How True is the Bible? Ratzinger on Faith, Reason and Scripture

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Interpreting the Bible, especially the creation narratives, in light of modern science is often presented as a set of unattractive choices: abandon rational consistency for blind faith or abandon faith for rational consistency. In this article, Joseph Ratzinger's theological method is examined as a means of "tinkering" with theological theories of revelation and a scientific worldview, allowing each to influence each other to find a synthesis that can resolve the disjunction between rational consistency and faith.

TWO SEEMINGLY INCOMPATIBLE truth claims confront the reflective reader of Scripture today. Representing the side of faith, *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, teaches that the Bible contains no errors in what it properly asserts: "Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation."[1] Because the statement represents a sort of compromise between bishops of different theological tendencies, its interpretation remains a matter of dispute even to this day. Most familiar with the drafting history seem to agree, however, that the statement excludes two extremes. On the one hand, it rules out any attempt to restrict the scope of inerrancy to matters of faith and morals. On the other, it rules out any attempt to imagine that Scripture teaches science, history, or even morals the way a textbook would, that is, as end in themselves and without reference to some saving purpose.

Representing the side of reason, however, scholars often claim that assenting to all the ideas contained in Scripture leads inevitably to rational

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1. *Dei Verbum,* November 18, 1965, 11, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

inconsistency. Even ancient readers of the Bible puzzled over problems of internal inconsistency, such as the historical discrepancies between Kings and Chronicles or the length of Jesus' ministry in John and the Synoptics. But contemporary readers must additionally confront problems of external inconsistency. For the Bible contains many ideas deficient from the point of view of modern scholarly findings. Its cosmology often conflicts with natural science, aspects of its history with archeology, and its hierarchical views of social relations (man-woman, slave-master) with post-Enlightenment philosophies of the human person.

Believers thus feel compelled to choose between unattractive extremes: either to abandon rational consistency in the name of blind faith or to abandon faith in the name of rational consistency. Opting for the first allows us to retain Scripture as a revealed guide for knowing and acting. But it ultimately suggests a rather mischievous God, the sort who would plant dinosaur bones to test our faith in the creation narratives of Genesis. Opting for the second ultimately renders Scripture superfluous. If modern science ultimately decides what in Scripture is worthy of belief, then why not just go directly to modern science, eliminating the biblical middleman altogether? On such a view, Scripture can at best provide colorful stories for reinforcing what polite society already holds. These extremes, however, are not the only choices. Joseph Ratzinger, I would suggest, charts a middle way between fideism and rationalism.

Before examining Ratzinger's *via media* in detail, however, I would like to offer a historical example of scientific problem solving that, at least to my mind, provides an analogy for Ratzinger's own way navigating this faith-reason tension. The example comes from the discovery of the structure of DNA. Even before scientists managed to map the molecule, they began, through X-ray diffraction experiments, to uncover two of DNA's general features: it was shaped somewhat like a corkscrew and its nucleotides followed a repeating pattern. When James Watson and Francis Crick learned of these findings, they simply started trying different combinations of helical shapes and molecular sequences until they came up with something that elegantly harmonized the data—namely, a *double*-helix shape with Guanine-Adenine-Cytosine-Thymine (GACT) sequencing.[2] They won the Nobel Prize by "tinkering" with both givens at the same time.

Ratzinger, I suggest, does something analogous. He formulates a way of discerning just how far the Bible's claim to truth extends by "tinkering" with two givens at the same time. He "tweaks" the textbook theology of Scripture with an eye to reason, and he challenges the narrowness of scientific reason

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2. See "The Structure of DNA: Cooperation and Competition," http://undsci.berkeley.edu/lessons/pdfs/dna_simple.pdf.

with an eye to faith. To show how Ratzinger does this, this essay will treat the following topics in order. First, it will examine how Ratzinger recasts the neo-scholastic theology of biblical inspiration of his day. Then, I will present how Ratzinger chastens the pretensions of scientific reason. Finally, it will turn to Ratzinger's concrete application of this faith-reason method to discern how far Scripture intends to affirm certain ideas: geocentrism, the existence of the Devil, and the existence of a single progenitor of the human race.

Recasting Neo-Scholastic Theories of Inerrancy

In order to understand how Ratzinger creatively recasts the typical theology of his day, it will prove helpful to recall the neo-scholastic model of inspiration and inerrancy predominant from the 1940s until Vatican II. Biblical scholars of the time were aware of the difficulty of reconciling biblical inerrancy with the new state of historical and scientific knowledge. But in harmonizing the two, they appealed almost exclusively to the intention of the individual biblical authors. This strategy could account, however, for only some of the problems posed by scientific reason.

The Dominican exegete Pierre Benoit, extending the thought of the pioneering exegete Marie-Joseph Lagrange, offered by far the most influential account of biblical inspiration and inerrancy before Vatican II.[3] He reasoned along the following lines. God is the author of Scripture not because he dictated its contents word for word, as Allah is said to have done for Muhammed, but because he employed human authors as living and rational instruments. God, therefore, guarantees as true only as much these intelligent authors assert as true. Since these intelligent authors expressed their judgments in literary form, one must use literary analysis to discern what they actually judged to be true. If biblical authors adopted the genre of saga, for instance, interpreters should not expect them to endorse historical or scientific claims in today's sense. None of the alleged inaccuracies in the Bible, he argued, concern what the biblical authors really intended to affirm.[4]

By restricting the range of guaranteed truth to the range of the author's intentional affirmations, Benoit greatly reduced the conflict between the biblical text and scientific reasoning. But certain problems nevertheless remained. Even after genre analysis, for instance, some biblical authors still seemed to

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3. See especially the work begun by Paul Synave but substantially completed by Pierre Benoit: *Prophecy and Inspiration: A Commentary on the Summa Theologica II-II, Questions 171–178*, trans. Avery Dulles and Thomas L. Sheridan (New York: Desclee Co., 1961). French original: *Traité de la prophétie* (Tournai: Desclée & Cie, 1947).

4. For a fuller analysis of Benoit, see Aaron Pidel, SJ, "Joseph Ratzinger on Biblical Inerrancy," *Nova et Vetera* 12, no. 1 (2014): 307–30, esp. 309–11.

assert error. When Joshua 6-8 inaccurately describes the geography and dimensions of the Promised Land, for instance, it seems to err in something of central interest to Israel, and something its author intended to affirm.[5] Historical-critical analysis of the Bible has increasingly revealed, moreover, that the Bible was a "curated" text, the product of many human authors over many generations. With so many authorial judgments in play, theories of inerrancy based on the rational psychology of single authors began to seem artificial.

With such problems in mind, the young Professor Ratzinger proposed a modification. Seeing that the first draft of *Dei Verbum* was assuming the neo-scholastic model of inerrancy wholesale, Ratzinger, in a 1962 position piece for the German-speaking bishops, subtly signaled both his agreement and his disagreement. "Scripture," he says, "is and remains inerrant and beyond doubt in everything that it properly intends to affirm, but this is not necessarily so in that which accompanies the affirmation and is not part of it."[6] Ratzinger maintains the neo-scholastic model to the extent that he uses authorial intention to restrict the scope of inerrancy. But he modifies the theory by making *Scripture* as a whole, not its individual literary authors, the grammatical subject of the intention to affirm. The final form of *Dei Verbum*, already cited above, reflects Ratzinger's intervention and others like it. After mentioning the assertions of the sacred authors, it then presents the "books of Scripture" as the subject of the intention to teach "solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation."

But how can Scripture, a mere textual artifact, "intend" in anything other than a metaphorical sense? Ratzinger answers this question perhaps most clearly in the introduction to the first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*. There he notes that Scripture actually originates from three interacting subjects or "authors." More specifically, Scripture bears the intentions of (1) God, (2) the individual literary authors and redactors employed by God, and (3) a transhistorical corporate personality—the "People of God." In view of its comprehensiveness, Ratzinger considers the People of God a "deeper 'author'" of Scripture than any individual literary author. It forms a constitutive part of Scripture *qua* Revelation, without which the Bible would be nothing more than a dead letter. It is because the people of God, guided by the Holy Spirit, articulates her faith through Scripture that Scripture can be said to "intend" to affirm certain ideas.[7]

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5. I take the example from Norbert Lohfink, SJ, *The Christian Meaning of the Old Testament* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1968), 46–8.

6. Jared Wicks, SJ, "Six Texts by Prof. Joseph Ratzinger as Peritus before and during Vatican Council II," *Gregorianum* 89, no. 2 (2008): 233–311, here 280.

7. Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), xx–xxi.

But how does one discern the intention of a whole people, spread over time and space? Here Ratzinger suggests a kind of analogy with personal development. Just like each human person goes through a "succession of states" without losing personal identity, so the people of God has gone through various developmental stages while remaining one and the same.[8] Discerning how much the people of God intends to affirm any given idea, therefore, requires investigating how central this idea has become to her life at its various stages. For Ratzinger, the most important stages are Israel (represented by the Old Testament), the Apostolic Church (represented by the New Testament), and the post-Apostolic Church (represented by the Church's saints, liturgy, and doctrines).[9] I will return to these stages and the relations between them when we take a close look at the case study.

In the meantime, we do well to summarize the results. Ratzinger does not reject the neo-scholastic model altogether. He concurs with it in one important respect: that Scripture is free from error only in what it properly intends to affirm. At the same time, he reconceives the primary created bearer of this intention, identifying it no longer as the individual literary author but as the whole people of God. In this way, one can say that Ratzinger "tinkered" with the theological end of his problem.

CHASTENING SCIENTISTIC REASON

But Ratzinger goes beyond adjusting the standard theology of inspiration in light of scholarly findings. He also uses the light of faith to subject reason to a searching critique, distinguishing between reason as such and mere "worldview." The roots of this conviction lie perhaps in Ratzinger's early writings on Bonaventure, especially those parts that still remain untranslated into English. Ratzinger notes how Bonaventure distinguishes stages on the path to wisdom: "from faith, through reason, to contemplation" (*a fide—per rationem—ad contemplationem*). Observing how Bonaventure assigns reason a middle position between faith and contemplation, Ratzinger draws the following conclusion: "Only united with faith can [reason] perform its task and lead to insight. Left to itself, it leads necessarily to the most dangerous errors rather than to true wisdom."[10] Reason, in

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8. Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Sr. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 132.

9. On the layers of tradition, see Joseph Ratzinger, "The Question of the Concept of Tradition: A Provisional Response," in *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, eds. Peter Hünermann and Thomas Söding, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008), 41–89, esp. 58–64.

10. Joseph Ratzinger, *Offenbarungsverständnis und Geschichtstheologie Bonaventuras: Habilitationsschrift und Bonaventura-Studien*, vol. 2 of Joseph Ratzinger Gesammelte Schriften, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller (Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 403–4. My translation.

other words, never exists in perfect neutrality. In our concrete historical order, marked by sin and redemption, reason will inevitably serve somebody or something. If it does not serve faith, it will serve some other quasi-religious vision, suffering a loss of wisdom thereby.

In later writings Ratzinger will give this Bonaventurian faith-reason schema a historical cast. Just as Bonaventure denies the possibility of a perfectly neutral exercise of reason, Ratzinger denies the possibility of a "view from nowhere." All human reason has a historical location and will inevitably reflect the values of the community in which it develops. Critical reason can never be universally critical. Whenever reason criticizes the traditions of one community, it inevitably does so in the name of another community, whose values it has trustingly internalized.[11] Ratzinger calls the fusion of reason and uncritically assumed values—that is, values accepted on "faith"—a "worldview" (*Weltbild*).[12] Given its limitations, human reason cannot choose whether to serve a worldview, but only which worldview to serve. Will it be the faith or some other totalizing value system?

In distinguishing between reason as such and its historically conditioned exercise, Ratzinger "tinkers" with the other end of the problem. What Scripture intends to affirm, he implies, will never contradict reason in the strict sense. But it may contradict the sensibilities and pre-understandings that reason has acquired under the tutelage of a certain "worldview."

Test Cases: the Devil and Galileo

Having explained how Ratzinger "optimizes" for the best fit between faith and reason, we do well to turn to a concrete case. Does Scripture really intend to affirm the existence of the Devil, or does it merely assume it as part of its own culturally conditioned worldview? Ratzinger treats the question explicitly in his essay "Farewell to the Devil?" (1973).[13] The short piece responds to Tübingen *Alttestamentler* Herbert Haag's contention that we best understand biblical portrayals of demons as nothing other than a culturally conditioned manner of expressing Scripture's true and abiding theme, i.e., social sin.[14] Whenever Christians run across biblical stories about demonic

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11. On this point, see Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 86–9.

12. Joseph Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion: Meditations in the Church's Marian Belief*, trans. John M. McDermott, SJ (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983), 57–8.

13. Ratzinger, "Farewell to the Devil?," in *Dogma and Preaching* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 199–206. German: "Abschied vom Teufel?," in *Dogma und Verkündigung* (München, Erich Wewel, 1973), 225–34. When alluding to the German original, I will distinguish English and German pagination by a virgule, e.g., *Dogma*, 199–206/225–34.

14. Ratzinger refers to Herbert Haag, *Abschied vom Teufel* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1969).

activity, he suggests, they may silently replace demons with structural injustice, losing nothing of the substance of revelation in the exchange.

Ratzinger responds to Haag's proposed demythologization by noting that, just because premodern cultures accepted a biblical idea more easily than contemporary culture does, this does not by itself mean that Scripture failed to affirm the idea. More discerning criteria must be applied. "[A]lthough there is no standard that automatically indicates in all particular cases where faith ends and world view begins," he observes, "there is still a series of aids to judgment [*Urteilshilfe*] that show the way as we look for clarifications."[15] He goes on to enumerate four such "aids to judgment," three derived from the different historical stages of the faith journey of the People of God, and one derived from reason. Clarifying by means of instructive comparison, Ratzinger applies the four tests to two different proposed "demythologizations": Haag's proposal to treat the Devil as mere personification of structural sin, and Galileo's proposal to treat biblical geocentrism as mere metaphor. An application of these tests quickly reveals that each of these ideas holds a very different place in the broader architecture of Scripture.

Tests of Faith

The first test for Ratzinger is the "relationship between the two Testaments,"[16] which examines the trajectory of development from Israel to Church, the two basic historical constitutions of the People of God. Here he observes that the demonic and the geocentric show very different trajectories in the transition from Old Testament to New Testament. The demonic shows a trajectory of intensification. "The notion of demonic powers enters only hesitantly into the Old Testament, whereas in the life of Jesus it acquires unprecedented weight, which is undiminished in Paul's letters and continues into the latest New Testament writings."[17] The geocentric, by contrast, shows a trajectory of contraction. The New Testament concentrates all the colorful creation narratives of Genesis into a dense Christological statement: "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1).[18] On the first test, then, the Devil tests positive for permanent normativity while geocentrism tests negative.

The second standard, which corresponds to the faith of the apostolic Church, examines how closely an idea is related to Jesus's own religious experience as depicted in the New Testament sources. Here again the demonic and the geocentric occupy very different positions. Jesus does not present

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15. *Dogma*, 199/228.
16. *Dogma*, 199.
17. *Dogma*, 200.
18. *Dogma*, 199.

himself as one who dispels astronomical ignorance and equips his disciples to understand the stars. But he does present himself as one who destroys the works of the devil and authorizes his disciples to do the same. "The figure of Jesus, his spiritual physiognomy, does not change whether the sun revolves around the earth or the earth around the sun," Ratzinger sums up, "but it is critically altered if you cut out the experiential struggle with the power of the demonic kingdom."[19] On the second test, then, the Devil again tests positive for permanent normativity while geocentrism tests negative.

The third test asks how deeply an idea has been received into the faith and life of the post-apostolic Church. Ratzinger points out that this test has often been decisive for settling disputed biblical questions. When Basil the Great defended the unqualified divinity of the Holy Spirit, for instance, he ultimately appealed to the Spirit's parity with the Father and Son in the baptismal formula: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." To Basil's way of thinking, Ratzinger observes, "one has to be able to take the liturgy at its word, above all in its core event."[20] And if one has to take the baptismal liturgy at its word, then one has to take the Devil seriously too. For the rite of exorcism and the renunciation of Satan have belonged to the core of baptism from the beginning. Those who live baptism best, moreover, the canonized saints, tend to grow more rather than less alert to demonic activity and influence. Excising the demonic would, therefore, inevitably change both the meaning of baptism and the basic "conduct of Christian life."[21] Ratzinger takes it as obvious that geocentrism has never entered into the Church's faith to the same extent. According to all three of the criteria relevant to the faith of the people of God, therefore, the Devil turns out to be central to Scripture's intention and geocentrism rather peripheral.[22]

Test of Reason

Ratzinger refers to the fourth and final test as the "question of worldview [*Weltbildes*], of compatibility with scientific knowledge [*wissenschaftlicher Erkenntnis*]."[23] This test corresponds not to any particular historical stage of the people of God but rather to the common rational nature that Israel and Church share with all humanity. Scripture's true intention will not contradict this. As we saw above, however, Ratzinger does not think that human reason exists anywhere in chemically pure form. It always operates under the influ-

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19. *Dogma*, 201.
20. *Dogma*, 203.
21. *Dogma*, 203.
22. *Dogma*, 202.
23. *Dogma*, 203.

ence of a quasi-religious vision of the world. What does that mean for our questions? Ratzinger notes that the existence of the demonic does not actually contradict any certified scholarly knowledge, but only what he calls the "functionalist perspective."[24] By functionalism Ratzinger seems to mean what Pope Francis means by a "technocratic paradigm," namely, a worldview that crops out anything that cannot be measured or exploited.[25] The problem with using such a worldview as a standard for discerning Scripture's intention is that it excludes much more than just the Devil: "There is no room in a functionalistic perspective for God, either, and no room for man as man, but only for man as function."[26] Only a rational standard that leaves the central elements of biblical worldview intact can plausibly claim to guide the discernment of peripheral elements.

Because astronomy strictly speaking claims only to describe certain processes within the universe, not its origin or value, it can be applied more selectively. Its findings can reveal some biblical ideas to be accidental (e.g., geocentrism, six-day creation) without excluding more central elements of faith (e.g., the origin of cosmic order from a personal Creator). Ratzinger points out that Galileo came to grief precisely because the Christianity and astronomy of his day had fused into a kind of "worldview." "In the Middle Ages the idea of the earth as the center of the universe had fused so thoroughly with the belief in the Incarnation of God . . . that the heliocentric world view appeared to be an attack on the very core of the faith: Is God, then, supposed to have become man on a planet that, viewed astronomically, was insignificant in the midst of a gigantic universe?"[27] Both theology and astronomy had difficulty circumscribing their proper domains.

Here, Ratzinger does not attempt to exonerate the Church altogether for overreaching in the Galileo affair. The case shows that the Church has sometimes inaccurately drawn the line between the essential elements of her faith and the accompanying worldview. But for every Galileo affair there are many cases of the Church's regrettable reluctance to condemn pseudo-science in the name of faith:

> The fact that this, too, has happened, from Reimarus down to the German Christians of the Third Reich, is usually not mentioned in warnings about new Galileo affairs, even though the consequences of

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24. *Dogma*, 202.
25. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2015), 106–114, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.
26. *Dogma*, 203.
27. *Dogma*, 198

such alternative, conformist christianities were probably far more disas-
trous than the trial of Galileo, which, after all, was not just the product
of ecclesiastical inflexibility but the struggle of a whole society, which
had to cope with the crumbling of the intellectual foundations of previ-
ous history and had to learn again, with the changing of the times, how
to distinguish between "fixed stars" and "planets," between permanent
orientation and transient movement.[28]

Here Ratzinger delicately recalls, on the one hand, that National Socialism
justified its genocidal program by appeal to the latest racial and eugenic sci-
ence. Though eugenics claimed to be science pure and simple, it was obviously
a "worldview," a fusion of science and uncritically assumed values. He also
reminds his readers, on the other hand, that not only the Church, but the
majority of the scientific community considered Galileo's heliocentric
hypothesis still unproven.[29] Scientists often turn out to be as much children
of their age as churchmen.

     In short, even though Ratzinger holds that Scripture's true intentions will
never contradict sound scholarly findings, he also grasps that the line between
true objective scholarship and worldview is not so easily drawn. The Church
must continue to discern in light of advances in human knowledge. At the
same time, the Church cannot stop warning the faithful against the inflated
claims of scientists that are incompatible with the central affirmations of
Scripture.

ANOTHER TEST CASE: LITERAL ADAM?

     Ratzinger's four tests appear to distinguish rather easily between certain
biblical ideas, such as the influence ascribed to demons and the earth's posi-
tion in the solar system. But one might wonder how serviceable these criteria
prove for discerning Scripture's intentions in subtler cases. As an additional
proving ground for Ratzinger's faith-and-reason approach to biblical truth,
therefore, I will also consider a question raised not by astronomy but by evo-
lutionary theory, namely, whether Scripture intends to affirm monogenism,
that is, the idea that humanity originated from a single human progenitor or
progenitor couple, an Adam and/or Eve. Or is Scripture's teaching also com-

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     28. *Dogma* 199.
     29. For the Jesuit astronomers who opposed Galileo, the discovery of the phases of
Venus showed the deficiency of the Ptolemaic system, but had not yet demonstrated the
superiority of Copernicus's heliocentric model to Tycho Brahe's geoheliocentric model,
according to which the sun orbited the earth while itself being orbited by Venus and other
planets. See Walter Brandmüller, "Der Fall Galilei—ein Konflikt Naturwissenschaft und
Kirche?" *Stimmen der Zeit* 182 (1968): 333–42, here 336.

patible with polygenism, the belief that the human family descended from many progenitors?

Though theologians have long assumed monogenism, taking the picture of Adam's original solitude quite literally, the findings of genetic and evolutionary science pressure towards polygenism. Studies of the genetic inheritance of contemporary humans, for instance, suggest that we descended from an interbreeding population that never shrank below 10,000 individuals, and that seems to have included not only what we would call *homo sapiens* but also Neanderthals and Denisovans.[30] This emerging scientific consensus naturally proves hard to square with the idea that all humanity descended from a single Adam. Despite this fact, Pius XII warned theologians against too hastily endorsing the polygenist alternative, observing that "it is in no way apparent how such an opinion can be reconciled with that which the sources of revealed truth . . . with regard to original sin, which proceeds from a sin actually committed by an individual Adam and which, through generation, is passed on to all and is in everyone as his own."[31] Pius XII stopped short of condemning polygenism outright. But he did discourage theologians from endorsing it before determining how it could be reconciled with Scripture as interpreted by the Church. This apparent irreconcilability forms the background to Ratzinger's 1964 Münster Lectures on Creation, where Ratzinger confronts this question most directly.[32]

Though Ratzinger's 1964 lectures do not, like "Farewell to the Devil?," expressly structure their treatment of polygenism according to the four tests, they nevertheless show an analogous way of proceeding. Ratzinger acknowledges forthrightly that his approach to discerning the degree to which Scripture teaches monogenism involves "tinkering" simultaneously with two givens. That is, it requires the theologian "to stay accountable to a twin series of facts: on the one hand to the findings of natural science, and on the other hand to

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30. For this scientific consensus, see Nicanor Austriaco, OP, "Defending Adam after Darwin: On the Origin of Sapiens as a Natural Kind," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 92, no. 2 (2018): 337–52, here 345.

31. Pope Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, 12 August 1950, 37, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis.html.

32. The lecture notes of the young professor Ratzinger are now available, partly transcribed, in a series of articles: Santiago Sanz Sánchez, "Joseph Ratzinger y la doctrina de la creación: los apuntes de Münster de 1964," *Revista Española de Teología* 74 (2014): 31–70; "Joseph Ratzinger y la doctrina de la creación: los apuntes de Münster de 1964 (II). Algunos temas fundamentales." *Revista Española de Teología* 74 (2014): 201–48; "Joseph Ratzinger y la doctrina de la creación: los apuntes de Münster de 1964 (y III). Algunos temas debatídos." *Revista Española de Teología* 74 (2014): 453–96. Since the articles summarize Ratzinger's lectures in Spanish in and transcribe German statements in the footnotes, I will quote mainly from the footnotes.

the affirmations that come down to him through Scripture and Dogma."[33]
This "twin series of facts" implicitly encompasses all the four of the tests men-
tioned in "Farewell to the Devil?" and leads Ratzinger to conclude that Scrip-
ture is compatible with at least some aspects of polygenism. To show how this
is so, I will reorganize Ratzinger's exposition according to the four tests, begin-
ning with those of faith and proceeding to that of scholarly reason.

Tests of Faith

The first test of faith, as we saw above, is that of the relationship between
Old and New Testaments. In "Farewell to the Devil?" Ratzinger concluded
that Scripture intends to teach the existence of personal evil, *inter alia*, because
the demonic shows a trajectory expansion from Old to New Testament.
Ratzinger finds that the Adamic follows a similar trajectory of intensification.
Though Adam comes at the beginning of Scripture textually, Ratzinger
observes, he seems to stand at the end of Scripture developmentally. Adam
emerges as a kind of theological inference from Israel's long experience of
resistance to grace, from its "very intense awareness of the true and exception-
less sinfulness of all humanity before God."[34] Among the resources at Israel's
disposal for narrating this decadence were what Ratzinger, following certain
exegetes, calls "prophecies of the past." Such prophecies attempt not so much
to expand our empirical knowledge about past events as to place humanity
under the "under the judgment and grace of its origin from God and of its own
historical activity, so that the past is determined in its fundamental theological
character."[35] As examples, Ratzinger points to the prophetic oracles against the
ruler of Tyre (Ezek 28:2,12–17) and the king of Babylon (Isa 14:13ff). These
prophecies express judgment on past figures, already fallen, whose sins remain
an ever-present temptation and reality.[36] One can think of the fall of Adam as
a "prophecy of the past" with global application, one expressing the estrange-
ment from God characterizing all humanity.

In the transition from the Old Testament to New, Ratzinger suggests, one
sees an intensification of two tendencies: to take the effects of Adam's sin seri-
ously, and to treat him as a retrospective inference from the present experience
of salvation.[37] Though the Old Testament does not yet conceive original sin as a
kind of "ontological defect,"[38] the Letter to the Romans takes a decisive step in

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33. "Ratzinger creación (III)," 481n80.
34. "Ratzinger creación (III)," 489n113
35. "Ratzinger creación (III)," 456n5.
36. "Ratzinger creación (III)," 457n7.
37. "Ratzinger creación (II)," 204n8.
38. "Ratzinger creación (III),"489n113.

this direction when it presents Adam as the point of entry for the power of sin and death. "Therefore, just as through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all, inasmuch as all sinned" (Rom 5:12). Though Romans 5 treats the Adamic stain with heightened realism, it does not treat Adam as an object of independent interest. It references Adam in the course of making a further and more central point, namely, that Christ brings very real salvation, liberating us from the very real dominion of sin and death.[39]

Turning to the second test, Ratzinger finds that New Testament theology, considered as a whole, understands Adam realistically but not necessarily individually. The counterpoint between Adam and Christ, presumed throughout the Pauline writings (Rom 5:12–21, Phil 2:6–11; 1 Cor 15:20–22), ultimately implies that human destiny is influenced by "two collective givens: by Adam and Christ."[40] But the ongoing influence of these "collective givens" on individual agency makes sense only within the biblical conceptuality of the "corporate personality." In contrast to modern individualists, biblical authors had a lively appreciation for the way individual and corporate destiny interpenetrate.[41] What touches the community touches the individual, and vice-versa. Paul clearly presupposes a similar vision of the human person when he affirms that sin and death entered the world through "one person" and yet came to "all." He interprets the figure of Adam in such a way, in other words, that the boundaries between individual and collective understandings of Adam remains "fluid" (*schwebend*).[42]

Turning to the test corresponding to the faith of the post-apostolic Church, Ratzinger finds that the fathers and councils have likewise attended to Adam not for his own sake but as an adjunct to orthodox Christology. An examination of Augustine's writings, for instance, reveals that the great Bishop of Hippo "developed his idea of original sin as a function of the doctrine of grace." Augustine insists against the Pelagians that original sin comes down to us "by propagation and not by imitation only" (*propagatione non sola imitatione*), for instance, in order to vindicate the absolute dependence of all on the grace of Christ.[43] It is likewise only in the context of affirming the indispensability of the merits of "our one mediator Jesus Christ" that Trent, in a subordinate clause, teaches that the sin of Adam was "one in origin" (*origine unum*).[44]

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39. "Ratzinger creación (II)," 221n65.
40. "Ratzinger creación (II)," 218n58.
41. "Ratzinger creación (II)," 218n59.
42. "Ratzinger creación (III)," 484n93.
43. "Ratzinger creación (III)," 486n101.
44. Council of Trent, Session 5, *Decretum de peccato originali*, (June 17, 1546), c. 3 in Peter Hünermann, Robert L. Fastiggi, Anne Englund Nash, and Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 1513.

The point of these affirmations is to show that "no person emerges from the ground zero of nothing," so entirely self-determining that his or her efforts can effectively substitute for grace, baptism, and Christ.[45] Ratzinger thereby implies that the idea of one Adam obliges us only up to a point, that is, only so far as it proves necessary to explain how original sin goes deeper than mere bad example and thus requires a stronger remedy than mere good example.

An application of the tests corresponding to the different historical stages of the people of God reveals that Scripture and Tradition do not teach monogenism as such. Ratzinger observes, "Monogenism can never be the primary intention of a biblical affirmation or a dogmatic teaching. The inner order of Scripture requires that one proceed first from the theological concepts of sin and grace. Only from this thematic can it be correctly asked how far that reaches down into the concrete."[46] Here Ratzinger has again "tinkered" with the givens of faith, using the tests to discern how deeply integrated monogenism is into the intentional structure of Scripture. He concludes that Scripture teaches monogenism only to the extent that more central affirmations depend on it for their intelligibility.

Test of Reason

Having defined the scope of the biblical affirmation, Ratzinger turns his attention to the competence of the sciences. By drawing attention to the explanatory limits of both evolutionary theory and modern individualism, he suggests a way of reconciling what Scripture intends to affirm about sin and grace with a polygenist account of human origins.

The chief limit of evolutionary theory is that it can account for the human person only at the biological level. Theology, by contrast, considers the totality of the person, including his or her historical and spiritual dimension. On the basis of this explanatory disparity, Ratzinger opens up a line of speculation worth citing at length:

> The process of becoming human lies in its innermost depths outside the biologically measurable. This means: Even if one accepts as entirely likely that hominization arose polygenistically in its biological stock [*Bestand*], there remains the possibility that the ingenious flash [*Blitz*] of transcendent thought occurred first in only one or two individuals. Biological polygenism and theological monogenism, therefore, are not necessarily mutually exclusive, for their field of inquiry is not entirely coextensive.[47]

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45. "Ratzinger creación (III)," 486n102.
46. "Ratzinger creación (III)," 483n86.
47. "Ratzinger creación (III)," 482n82.

Since the human person is defined not just by biological descent but by the ability for transcendent thought, it is still possible to reconcile the genetic record with hominization at a single point of origin.

In a second chastening of reason, Ratzinger notes that much of the difficulty understanding original sin stems from the unexamined assumptions of modern individualism. But if the biblical idea of the "corporate personality" is closer to the truth of human nature, that is, if humanity exists in an "indissoluble polarity of individual and community,"[48] then one also readily sees how the decision of the first humans would have stamped their progeny at a level deeper than mere example. It would have affected the whole relational tissue of human life, making Adam's sin something that "comes down to us from a constantly recurring beginning." "The essential thing," Ratzinger concludes, "is that first decision of humanity was characterized by a No. Whether his beginning was posited by one or several is not so important."[49] Ratzinger does not enter into the messy details of the problem, such as whether the "flash" accompanied a genetic modification, or whether the first rational animal bred with subrational humanoids to sire the human race. He merely indicates the lines along which a more detailed solution would have to be worked out.[50]

Here, as in the cases of geocentrism and demonology, Ratzinger uses tests of both faith and reason to decide were Scripture's central intentions end and its accompanying ideas begin. Ratzinger "tinkers" with the findings of scholarly reason, taking their solid findings seriously while correcting for inflationary tendencies. The more serious findings call for a partial "demythologization" of the figure of Adam as solitary progenitor. At the same time, the data of faith continue to suggest that Scripture, through the figure of Adam, intends to affirm a core event. The first rational animal or animals rebelled against God, distorting the fabric of humanity so deeply that only God could save us.

Conclusion

Is the Bible still true then? For Ratzinger the answer remains, "Yes, in what it properly intends to affirm." New scientific advances have not so much disproven the truth of Scripture as shown the need for a more sophisticated

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48. "Ratzinger creación (III)," 484n91.
49. "Ratzinger creación (III)," 484n90.
50. For more contemporary statements along these lines, see Austriaco, "Defending Adam after Darwin," 345–51; International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God* (2004), 62–70, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html.

approach to discerning its intentions. This involves reconstructing not only the mind of individual authors but, first and foremost, the mind of the people of God. And one measures how deeply an idea has entered the people of God's mind by applying some version of the four "tests" outlined above.

In applying the test of reason, however, we do well to distinguish carefully between reason strictly speaking and the worldview it serves. This goes not only for the eugenic science of the past. It also goes for evolutionary science's present claim to explain everything about humanity, from consciousness and art to law and religion, as well as for modern liberalism's picture of the human person as autonomous individual. If we want to discover how much our own reason has become conditioned by contemporary ideology, Ratzinger implies, we can do no better than to engage inspired Scripture seriously.

Indeed, theology loses its center when it stops treating the teachings of Scripture as a series of "findings" no less real than those produced by scholarly research. But it is only by tinkering at both ends, Ratzinger ultimately suggests, that one gradually perceives what Scripture properly intends to affirm. This remains immune to error, constituting the underlying DNA of our faith.

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