own Christological-pneumatological exegesis, we recalled some basic elements of his Mariology. This example demonstrates

the vitality of, and provides a model for, the recovery of such an exegesis for the Church's development of dogma. Always taking his cue from the New Testament, Ratzinger goes back into the Old Testament, follows its movement towards its fulfillment and re-reads it in light of the fullness of revelation. In particular, he shows how the Church's belief in the unity of Scripture is perfectly embodied in Mary, who is the living bond between the Old and the New Covenant. Ratzinger reminds us that none of the recent Marian dogmas can be derived from the New Testament alone; it is only by reading the New and Old Testament in unity that we can see the coherence of the Church's confession of the Marian mystery. Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict thus shows that it is not only possible to recuperate a Christological-pneumatological exegesis of the Old Testament, but that in doing so we also recover the interpretation of Scripture as the soul of theology. In this way, we allow the Holy Spirit to lead the Church yet deeper into understanding that fullness of revelation which is none other than her head and spouse, Jesus Christ.

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