

Comment: The Great Divorce

Naturally enough, the death of Pope Benedict XVI was followed by a good deal of comment on his theological as well as his ecclesiastical legacy. It has been noted, among other things, that as a theological consultant at Vatican II he had a part in the composition of the Council's Constitution on Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, and that the interpretation of scripture remained at the heart of his work, both as a theologian and as Pope, exemplified by his apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010) and his theological trilogy *Jesus of Nazareth* (2007-12).

When the first volume of this work came out, I was a doctoral student at Oxford, and the reaction among New Testament scholars there was not unanimously enthusiastic. To an extent this was simply because the professors and lecturers of NT in Oxford did not all accept his arguments and his conclusions, but there was a deeper objection – sometimes explicit, but more often tacit: a theologian, Pope or not, had no business engaging in scripture scholarship. The texts of the Bible are historical texts, and it is for historians to interpret them. To come to the NT with theological presuppositions that are not carefully set aside is not the proper approach in these post-enlightenment times.

Conversely, at around the same time, I remember presenting a paper at the NT Graduate Student Seminar, on some passage of the Letter to the Hebrews, and when I finished the acting chair of the Seminar spluttered 'but that was *theology*!' As a biblical scholar, it was not my place to reach theological conclusions.

The notion that biblical studies and theology are to be kept firmly apart is an odd one for someone brought up in the Dominican tradition. It is often remarked that for St Thomas Aquinas, there is a strong sense in which all theology, *Sacra Doctrina*, simply *is* the interpretation of scripture. Yet we can trace the beginnings of this great divorce back to a period not so long after the life of Aquinas, namely the 'rediscovery' of classical literature, thought, and language by the humanists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The study of classical languages became an academic specialism, and even before the Enlightenment we can see the beginnings of the recognition that, in reading classical texts in their original languages and with an understanding of their original contexts, the expert is offering a window onto a now-lost thought-world.

This led, perhaps inevitably, to the notion that without the clarificatory work of philologists and classical scholars, the reader of ancient texts is at something of a loss, and in the fulness of time this

attitude came to be applied to biblical texts too, first to the NT and only later to those in Hebrew. But at the same time another development, even more crucial, was to take place: from being an ancillary discipline, intended to provide theologians with the tools they needed to do their jobs, philology and history became the primary disciplines, their conclusions the final and definitive results of biblical scholarship. This shift in mindset can be seen to accompany and feed the growth of historical-criticism into the monolith it became in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Let it be said at once that there should be no objection to the use of these secular disciplines in the study of scripture, provided that they are rightly ordered. We should be studying history in order to understand scripture; but too often today in practice academic study of scripture is done in order to do history. If this becomes, at least tacitly, the ultimate purpose of the biblical scholar, then a danger emerges that certain questions may be ruled in or out *a priori*: we can consider the nature of the early Church, we can ask what St Paul thought about Jesus, or who wrote Hebrews, when, and why; but we cannot ask whether Jesus was (is!) God, how his cross and resurrection wrought salvation, or in what sense the Church is the Body of Christ, because these are not the kinds of questions susceptible to historical investigation.

Worse still, it has often happened – I am of course making sweeping generalisations about two centuries of biblical scholarship – that not only some questions but some conclusions are pre-determined: if I am a serious historian, then I seek this-worldly explanations of this-worldly phenomena; the supernatural is not my sphere, so I bracket it out before I start. Then, inevitably, my historical conclusions will also exclude the supernatural. This leads to the belief among many that ‘biblical scholars have disproved the resurrection’, or whatever. They haven’t; rather, some have ruled the resurrection out from the start. Yet the dramatic headlines stoke a fear and suspicion of biblical scholarship among the faithful as well as among many theologians, whose work thus fails to be nourished by the many offerings of scriptural study at its best.

This failure to make use of good biblical scholarship cannot be said of Benedict XVI, nor indeed of numerous theologians Catholic and otherwise living and working today. There will always be those for whom the ‘hermeneutic of faith’ is a poorly disguised attempt by the Church to monopolise and control the interpretation of the Bible, but others will recognise the value in reading the scriptures as more than simply a set of historical documents. They *are* such, and to read them without recognising that fact is not a hermeneutic of faith but of wilful ignorance; but they are also and precisely as such also the word of God, and therefore transcend the limits of historical investigation. There are

signs of hope even now that the great divorce between biblical studies and theology may prove to have been, after all, only a trial separation.

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