

BOOK REVIEW

Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives. By Pope Benedict XVI. New York: Image Books, 2012. 132pp. \$20.00. ISBN 978-0-385-34640-5.

In the third and final volume of his best selling series *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI turns his attention to the stories of Jesus's birth, found in the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke. In all three books, it is the pope's methodology that takes center stage. He spells this out most clearly in the forward to the first book. His intent is not to do historical criticism. It is to do an exegesis of the Gospels that uses historical criticism but goes beyond it. The Pope writes that the historical- critical method is indispensable but can only take us so far. First, it "leaves us in the past", but the Bible must also be a living Word that speaks to men and women today. Second, it tends to interpret texts as individual units, but the Bible must also be understood as a whole. Finally, the pope includes what could be called the "faith-hermeneutic," that is, the Bible is the sacred text of a community of faith and must be interpreted within the living faith of the People of God who are shaped by the incarnate Word. In the end, the pope is writing a theology (and to a lesser degree, spirituality) of Scripture. He makes it clear that this is not an exercise of the magisterium but an expression of his own personal search for the face of the Lord.

In this final volume, Benedict is on trickier ground. The first two works covered from the baptism to the resurrection of the Lord. Most of that material is on solid historical terrain. In the stories of Jesus's birth, however, separating fact from theological story is a more challenging task. How accurate are the stories of the annunciation and the visitation? Did Mary and Joseph really travel to Bethlehem for a census? Was the Lord really born in a stable or cave? Was Bethlehem the real site of the birth? Did shepherds and later magi come to visit the baby Jesus? Did Herod really slaughter the babies in an attempt to kill Jesus? These stories have deep theological purpose. In them we find the Church's conviction that the conception of Jesus was an utterly unique intervention by God in human history. We find a beautifully developed narrative which provides the foundation for Marian spirituality. We recognize that Jesus is the fulfillment of the hopes of both Israel and all humanity. Whatever their historical value, the infancy narratives are theological and spiritual treasures. The pope is well aware of the debates that rage among the exegetes in these areas concerning historicity, but his position is quite consistent and clear. He believes that the stories that we find in Matthew and Luke are most likely traceable to family traditions. Luke tells us that "Mary pondered these things in her heart"

for a reason. The evangelist is hinting at the root of his source material. Thus Benedict writes: "To sum up: what Matthew and Luke set out to do, each in his own way, was not to tell 'stories' but to write history, real history that actually happened, admittedly interpreted and understood in the context of the Word of God" (17). Much of the book then explores how these events can best be interpreted through the eyes of faith and in the light of the Word of God.

There is no doubt that after the resurrection, the earliest Christians read the Scriptures "with new eyes." Luke describes how the risen Lord on the road to Emmaus "beginning with Moses and the prophets, interpreted to them what referred to Him in the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27). This approach can be found throughout the infancy narratives. Indeed, Matthew shapes his narrative around five such passages from the Old Testament that are being fulfilled in Christ's birth. The pope is particularly interested in the connections between the Old and the New Testaments. Following the work of Marius Reiser, he refers to a couple of passages in the Old Testament as "stray," that is, they refer to someone or something unknown, for example the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. The pope writes "The actual 'owner' of the text keeps us waiting. Only when he appears does the passage acquire full meaning.... One of the characteristics of early Christian narrative is that it provides these 'waiting' words with their 'owner'" (17). The example of this in the infancy narratives, par excellence, is Isaiah 7: 14: "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" The Pope explores the historical context for the original quote and can find no "owner." He concludes: "Should Christians not hear this word as their own? ... Should they not be convinced that God has given us this sign in the birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary? Emmanuel has come" (50).

There are a number of interesting theological "riffs" throughout. A small phrase will lead the Pope into a more deeply developed reflection on the meaning of Jesus. So when Mary gives birth to her "first-born" (Luke 2:7), this leads the Holy Father into an exploration of Paul's notion of Christ as the "first-born among many brethren" (Romans 8:29), "first-born of all creation" (Colossians 1:15), and "first-born from the dead" (Col 1:18). The Pope notes: "The concept of first-born takes on a cosmic dimension.... Luke does not speak in these terms, yet for us, reading his Gospel with the benefit of hindsight, this cosmic glory is already present in the lowly manger in the cave at Bethlehem" (71).

Some of the finest parts of the book are his poignant reflections on Mary and Joseph. After focusing on the initial joy of the annunciation, the Pope adds: "I consider it important to focus also on the final sentence of Luke's annunciation narrative: 'And the angel departed from her' (Luke 1:38).... There are no angels

standing around her. She must continue along the path that leads to many dark moments—from Joseph’s dismay at her pregnancy to the moment when Jesus is said to be out of his mind (cf. Mark 3:21; Jn 10:20), right up to the night of the Cross” (37).

The Infancy Narratives is an “open book” into how the Pope’s theological mind works. For Benedict, the stories in Matthew and Luke answer Pilate’s question to Jesus: “Where are you from?” (John 19:9). Jesus is not simply from a stable in Bethlehem or a carpenter’s home in Nazareth. He is from God. Biblically, his exegesis is cautious. At times he sees history where others might see theological narratives (perhaps most notably in the story of the magi). Much of this remains an open question among scholars. In the end, it is his method that is most compelling, weaving together Scripture, theology, the Fathers of the church, the saints, the creed, literature and personal spiritual reflections. He hopes that “this short book, despite its limitations, will be able to help many people on their path toward and alongside Jesus” (xii). If that is the goal, then maybe the best tribute would be to return to the Gospels anew to discover what they continue to say to each of us. How do we open our souls to the voices of angels? What does the pregnant Mary have to say to pregnant women in crisis? What does the stable have to say to the wealthy on behalf of the poor? How do the screams of the holy innocents echo in our world? How can the night of our dear savior’s birth become a source of light in our world and in our own lives?

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