

VERBUM DOMINI AND THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

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ALITTLE OVER a year ago on 11 November 2010, Pope Benedict XVI issued the apostolic exhortation, *Verbum Domini*.¹ This document was the response to the synod on the Word of God which took place in Rome two years earlier from 5-26 October 2008. Since *Verbum Domini* appeared, only a few journal articles have emerged that address it. Three of these provide summaries of the content and themes of the exhortation.² One article treats the pastoral aspects of the document.³ The most recent publication, a book, presents a summary of the proceedings of the synod on the Word of God followed by an explication of the exhortation.⁴

Since these works provide summaries as well as discussions of the major issues of *Verbum Domini*, rather than repeat these, this article will concentrate on a single issue of the document: the interpretation of Scripture. The reason for selecting this particular issue is that it was the only topic on which the Pope personally commented during the course of the synod. During his comment, he also requested that this issue be incorporated into the final document on the synod.⁵

In his reflection, the Pope stated that the Vatican II document, *The Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* 12, called for two methodologies to be used in the exegetical process. The first is historical criticism and the second is a theological process that includes three aspects. First, the unity of the Bible must be kept in mind. Second, the passage being interpreted must be seen in the context of the living tradition of the Church. Third, the analogy of faith must be observed.⁶ The

Pope believes that the first exegetical principle has been well practiced through the use of the historical critical method; however, the second method, the theological method, has not been adequately utilised in exegesis. In order to correct this imbalance, numbers 29 to 49 of *Verbum Domini* directly address the issue of the proper exegesis of Scripture. The remainder of this article will explore how *Verbum Domini* expresses Pope Benedict's understanding of exegesis. This will be developed in the following way. First, the 'two senses' of Scripture will be discussed. This will be followed by an examination of the two exegetical methodologies found in *Dei Verbum*. Third, there will be a presentation of Pope Benedict's interpretation of *Dei Verbum* 12. The article will conclude with the Pope's application of the twofold exegetical method as found in *Verbum Domini*.

The Two Senses of Scripture

We begin with the two senses of Scripture because this is basically where Christian biblical interpretation began in the early Church. The early Christians saw Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament but they wondered how the Old Testament spoke about Jesus. Did it refer to Jesus in a literal sense or did it refer to Jesus in some other way? This question led to the development of the two senses of Scripture: a literal sense and a more-than-literal sense that is frequently called the spiritual sense of Scripture.

The literal sense is the meaning of the text 'which the human author directly intended and

which the written words conveyed'.⁷ The spiritual sense is not so easy to define. Basically, it is a meaning that goes beyond the literal meaning and which was not originally intended by the human author. Such a definition is open to a variety of interpretations. Pope Pius XII's encyclical, *Divino afflante Spiritu*, and the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document of 1993, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, define the spiritual sense as the Christological meaning of the Old Testament. The spiritual sense arises from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and is part of the living tradition of the Church.⁸

The history of biblical interpretation can be summarised in terms of the use of these two senses of Scripture.⁹ Although both senses are essential for a proper interpretation of the Bible, at various times, one has held preference over the other. During the patristic period (2nd-8th centuries) up until the scholastic period (14th and 15th centuries), the spiritual sense dominated. One of the most popular forms of the spiritual sense in both periods was the use of allegorical interpretation in which aspects of Scripture were given meanings outside the biblical text. For example, the city of Jerusalem was understood as the Church of Jesus Christ. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the literal sense of Scripture became prominent and the historical critical method was developed in order to arrive at a better understanding of the literal sense of the Bible. The 19th and 20th centuries continued to emphasise the literal sense but within the last 50-60 years there has been a renewed interest in the more-than-literal sense of Scripture. This has been seen in the development of new methodologies such as narrative criticism, rhetorical criticism, psychoanalytical criticism, canonical criticism, and advocacy exegesis which includes liberation and feminist studies.¹⁰

This brief outline of the two senses of Scripture has been provided because it forms the basis of Pope Benedict's vision of the future of biblical interpretation as expressed in *Verbum Domini*. He believes that the balance between the two senses of Scripture has be-



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come distorted and needs to be corrected. This balance was expressed in *Dei Verbum* and he is calling for a better application of the interpretive directives of *Dei Verbum* in order to restore the proper balance between the literal sense of Scripture and the spiritual sense. The article now turns to an examination of *Dei Verbum*'s understanding of how exegetes can study the two senses of Scripture while maintaining the unity between them.

The Interpretation of Scripture in Dei Verbum

The section concerning biblical interpretation in *Dei Verbum* is quite short; yet it addresses both senses of Scripture. In order to determine the meaning intended by the human author, the exegete must pay particular attention to the literary forms used by the writer. In addition, 'due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another.'¹¹

Even though the historical critical method is not mentioned by name, it is evident that the document is referring to this methodology. The Council purposely avoided mentioning a specific methodology in order to leave the door open for exegetes to use any appropriate methodology in determining the literal meaning of the biblical text.¹² *Dei Verbum* only cites the elements that are always essential to uncover the literal sense of Scripture.

Dei Verbum then addresses the criteria nec-

essary for determining the spiritual meaning of the Bible. First, the exegete must place the biblical text within the context of the entire Bible. For example, Deut 24:1 permits divorce but in Mark 10:1-12, Jesus prohibits divorce.¹³ Second, the interpreter must take into consideration the living tradition of the whole Church. This criterion includes several sources: the teaching office of the Church (the magisterium); the teaching of the fathers of the Church; the use of the Scriptures in the liturgy and in prayer; and the testimony of the saints. A third and final criterion is that the biblical interpretation must be in harmony with the elements of faith. This means that the biblical interpretation must be in agreement with the doctrine of the Church.

Pope Benedict XVI's Insight into Biblical Interpretation

The intervention that Pope Benedict gave at the synod on the Word of God regarding biblical interpretation expressed certain growing concerns that he had with the direction that biblical exegesis was taking. He believed that exegetes had fulfilled quite well the directive of *Dei Verbum* regarding the exegesis of the literal sense of Scripture in using the historical critical method. For the most part, however, exegetes had failed to apply the three criteria for interpreting the spiritual sense of Scripture.

On 27 January 1988 in a lecture entitled 'Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today', given in New York City, as Cardinal Ratzinger, he presented his misgivings as to the current direction of biblical exegesis.¹⁴ As much as the historical critical method had contributed to biblical exegesis, the method had a number of limitations that prevented it from being the only method that could be used in biblical interpretation. Most importantly, the method is based on a philosophy that automatically excludes faith and the supernatural from the exegetical process.¹⁵ Historical criticism claims to be an objective

approach to scriptural interpretation; yet, each person who employs the method brings his or her own agenda to the text.¹⁶ The historical critical method divides the biblical text into many parts and fails to see the unity of the Bible.¹⁷ In attempting to arrive at the original sources of the biblical books, many hypothetical theories are produced that complicate the interpretation of Scripture rather than clarify it.¹⁸ In view of these shortcomings, the historical critical method, by itself, is inadequate for the exegetical process.

Cardinal Ratzinger explained that a two-fold methodology is necessary for an adequate exegesis of Scripture: an historical approach as well as a theological approach.¹⁹ Despite its inadequacies, the historical critical method remains necessary for exegesis but must also be supplemented with other interpretive aspects that include the tradition of the Church as found in patristic and medieval thought.²⁰

A clear description of Pope Benedict's understanding of comprehensive exegesis can be found in the Forward to his book, *Jesus of Nazareth*.²¹ The Pope refers to his methodological process of biblical exegesis as the 'hermeneutic of faith' which is simply the application of the exegetical process as outlined in *Dei Verbum*.

The first step in exegesis is historical criticism. The Pope emphasises the importance of historical criticism:

...the historical critical method—specifically because of the intrinsic nature of theology and faith—is and remains an indispensable dimension of exegetical work. For it is of the very essence of biblical faith to be about real historical events. It does not tell stories symbolizing suprahistorical truths, but is based on history, history that took place here on earth...

If we push this history aside, Christian faith as such disappears and is recast as some other religion. So if history, if facticity in this sense, is an essential dimension of Christian faith, then faith must expose itself to the historical method—indeed, faith itself demands this.²²

Historical criticism is capable of addressing the literal meaning of the Bible. Other

methods are necessary to access the spiritual meaning. The first of these is canonical exegesis which views the Bible as a unity. It was mentioned above that one way of seeing this unity is in the development of themes and theology as in the specific example of divorce in the Bible. For Pope Benedict, however, the true unity of the Bible lies in the person of Jesus. It is the Christological dimension that unites the Old and New Testaments, a dimension that can only be appreciated through faith.²³

In reading *Verbum Domini*, it is impossible to miss the number of times the Pope makes reference to the fathers of the Church and the medieval doctors of the Church.²⁴ This reflects another important principle that Pope Benedict sees as essential to theological exegesis – taking into account the living tradition of the whole Church which includes the fathers of the Church as well as the medieval writers. The importance of the patristic witness is found in its contribution to the development of early Christian thought. The early fathers developed the canon of Scripture, formed the first creeds and developed the form of the liturgy.²⁵ All of this plays a vital role in the interpretation of Scripture. Whereas the fathers of the church introduced the spiritual meaning of Scripture, the medieval period developed this sense by refining it into three categories: the allegorical, the moral and the anagogical.²⁶

Together with the doctrine of the church that has developed down through the centuries, patristic and medieval exegesis forms the living tradition of the church which is essential in interpreting the Scriptures for the present age. This is what the historical critical method cannot do. The expertise of historical criticism lies in finding the meaning of Scripture intended by the authors when they wrote - this is the literal meaning. Historical criticism is unable to provide a meaning for the Christian community of today. This task is the work of theological exegesis which includes the three aspects of the unity of the Bible, the living tradition of the church and the harmony of theology. Theological exegesis arrives at the spir-

itual meaning of Scripture which transcends the literal meaning.

This, briefly, is what the Pope calls the ‘hermeneutic of faith’ and how it functions in the interpretation of Scripture. This forms the basis of how he envisions the exegetical process in *Verbum Domini*. We now turn to the document itself.

Biblical Interpretation in Verbum Domini

Verbum Domini is divided into three sections: the Word of God, the Word in the Church, and the Word in the World. Its teaching on exegesis is found in the first section and extends from numbers 29 to 49. Number 29 sets the tone for all that follows: ‘Interpretation of sacred Scripture requires full participation on the part of exegetes in the life and faith of the believing community of their own time.’

Numbers 32-34 present a brief summary of the development of Church teaching concerning biblical interpretation. It cites three of the most important documents on Scripture: *Providentissimus Deus* by Pope Leo XIII, *Divino afflante Spiritu* by Pope Pius XII, and *Dei Verbum* from Vatican II. The benefits and the necessity of historical critical exegesis are brought forward but the twofold interpretive approach of *Dei Verbum* is emphasised. Exegesis must be as concerned with the theological dimension as it is with the historical dimension. The following number 35 warns against the danger of neglecting theological exegesis. The result can be an exegetical method that denies the divine element in Scripture. In order to prevent this from happening, *Verbum Domini* advises that more than one hermeneutical methodology be employed in exegesis. Although historical criticism is necessary, it is imperative that other methods be adopted to ensure that a proper and total exegesis of the Bible takes place (number 36).

The document suggests that a better balance between the historical and theological interpretations can be achieved by following the example of the fathers of the Church who were able to recognise the literal and spiritual

senses of Scripture (number 37). In defining the literal sense, the exhortation quotes the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: the literal sense is ‘the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture, and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation’.²⁷ Based upon the literal sense, the patristic and medieval exegetes developed the three categories of the spiritual sense described above: the allegorical sense, the moral sense, and the anagogical sense. In defining the spiritual sense, *Verbum Domini* refers to the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s definition: ‘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...’²⁸

Number 38 explains that ‘the word of God can never simply be equated with the letter of the text’. This means that different interpretive methods are needed to arrive at the literal and spiritual meanings of Scripture. The historical critical method is a method to obtain the literal meaning that the author intended to convey. Number 39 describes one method in achieving the spiritual meaning of Scripture and that is by seeing the intrinsic unity of the whole Bible with the person of Jesus as the basis of that unity. The patristic writers expressed this Christological unity of the Bible in terms of typology. In typology persons, events, or things in the Old Testament are seen as the prefigurement of persons, events or things found in the New Testament. At the same time, the persons, events, or things in the New Testament are seen as the fulfilment of the persons, events, or things in the Old Testament.²⁹ An example of typology is found in Rom 5:14 where Paul calls Adam a type of Jesus who was to come.

This is the basic teaching of *Verbum Domini* regarding biblical interpretation. The remaining seven numbers (42-49) of the section concerning interpretation discuss some of the issues and implications of biblical interpretation in the life of the Church.

a) Number 42 speaks to those biblical passages that are particularly difficult to interpret,

especially those ‘dark’ passages that contain elements of violence and immorality. These require an expertise in the application of historical-literary methods of interpretation.

b) *Verbum Domini* addresses the problem of fundamentalist interpretation of Scripture in number 44.

c) A hermeneutic of faith, i.e. a hermeneutic that includes both historical and theological aspects, also has pastoral implications. It should foster a close working relationship among pastors, exegetes, and theologians (number 45).

d) Number 46 explores the importance of biblical interpretation for ecumenism, including the translation of Scripture into various languages.

e) Number 47 emphasises that in the preparation of candidates for the priesthood, it is essential that both aspects of biblical interpretation, the historical and the theological, be included in the curriculum.

f) The final two numbers, 48 and 49, call attention to the lives of the saints whose lives dedicated to the living out of the Gospel present a unique, living interpretation of the word of God.

Closing

Throughout the history of the Church, the relationship between the two senses of Scripture has been at the heart of biblical interpretation. *Dei Verbum* presented the two methods of studying and reflecting upon these two senses: the historical method and the theological method. Pope Benedict’s contribution to biblical interpretation in *Verbum Domini* is the presentation of the two senses of Scripture as necessary, complementary aspects of the one process of interpretation that are never in opposition to each other. Furthermore, the exhortation attempts to present very practical ways in which both senses of Scripture can be both studied and prayed so that the word of God may be of greater value to the individual Christian, and thereby, help build up the community of Christ.

NOTES

1 *Verbum Domini* can be found at the Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini_en.html (the paragraphs are not numbered in this text). This paper will cite the following edition in which the paragraphs are numbered: Pope Benedict XVI. (2010), *Verbum Domini*. St. Paul's Publications, Strathfield.

2 RD Witherup, 'Deo Gratias for *Verbum Domini*: Benedict XVI's teaching on the Word of God', *The Pastoral Review* 7, no. 1 (January/February 2011): 12-17. RE McCarron, "Proclaimed, Accepted, Celebrated, and Meditated Upon": Benedict XVI on the Word of God', *New Theology Review* 24, no. 1 (February 2011): 69-71. K O'Gorman, 'This is the Word of the Lord', *Furrow* 62, no. 3 (March 2011): 162-170.

3 A Graffy, 'Verbum Domini – the pastoral implications', *The Pastoral Review* 7, no. 2 (March/April 2011): 4-9.

4 JC Okoye. (2011), *Scripture in the Church: The Synod on the Word of God*. Liturgical Press, Collegeville.

5 For the complete text, see 'Intervention of Pope Benedict XVI at the synod of Bishops on Tuesday, 14 October: Modern exegesis necessary for a living faith today'. *L'Osservatore Romano* (weekly edition in English), #43. Wednesday, 22 October 2008. 13.

6 *Dei Verbum* 12, (2009), *The Documents of Vatican II, with Notes and Index. Vatican Translation*. St. Paul's Publications, Strathfield.

7 RE Brown and SM Schneiders. (1990), 'Hermeneutics', in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, et al. Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ. 1148.

8 JA Fitzmyer. (2008), *The Interpretation of Scripture*. Paulist Press, New York. 92.

9 The size of this paper cannot adequately treat the richness of the history of biblical interpretation. The interested reader is directed to the following works; AJ Hauser and DF Watson, eds. (2003), *A History of Biblical Interpretation*. Vols. 1 and 2. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids; and H Wansbrough. (2010), *The Use and Abuse of the Bible: A Brief History of Biblical Interpretation*. T&T Clark, London.

10 Okoye (*Scripture in the Church*, 78-83) provides a comprehensive list of current exegetical methodologies along with a description and evaluation of each. This list is based on the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. (1993), Pauline Books and Media, Boston.

11 *Dei Verbum*, 12.

12 A Grillmeier. (1969), 'The Divine Inspiration and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture', in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler. Herder and Herder, New York. 220.

13 Since Vatican II, this has developed into a new interpretive methodology known as 'canonical criticism'. The seminal work is by BS Childs. (1979), *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. SCM Press, London. Childs also addresses the canon of the New Testament: (1984), *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction*. SCM, London.

14 For the full text of the lecture see, RJ Neuhaus. (1989), *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids. 1-23.

15 Ibid. 2, 15.

16 Ibid. 8.

17 Ibid. 2.

18 Ibid. 2.

19 Ibid. 5.

20 Ibid. 22.

21 Pope Benedict XVI. (2007), *Jesus of Nazareth*. Doubleday, New York. xi-xxiv.

22 Ibid. xv. On page xvi, the Pope reiterates the importance of the historical critical method in exegesis.

23 Ibid. xix.

24 Okoye (*Scripture in the Church*, 128) cites 61 references.

25 L Boeve and G Mannion, eds. (2010), *The Ratzinger Reader: Mapping a Theological Journey*. T&T Clark, London. 22.

26 The allegorical sense has already been discussed. The moral sense interprets Scripture in terms of the spiritual life of the individual believer; therefore, once again using Jerusalem as an example, Jerusalem would be interpreted as the human soul. The anagogical sense refers to future heavenly or eschatological realities. Using this third spiritual sense, Jerusalem is the heavenly city that will be manifested at the end time. For more information pertaining to the three aspects of the spiritual sense of Scripture, see Brown, 'Hermeneutics', 1153-1162, and Fitzmyer, *The Interpretation of Scripture*, 91-97.

27 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 116, (1994), St. Pauls, Homebush.

28 *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, page 85.

29 RN Soulen and RK Soulen, eds. (2001), *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 3rd ed. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville. s.v. 'Typology'.