

VINCENZO BELMONTE

YOU ARE GODS

AT THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIANITY



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INTRODUCTION

The challenge facing Christianity today is unprecedented and threatens to blow it apart at the seams. Views that may be traced back to the so-called biblical minimalism deny any credit to 'Biblical History'. The narratives relating to the Patriarchs, Moses, David and Solomon are labeled as legendary. In particular, the meticulous revelations of God to Moses, which occupy a large part of the Pentateuch, are downgraded to mere late human contributions. On the basis of this reconstruction, until the Persian period the Jewish religion was not distinguishable from the polytheistic Canaanite one. Monotheism was introduced in Palestine by self-styled repatriated exiles, perhaps Aramean settlers sent by the Persians. The worship of the Mazdean "God of Heaven" was passed off as a reform of the cult of the main local god, YHWH. The missionaries of the new creed tried to impose it on the indigenous polytheists as a pretext to take control of the landed property. The books of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh or Miqra), written, with the occasional use of previous materials, in the Persian, but above all, Hellenistic and Hasmonean, and in some cases, even Roman epochs aimed, also through the creation of a national identity based on myths, to ensure the predominance of the Yahwist group. With time, Jewish monotheism assumed an increasingly rigid, exclusive and violent feature, centered on the holy homicidal zeal attributed to characters like Phinehas and Elijah, so much so as to legitimize, well in advance of the Qur'ān, the holy war.

These demolishing theses have given rise to a very lively debate in which, not unexpectedly, a multiplicity of positions have emerged. Unfortunately, while the inadmissible and never enough deplorable ignorance of Hebrew precludes me from accessing the challenging arena, for want of prophetic attributes I am not even able to foresee the outcome of a dispute that will surely drag on for decades, if not centuries. In the meantime my Christian faith cannot, of course, be put on standby. An extreme alternative remains: to assume as a research hypothesis that the Minimalists are in the truth, and then to verify whether the acceptance of their point of view implies the end of Christianity or, on the contrary, gives the cue to cleanse it of decrepit cultural legacies. On the themes of faith a reassessment is, in reality, necessary, a new synthesis is urgently needed that incorporates the most advanced results achieved in disciplines ranging from biblical sciences to anthropology, from psychology to history.

[The Word] *emptied himself* (Phil 2:7) - *And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years* (Luke 2:52). On the humanity of Christ, alluded to in the two verses, the central reflection of these

pages takes place. Precisely by virtue of *kénōsis* [exinanition, emptying, self-limitation of the Word], in an asymmetrical relationship, if the Logos had full knowledge of the human consciousness of Jesus, the reverse did not happen: the human consciousness of Jesus only progressively and always limitedly, until the turning point of his glorification, acquired the cognitive treasure and self-awareness of the Logos, which in him acted as an infinite unconscious unveiling itself over time. Therefore, a fundamental aspect, until now disregarded, of the unsounded divine *kénōsis* is the ineludible need for the Logos, determined to humanize himself, to embody his message *ad modum recipientis* in a fallible and fallacious human culture: from the Son of the divine Father to the son of his time, imprisoned in the cultural cage of the I century Palestine.

Jesus, as a man, felt not only our own physical frailties, but also our intellectual weaknesses, in the sense that like us he suffered the conditioning of the surrounding culture. He absorbed Essene religiosity, its way of interpreting the Scriptures, its faith in the imminent coming of a Savior. Through prayer and continuous conversation with the Father in him gradually developed the conviction that he was God's envoy and possessed a divine nature, in the wake of what the Essene Teacher of Righteousness had said about himself. The climactic moment of this awareness was Baptism, which not by chance marked the beginning of his mission. Aware that he was going to meet a painful Passion following the example of the martyr Isaiah and the Suffering Servant, Jesus was certain that God would resurrect him.

Jesus' self-awareness was born fundamentally from his personal relationship with the Father, but it got hold of documentary support in the Tanakh, which was creatively interpreted. From this we may infer a principle of general validity: the 'truth' of the sacred scriptures of any religion resides not so much in their historical and scientific reliability as in the effectiveness of their emotional and moral grasp in view of the experience of God based on openness to the infinite. They are but fruitful instruments for setting up and implementing the personal project of perfecting one's own humanity. As such, they involve the interpretative intervention of those who *ad modum recipientis*, that is, in keeping with individual needs, expectations and limitations, draw from them. Jesus (as a man) and the apostles discovered new meanings in the Hebrew Scriptures, on the grounds that, since they were already bearers of a more radical existential project, they could only read them with new eyes. Regardless of the authors' intent, in them they sought and found themselves, their own personal aspirations dictated by the Spirit.

To understand the Scriptures, we have to get into the mindset of their writers. The events that, in the eyes of an ancient Jew, stood out on a stage well in view, the scene of imposing

'objective' interactions between heaven and earth, today, in a process of internalization, ought to be considered in their subjective or psychological truth, with God who comes into contact with man (even with the man Jesus) in the sanctuary of consciousness. It will be more appropriate to deem angels that appear and voices that are heard as 'objective' transpositions of inner locutions. In the same way, thunder and lightning as 'objective' clues of the divine presence ought to be shifted from the sphere of witness to that of interpretation.

The need for 'objectivity' is also at the basis of the search for the historical Jesus, an enterprise bound to fail, inasmuch as knowledge of the other can only take place *ad modum recipientis*. Moreover, even if it were to be admitted, with certain reservations, that the scholars have succeeded in pinpointing the authentic sayings, it would not be, in any case, the complete repertory of Jesus' words, but a limited selection made by the tradents in an assuredly partial and tendentious way, on the basis of personal motivations inherent in their theological vision, therefore already within the dimension of faith.

The *kērygma* [the Christian message], in nuce, is contained in the enunciation: *Jesus is the incarnate Son of God, who, dead and risen, keeps on living through the Spirit in the community redeemed by him*. Without prejudice to this basic and inalienable truth of Christianity, in the rest, for example in the interpretation of the Old Testament, one may clearly see the unpreventable effect of the flawed mindset linked to the times, given that the first inculturation of Christian truth took place in Judaism. The concept of revelation must therefore be revised and its traditional scope drastically reduced.

The new dignity assumed by man who enters into a loving relationship with the Christian God is expressed in the fundamental concept of divinization by which is meant that the believer participates in Trinitarian life and in particular lets himself be guided by the Spirit. Full humanization (the creation of the Superman) consists precisely in this.

To the skeptical deniers of faith I remind that, in order to live, man cannot forgo believing. This is demonstrated by the thousand declensions of the secular faith, which, as far as arationality is concerned, have nothing to envy to religion. In any type of faith the voluntary aspect is overarching. In the strips of linen placed in the empty tomb the disciples wanted to see the proof of the resurrection and the divinity of Jesus, while others wanted and keep wanting to see only the proof of deception. Faith is not a theorem nor a sequence of crystallized dogmas, but an act of love, an immensely ambitious life project, anchored in infinity. The faith of St Thomas Aquinas wasn't based on the 'five ways'. These were only the rationalization of an already existing conviction, in turn based on the

will to believe and the direct experience of God, that is, on a driving passion, capable of changing and renewing its apologetic armamentarium over time.

Everything is possible in the risen Christ: so the Christian sums up his faith. But in the risen Christ he believes precisely because he wants everything to be possible. Each one in his firmament arrays and marshals the chosen constellations.

The Christian faith, in particular, is an interpretation that gives meaning to life by providing order and harmony to an existential universe that is in itself chaotic and incongruous. Only those who are passionate can understand it in its specificity, as it is fundamentally a loving relationship with the person of Christ: not an unbearable yoke imposed by the god Moloch, but the offering of wings to rise in flight, because to love God is to love one's deepest self, the source of one's complete realization.

The proof of the truth of Christianity is not to be sought in tortuous metaphysical arguments, but in religious experience, that is, in the experience of a personal dialogical and loving relationship with God, a relationship that is authentic only if it reveals itself in *kénōsis*, concealment, personal disinterest, spirit of sacrifice, serenity, inner joy, oblation love; in practice, in the *sequela Christi* or, rather, in merging with Christ: *It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me* (Gal 2:20). Consequently, the loving disciple, dismayed by the divine *kénōsis*, feels innate the awareness of his own cognitive and moral fragility, but, on the other hand, he rates extraneous the refractoriness to doubt, the presumption of infallibility, the fanatical and triumphalist attitude, the celebratory parades, the spirit of crusade, the *Te Deums* of victory.

ONE GOD, ONE LAW, ONE PEOPLE

A Manipulated God

The traditional framework. The Christian Churches propose, interwoven with religious doctrines, a 'Sacred History' modeled on the texts of the Bible: Genesis for Creation and the Patriarchs; Exodus for Moses; Joshua and Judges for the conquest of the Promised Land; the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles for the monarchy; Ezra and Nehemiah for the return from exile. Every Christian knows, at least in their salient features, these events, which for their emblematic value are now part of the common religious imagination, also since they have been chosen over the centuries as the privileged subject of the so-called *Biblia pauperum* or *Biblia picta*.

The Patriarch Abraham is the model of faith in the divine promise, a faith that induces him to abandon his homeland and venture to an unknown land, in the certainty that he will have an infinite offspring as a reward: *Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing"* (Gen 12:1-2). He is the model of obedience to God, pushed to the sacrifice of the only son: *He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you". When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son* (Gen 22:2, 9-10).

Moses is undoubtedly the most famous character of the Old Testament, thanks also to the numerous film adaptations of the vicissitudes of the Jews oppressed in Egypt and led by him, after crossing the Red Sea and the Sinai desert, in view of the Promised Land: *Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left* (Exod 14:21-22). The celebration of the Passover, shared by Jews and Christians, is traced back to him: *You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled*

congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance (Exod 12:6, 8, 11, 14). The delivery on Sinai of the tables of the Law is considered a founding event of faith: Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder (Exod 19:18-19).

David and Solomon's military power is celebrated. The former wins the Jebusites, the Philistines, the Moabites, the kings of Zobah and Maacah, the Arameans of Damascus, the Edomites, the Ammonites, the Amalekites (list from 1 Chr, chapters 11-20). About the latter is said: *Solomon gathered together chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem. The king made silver and gold as common in Jerusalem as stone, and he made cedar as plentiful as the sycamore of the Shephelah (2 Chr 1:14-15) - The weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was six hundred sixty-six talents of gold, besides that which the traders and merchants brought; and all the kings of Arabia and the governors of the land brought gold and silver to Solomon (2 Chr 9:13-14). Under these two sovereigns the Jewish Kingdom (better to say the Jewish Empire) extended from the Mediterranean to the Arabic desert, from the Red Sea to the banks of the Euphrates. Solomon is depicted as a record-breaking king: Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. All the kings of the earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind (2 Chr 9:22-23). In any field big numbers befitted David's scion: Among his wives were seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3).*

With the consecration of the Temple, Jerusalem is designated as the central place of Yahwistic worship. The so-called first Temple emerges as the exclusive place of God's presence: *I have chosen Jerusalem in order that my name may be there (2 Chr 6:6).*

The 'Sacred History' keeps up with the vicissitudes of the monarchy soon no longer united, but divided into the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah, both bound, as they were unfaithful to God, to fall prey to the Assyrians (722 BC) and the Babylonians (587 BC) respectively. Having taken possession of Babylon, the Persian king Cyrus issued an edict favorable to the Jews: *In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King*

Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared: "Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of those among you who are of his people - may their God be with them! - are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel - he is the God who is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:1-3). Consequently, the Jews deported to Babylon returned to Judea¹ and under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple and restored the traditional Yahwistic cult.

The shadow of doubt. The archaeologist William Foxwell Albright, with regard to the just outlined 'Sacred History', fully supported the thesis of Werner Keller's bestseller². In their opinion, the archaeological excavations demonstrated in an incontrovertible way the truthfulness of the biblical assumption.

Today the situation has changed radically³. The history of the Patriarchs has been downgraded to legend. The exodus from Egypt and the conquest of the Promised Land are looked upon as an evident forgery, due to the fact that at the time of these alleged events Palestine was firmly under the control of the Egyptians and therefore talking about exodus and conquest makes no sense. The new position of historians lets itself be summed up as follows: at the time of the legendary Moses the Jews were slaves of Egypt, but not in Egypt⁴. They were slaves without worrying about leaving their seat. Incomprehensibly,

¹ *The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred sixty, besides their male and female servants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty-seven; and they had two hundred male and female singers (Ezra 2:64-65). All biblical quotations come from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated. On Cyrus I point out M. Rahim Shayegan, ed., *Cyrus the Great: Life and Lore*, Cambridge, Ma, 2019.*

² *Und die Bibel hat doch recht - Forscher beweisen die Wahrheit des Alten Testaments*, Düsseldorf 1955. English translation: *The Bible as History: Archaeology Confirms the Book of Books*, London, 1956.

³ The new positions are represented by archaeologists Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman (*The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*, New York 2001; *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition*, New York 2006) and biblical scholars Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham*, Berlin 1974; John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, New Haven 1975; Giovanni Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel*, New York 1988; Philip R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"*, London-New York 1992; Keith W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History*, New York 1996; Niels Peter Lemche, *The Old Testament between Theology and History: A Critical Survey*, Louisville, Ky, 2008; Mario Liverani, *Israel's History and the History of Israel*, London-New York 2014.

⁴ Frederick E. Greenspahn, *The Hebrew Bible: New Insights and Scholarship*, New York 2008.

the Bible is silent about the Egyptian rule over Palestine, which lasted for 400 years. The sumptuous unitary monarchy of David and Solomon is qualified as a myth without historical base, since it is well established that, at the time, Jerusalem was not a city, but a village, while archaeological excavations show that, on the contrary, much more important was Megiddo. Consequently, the unparalleled grandeur of the first Temple would be a later invention, outright controverted by archaeological research that has not yet found one single stone of that building. Of the glorious sovereigns, moreover, there is no mention in extra-Biblical documents, apart from a reference to the house of David, that is, to his dynasty. The countless Egyptian, Assyrian and Babylonian inscriptions ignore them altogether. Not even in Palestine has the slightest direct documentary or archaeological trace been found. There is accordingly a well-founded suspicion that they were at most clan leaders, if not even brainchildren.

Pre-exilic polytheism. The so-called 'Sacred History' is reputed by some to be a fragile castle of pious fibs that under the mantle of fidelity to the covenant with God hid much more concrete aims of domination. It is a fact that before the Persian period the Jewish religion was not distinguishable at all from the Canaanite one. Archaeological finds confirm on the territory of Palestine the continuity of polytheism. The male deity was often associated with a female one.

Of the Canaanite religion, until the discovery of the literature of the city-state of Ugarit (1928), only that much was known that was filtered through the polemical hints in the Bible and the often late reports of classical authors. The texts of Ugarit, with all the reservations due to the location of the city (a melting pot of different cultures in the far north of the region) and the chronological distance (it was destroyed in XII century BC), give us the most complete picture. It was a polytheism with the supreme El surrounded by a pantheon of gods and goddesses (the Elohim). YHWH was one of them. In the heavenly council a more important place was occupied by Baal, also known as Addad (the thunderer) and Baal zbl (Prince Baal), whence comes the biblical Beelzebub⁵. Other names for the supreme god were El Shaddai, El Elyon (the God Most High⁶), El Berith, all applied in the Bible to YHWH⁷. Adored in phallic form (the poles, the high places) and often

⁵ In 2 Kings 1:2 he is the pagan god of Ekron; in Matthew 12:24 he becomes the prince of demons.

⁶ This is the common translation, but in the ancient theogony El was Elyon's nephew, so in El Elyon a fusion of two originally distinct godheads is detectable. See Marvin H. Pope, *El in the Ugaritic Texts*, Vol. II, Leiden 1955, p. 15, n. 84.

⁷ At the beginning of Psalm 91, God is indicated by four different names: Elyon, Shaddai, YHWH, Elohim.

mentioned in the Tanakh (e.g., Isa 27; Jer 7, 17 and 44; 2 Kings 13, 17, 18, 21 and 23), Athirat (the biblical Asherah), later confused with Astarte (Astoreth), was the Great Semitic Mother, wife of El and mother of 70 children⁸. These gods (the sons of El) were identified with the heavenly bodies, the heavenly army⁹.

Vestiges of Canaanite cults are traceable in the Bible. Some psalms¹⁰, such as Psalm 29, re-adapt Ugaritic material and keep exalting El¹¹. In 1 Kings 22:19-22 and Daniel 7:9-10 the description of the heavenly council clearly depends on texts from Ugarit. Here the king was esteemed divine and therefore it is not surprising that Psalm 45:7 celebrates the king as *elohim* (god). In Ugarit, Baal rides the clouds; in Psalm 68:4 we find *Lift up a song to him who rides upon the clouds*, hinting at YHWH; and in Daniel 7:13: *As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being, coming with the clouds of heaven*. In sundry psalms the enthronement of YHWH is modeled on that of Baal, winner of the sea monster Yam. When the Jewish prophets raged against the cult of the dead, with the attached ritual meal (*marzeach*), they alluded to a custom documented in Ugarit. Symptomatically, the names of some Jewish tribes (Dan, Gad, Asher) are derived from Canaanite deities¹². The literary parallelism, so dear to biblical authors, is not without precedent.

In Elephantine/Yeb (Egypt), the Jews also worshiped the goddess Anath-Yahu. In Samaria, YHWH was revered as Baal-Shamen with the *paredra* Asherah (inscription of Kuntillet Ajrud). *Nehushtan* was the name of the bronze snake, raised by Moses in the desert and worshiped by the Canaanites, as evidenced by finds from Megiddo, Hazor, Gezer, Shechem. The biblical opposition Israel-Canaan is therefore groundless. The pre-Persian Jewish religion was but a subtype of the Canaanite religion. There is no clue that might

⁸ See Paolo Merlo, *La dea Ašratum-Atiratu-Ašera: un contributo alla storia della religione semitica del Nord*, Roma 1998; Steve A. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah: With Further Considerations of the Goddess*, Piscataway 2007.

⁹ See Aleksander R. Michalak, *Angels as Warriors in Late Second Temple Jewish Literature*, Tübingen 2012, pp. 43-53. Regarding the texts of Ugarit, in CTA (Andrée Herdner, *Corpus tablettes alphabétiques*, Paris 1963) 10.I.3-5 the stars are indicated as children of El; in CTA 15.II.4 El's family is deemed to be an astral one. For the Tanakh see Job 38:7. After being transformed in the Essene environment (11Q13) into diabolical entities, the children of El (the minor gods of the divine council) will appear in the Letter to the Ephesians 6:12 as *kosmokrátōres*, evil astral powers that domineer the world.

¹⁰ As for the Psalms I do follow the Hebrew numbering.

¹¹ On the other hand, Psalm 104 translates the Egyptian hymn to Aton.

¹² Alan Silver, *Jews, Myth and History: A Critical Exploration of Contemporary Jewish Belief and Its Origins*, Leicester 2008, p. 51, n. 22.

suggest a previous monotheistic peculiarity¹³. Consequently, the alleged monotheism of Josiah is a post-exilic invention, devised with the intention of conferring antiquity and authority on Deuteronomy, which would have been the very book dug out by the high priest and promulgated by the king at issue.

In Judaism YHWH takes a central role. In Gen 14:22 and Psalm 87:5 he is identified with El Elyon, assuming his role as head of the divine council. He is now the God of the gods (Deut 10:17; Psalm 136:2), superior to any other god (Psalm 97:9). As mentioned, the myth of the divine assembly lives on in the Bible texts¹⁴. As attested to in Psalm 48:2, *Mount Zion is like the utmost heights of Zaphon*, which in Ugarit was the seat of the gods. The pre-eminent role of YHWH certainly does not lead to the denial of the divinity of the other members of the council. Noll, for example, cites Deut 5:7-10, where YHWH forbids the worship of other gods (*elohim acherim*) on the grounds that he is a jealous god. Which would make no sense if the existence of rivals were not admitted¹⁵.

Incredibly, a relic of erstwhile polytheism emerges in Deuteronomy 32:8-9; not in the Masoretic version, but in the one that survives in two fragmentary scrolls of Qumran¹⁶: *When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods [that is, he gave each nation a patron god]¹⁷. YHWH's own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share.* Here YHWH is a lesser god. When, in the polemical confrontation with the Kittim [the Greeks], the Jews wanted to mark the peculiarity of their religion, then the text was suitably amended: *When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all the sons of man, he set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel (bny yshr'l). For Yahweh's portion was*

¹³ Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, Oxford 2001; Mark S. Smith, "Recent Study of Israelite Religion in the Light of the Ugaritic Texts", in K. Lawson Younger Jr., ed., *Ugarit at Seventy-Five*, Winona Lake 2007, pp. 1-25.

¹⁴ Theodore E. Mullen, *The Assembly of the Gods: The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, Chico 1980. Among more recent studies I point out Ellen White, *Yahweh's Council: Its Structure and Membership*, Tübingen 2014.

¹⁵ Kurt L. Noll, *Canaan and Israel in Antiquity: An Introduction*, London-New York 2001, p. 249.

¹⁶ 4QDeuteronomyⁱ^q. This reading is confirmed by the papyrus Rahlfs 848 (Fouad = 266) of the Septuagint (LXX), dating back to around 50 BC.

¹⁷ Most LXX attestations read *according to the number of God's angels*, which is an *ad usum Delphini* interpretation of the previous reading. Similarly, Daniel (10:13, 20) speaks of 'princes' (angels) of Persia and Greece.

his people, Jacob was the lot of his inheritance [Masoretic lection]. Here we no longer speak of a patron god for each people, and El Elyon and YHWH are unified¹⁸.

Let us look over other texts that travel on the same polytheistic wavelength¹⁹. Psalm 89:6-8: *For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord, a God feared in the council of the holy ones, great and awesome above all that are around him? O Lord God of hosts, who is as mighty as you, o Lord? Your faithfulness surrounds you.* Psalm 29:1: *Ascribe to the Lord, o heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.* Psalm 97:7: *All gods bow down before him.* Psalm 138:1: *I give you thanks, o Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise.*

The analysis of the Hebrew text shows that some of the most common phrases that are used to deny that there are gods other than YHWH appear in the very same chapters where their existence is plainly admitted²⁰. Therefore, more than the uniqueness of YHWH, his incomparability with the other gods, his overt superiority, is proclaimed. Let us collate the expressions of uniqueness with Isa 47:8, 10, where Babylon brags *I am and there is no one besides me*. The sense is that no city can rival it, not that it is the only existing city. While Moses asks rhetorically in Exod 15:11 *Who is like you, o Lord [YHWH], among the gods?* and Jews in Deut 4:7 *For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord [YHWH] our God is whenever we call to him?* the existence of other divinities is *ad abundantiam* recognized²¹.

Over time the lesser gods of the divine council were downgraded to angels. Psalm 82:1, 6: *God rises up in the divine assembly, judges in the midst of the gods* is remodeled as *God rises up in the divine assembly, judges in the midst of the angels* in the Greek LXX version and later in

¹⁸ For this case of 'biblical censorship' see Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Cross-Cultural Recognition of Deities in the Biblical World*, Grand Rapids, 2010, p. 195+. Deut 32:8-9 shows various thematic links with Psalm 82 (p. 210+).

¹⁹ For an overview I refer to David Penchansky, *Twilight of the Gods: Polytheism in the Hebrew Bible*, Louisville, Ky, 2005.

²⁰ For instance, Deut 4:35, 39; 32:12, 39.

²¹ "The ancient biblical statements which we characterise as 'monotheistic' are never meant in an absolute sense... Thus, the juxtaposition of monotheistic and mythological polytheistic statements in one chapter or one book [of the Hebrew Bible] is not puzzling" (Christian Frevel, "Beyond Monotheism? Some Remarks and Questions on Conceptualising 'Monotheism' in Biblical Studies", in *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 34.2 - 2013, art. 810, pp. 4, 5).

the Syrian version. As patrons of the various peoples angels are indicated. The patron of Israel is no longer, as in Deut 32:9, YHWH, but the archangel Michael (Dan 10:21, 12:1).

The Persians had no interest in stirring up religious antagonism with the subdued peoples and therefore they simply made Ahura Mazda wear the clothes of the local god, whether Marduk, YHWH or others, often preferring to use the neutral title 'God of heaven'²². In the more enlightened layers of society prevailed the belief that the many gods might be interpreted, in a higher perspective, as different manifestations of the supreme and unique god. Proof of this is the attestation that in Babylon Marduk was invoked under 50 different names²³. It is a fact that, despite the efforts made by the Persian emissaries, at the end of the V century it was still not possible to speak of perfect monotheism in Yehud [Judea], since, otherwise, the Jewish polytheists of Elephantine (who worshiped - alongside YHWH - Anath, Bethel, Ishum and Herem) would not have dared in 410 BC to turn to Yohanan, the high priest of the Jerusalem Temple²⁴. The introduction of the exclusive worship of YHWH under the Persians took place very slowly, step by step.

YHWH means "he lives, he is, he is present" / "he brings into being, he creates". At the beginning, in Ugarit, it was just an epithet of El (= El is present / El creates), especially in the form El YHWH Sabaoth, El creator of the celestial army, that is, of the stars. Later YHWH was distinguished from El and counted among his sons. The oldest testimony of YHWH was detected in the temple of Ammon in Soleb, Nubia (1386 BC): *YHWH of the land of the [nomads] Shasu*. From the names ending in -yeho, -yo and -yah one can deduce that his cult went well beyond the borders of Israel. As reported by Porphyry, Yeuo was adored in Berytus. Yahu was a god of the Syrian pantheon. Ultimately, the name YHWH was spread over a vast area from Syria to Sinai and even Cyrenaica. It is a commonly accepted opinion that this cult came to the Jews from neighboring peoples (Edomites, Moabites, Midianites).

²² This designation is taken up several times by the Hebrew Bible: Gen 24:7 - Jonah 1:9 - Ezra 1:2; 7:12, 21 - Neh 1:5; 2: 4, 20 - 2 Chr 36:23.

²³ In the *Enuma Elish* we read: "Let the people of this land be divided as to gods, but by whatever name we call him, let him be our god" (VI:119-120). Mark S. Smith calls (with a term coined by Eric Voegelin) 'summodeism' the particular type of theism in which a god is at the head of a pantheon of other gods that are seen as aspects or functions of the main god (*God in Translation..., cit.*, pp. 168, 169).

²⁴ Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes Toward the Jews in the Ancient World*, Cambridge, Ma, 1998, p. 130.

According to the biblical account, God first revealed his name to Moses on Horeb or Sinai (Exod 3:13-15). But there is no lack of anachronisms. In Gen 4:26 we find: *To Seth [the third son of Adam] also a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to invoke the name of the Lord [YHWH].* So at the time when Moses was yet *in mente Dei*. The Book of Numbers (26:59) unwarily gives Moses' mother the name Yochebed ("YHWH is my glory").

Mass exile and empty earth. On the basis of some biblical texts, the related theses of mass exile and empty land have long held on: all or almost all the population of the kingdom of Judah would be deported to Babylon, leaving the country empty as a result: *He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfill seventy years (2 Chr 36:20-21)*²⁵.

Far from it, the assumption is contradicted by archaeological excavations and passages in the Tanakh²⁶. The exiles were a few thousand professionals, notables and their supporters, who were given a treatment certainly not comparable to that wanted for slaves²⁷. In exile, the members of the Jewish ruling class had the chance to enter the conquering society with managerial or, in any case, important roles. At home, the overwhelming majority of the population remained, whose standard of living improved under the foreigners. The prophet Jeremiah was not among the exiles. He abode in Judea until Godoliah, the

²⁵ To be related to Leviticus 26:34: *Then the land shall enjoy its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its sabbath years.*

²⁶ The current reconstruction of the past that emphasizes the total exile and the 'empty' land is a theological and ideological construction. So Ehud Ben Zvi, "Inclusion in and Exclusion from Israel as Conveyed by the Use of the Term 'Israel' in Postmonarchic Biblical Texts", in Steven W. Holloway and Lowell K. Handy, eds., *The Pitcher is Broken. Memorial Essays for Gösta W. Ahlström*, Sheffield 1995, p. 104.

²⁷ Note that Jeremiah invites to collaborate with the victors (the Babylonians, but, in reality, the Persians, under whose occupation the piece was actually written): *But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (29:7)*. This speech would make little sense if Jews were treated as slaves. See Abba Solomon Eban, *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews*, New York 1984, p. 69. The author's thesis is confirmed by the nearly 200 cuneiform tablets exhibited in the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem (February 2015). I refer to the exhibition catalogue: Filip Vukosavovic, *By the Rivers of Babylon: The Story of the Babylonian Exile*, Jerusalem 2015.

Babylonian governor, was murdered. In the wake of this event, either by his own choice or forced by conspirators, he passed into Egypt.

Returnees v remainees that is the so-called return. Once they had taken the place of the Babylonians, also in view of the persistent conflict with Egypt, the Persian sovereigns hastened to ensure the loyalty of the Jews and the regular payment of taxes. They, in successive waves, over the course of more than a century, therefore sent to the province of Yehud a few thousand settlers, who were not, as was long believed, the descendants of the Jews. These, already well integrated into the rich Mesopotamian society, had no interest in returning to a land that wasn't certainly opulent.

Imaginatively, Ezekiel sees in the purported return a new dawn for Israel: *The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely'. Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, o my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, o my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord"* (Ezek 37:1-2, 11-14). This famous passage, later interpreted by Christians as allusive to the resurrection of the dead, wants to pass off the presence of the new settlers as the return to Judea of the people who worshiped the true God. A perfect propaganda operation aimed at presenting the preachers of the new religion as descendants of the deported Yahwists²⁸. In Ezra they are called *children of exile* (Ezra 4:1; 6:19-21; 8:35; 10:7, 16).

The settlers were not *returnees*. They had no connection with Judea²⁹. It was perhaps a new class of Arameans³⁰ from Harran and Edessa (Urfa) in northern Mesopotamia³¹. The

²⁸ "The dirty secret of return is that it was never really a return but the formation of a new social-political identity" (Jeremiah W. Cataldo, "The Radical Nature of 'Return' in Zechariah", in *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, 16.6 - 2016, p. 24).

²⁹ Michael Nathanson (*Between Myth and Mandate: Geopolitics, Pseudohistory, and the Hebrew Bible*, Bloomington, In, 2014, p. 346) wonders whether it was the return of Jewish exiles and their descendants or rather the settlement of Babylonians in a Persian colony.

³⁰ Deut 26:5: *A wandering Aramean was my ancestor*. Other texts of similar content: Gen 11:32; 12:1; 24:4, 10; 25:20.

Aramean origin is confirmed by the fact that in this area the names Abraham, Jacob, Ishmael, Israel were common³². The emissaries sent by the Persians were entrusted with the reinforcement of their presence by restoring the walls of Jerusalem and rebuilding (or building for the first time) a modest temple³³, which, besides being a place of worship, probably had to serve as an administrative center³⁴. All this came to pass about more than a century after the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus. The acceleration of this policy was due, under Artaxerxes I, to the Egyptian revolt (460-454) led by Inaros II, who availed himself of the help of the Athenians. The rebellion was tamed by Megabyzos the Younger, and it seems that the Jews in that circumstance leaned towards the rebels.

³¹ The two cities are now located in Turkish territory, near the border with Syria. However, whether true or false *returnees* they were, it is precisely to the newcomers, according to a professor at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, that we owe the invention of Abraham's pilgrimage, seen as a prelude to their own: "I propose to see in Abraham cycle the hand of the *returnees* from exile... so Abraham became the ancestor not only of those who remained in the land (Ezekiel 33:24), but first of all of those who came back from Mesopotamia as Abraham comes from Ur of the Chaldeans" (Jean-Louis Ska, *The Exegesis of the Pentateuch: Exegetical Studies and Basic Questions*, Tübingen 2009, p. VIII). One should not forget that in Harran, as stated in Gen 11:31, Abraham tarried and it is no coincidence that the founding event of the Jewish religion took place there: *Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed". So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Harran. When they had come to the land of Canaan, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land". So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him (Gen 12: 1-7).*

³² See Walter J. Houston, *The Pentateuch*, London 2013, p. 150. The names of Abraham's immediate ascendants (Serug, Nahor, Terah - Gen 11:22-26) correspond to those of settlements near Harran, while the name of a brother of Abraham is almost identical to that of the city (cf David N. Freedman, Allen C. Myers and Astrid B. Beck, eds., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, Grand Rapids 2000, p. 10). In any case, in the post-exilic period the Jews must have felt a strong affinity with the Arameans, at least for the common use of Aramaic, if in Elephantine the same individual (Meshullam, son of Zaccur) was qualified as an Aramean in one document, as a Jew in another (Ehud Ben Zvi, "The Memory of Abraham in Late Persian/Early Hellenistic Yehud/Judah" in Diana Vikander Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi, eds., *Remembering Biblical Figures in the Early Late Persian and Hellenistic Periods*, Oxford 2013 p. 31).

³³ While previously practicing their worship in open places, the Persians at a later time built temples under Babylonian influence. Let us bear in mind that in Yehud the governor and the high priest were not the same person (James C. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile*, Minneapolis 2004, p. 118).

³⁴ The Persians considered the Temple as the hub of economic activity and probably of tax collection itself. See Philip R. Davies, *On the Origins of Judaism*, London-New York 2014, p. 67.

The Persian province of Judea (Yehud Medinata) was limited to a small area around Jerusalem and had no more than 20,000 residents. From 587 BC (the date of Babylonian conquest) to 445 BC the capital was Mizpah³⁵. However, even when later it served as capital city, Jerusalem had no more than 1500 inhabitants³⁶. Similarly, the second Temple was certainly not a model of magnificence. In such an environment it is difficult to imagine that the Jewish Bible was composed. In the Persian Jerusalem, at most liturgical or propagandistic texts and simple catechisms were written, which aimed to impose on the loath majority of the population, with nominalistic virtuosity, the reformed Yahwist cult. These short or embryonic writings were later inserted in wider compositions and subjected to further remakes by the Alexandrian Jewish scholars of the Hellenistic period and by the religious groups of the Hasmonean and Roman periods³⁷. The Dead Sea Scrolls attest to a still ongoing elaboration of the Bible.

A new religion in disguise. The Persian policy towards the occupied countries sought to keep the populations subjugated by linking the respect for the king to the cult of the only god of the Iranian religion, Ahura Mazda. It was therefore an inclusive or universalistic monotheism, conceived as an *instrumentum regni*³⁸. The missionaries of monotheism in Judea, the so-called *returnees* (collectively referred to as the Golah), were a scanty minority. They knew well that a foreign god not without contrast would be welcomed by the population and, therefore, Ahura Mazda had to be smuggled in under the assumed identity of the local godhead, YHWH³⁹. So they had done in Babylon, whose main god, Marduk, had been presented as the benevolent protector of Cyrus, who worshiped him in public ceremonies, precisely because in him he recognized Ahura Mazda. The cylinder named after him depicts Cyrus as the king chosen by the god Marduk to restore peace and

³⁵ Jeremiah W. Cataldo, *Breaking Monotheism: Yehud and the Material Formation of Monotheistic Identity*, New York-London 2012, p. 206, n. 73.

³⁶ Oded Lipschits, "Persian Period Finds from Jerusalem: Facts and Interpretation", in *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, 9.20 - 2009, pp. 2-30.

³⁷ "Few would dispute that the Bible as we have it is a product of the Second Temple period. While its raw material may often be earlier, it is in the Persian, Hellenistic, and early Roman periods that biblical texts took on their final editorial form and were compiled into scriptural collections" (Eva Mroczek, "The Hegemony of the Biblical in the Study of Second Temple Literature", in *Journal of Ancient Judaism*, 6.1 - 2015, p. 2).

³⁸ From Ezra 6:10 it is plain that sacrifices and prayers for the king were incorporated into the liturgy, while Ezra 7:26 threatens: *All who will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on them, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of their goods or for imprisonment.*

³⁹ As proof of this, YHWH takes, as we have seen, the Mazdean name "God of heaven".

order in Babylonia. In the same way, with equal pro-Persian propaganda intent, in Isa 45:1 we read: *Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him—and the gates shall not be closed.*

In reality it was a sheer new religion, far from pleasing to polytheistic residents, since it was a re-edition of Mazdeism from which the Jews gradually drew monotheism, aniconism⁴⁰, angelology⁴¹, demonology, immortality, the final judgment, the Messiah Savior, that is, all the distinctive dogmas with respect to pre-exilic Yahwism. As the biblical sources themselves attest, the relations between settlers and *remainees* were strained. For Haggai (2:14) the *remainees* are impure, implying that only the pro-Persians are pure (the 'holy seed' of Ezra 9:2). Hag 2:10-14 and Ezra 4:1-3 exclude the *am ha-aretz* and the Samaritans from rebuilding the Temple. Ezek 33:24-29 even threatens that God will destroy the *remainees*⁴². The exclusivist theocratic utopia was the weapon wielded by the settlers in the attempt - unsuccessful in Persian times - to gain control of Yehud's socio-economic base⁴³.

When the Zoroastrian Ezra proclaimed the Law, he did so in his own language, so much so that an interpreter was needed. The locals cried tears of anger, not of joy, for having to accept unwelcome impositions (Neh 8:8, 9). The previous settlers who had meanwhile married local women were forced by Ezra to repudiate them (Ezra 9:1-10:14). As language

⁴⁰ The nomads had neither temples nor images (Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, Vol. II, Leiden-Köln 1982, p. 21). In addition, "aniconism is a typical feature of West Semitic open-air cultic sites (the 'high places')" (Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, "The Absence of Images: The Problem of the Aniconic Cult at Gades and Its Religio-Historical Background", in *Studi epigrafici e linguistici*, 21 - 2004, p. 95).

⁴¹ The 4 archangels (Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Phanuel) are only names and attributes of YHWH, as the Amesha Spenta were of Ahura Mazda (Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God*, London 1992, p. 36).

⁴² "Consequently, the *am ha'aretz* was labeled by the *golah* community as profane and 'criminal'" (Jeremiah W. Cataldo, *Breaking Monotheism*, cit., p. 80).

⁴³ Of Jeremiah W. Cataldo see also "Persian Yehud Policy and the Community During Nehemiah" in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 28.2 - 2003, pp. 131-143; *A Theocratic Yehud? Issues of Government in a Persian Province*, New York-London 2009; "Whispered Utopia: Dreams, Agendas, and Theocratic Aspirations in Yehud", in *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, 24.1 - 2010, pp. 53-70. J. W. Cataldo scathes J. Weinberg's Bürger-Tempel-Gemeinde theory, arguing that the biblical texts of the Persian period cannot be accepted as evidence of a theocracy operating at the time in Yehud.

of worship was chosen an outdated Canaanite dialect, Hebrew⁴⁴, whereas in Judea, as in the rest of the Middle East, the *lingua franca*, also used by the Persian administration, was Aramaic.

It remains to be explained the strong intolerance of Jewish-style monotheism. It depended on economic reasons. The pure monotheists wanted to expropriate land from the indigenous polytheists⁴⁵ (first up, the Tobiads: Neh 6⁴⁶). To justify the usurpation of other people's property, what better argument than the covenant with the one God who would have reserved for the faithful missionaries of his cult the exclusivity of the goods of the cloud-built Promised Land? What made Jewish monotheism less and less inclusive and more and more dogmatic and aggressive⁴⁷ (a unicum within the Persian Empire) was also the struggle of interests that led to the demonization of the adversary, portrayed as cursed by God⁴⁸.

As stated in 2 Macc 1:18, Nehemiah brought fire (in the form of a dense liquid, i.e., oil) from Babylon and rekindled it in the Temple, in full consonance with Iranian customs. Of Zoroastrian origin was the prohibition of marriage between Yahwists and idolaters, recalled by Ezra⁴⁹. It follows that, if in the book of Esther the Persian king Ahasuerus

⁴⁴ In Isa 19:18 Hebrew is designated as 'the language of Canaan'. See Koert van Bekkum, "The 'Language of Canaan': Ancient Israel's History and the Origins of Hebrew", in Koert van Bekkum, Gert Kwakkel and Wolter H. Rose, *Biblical Hebrew in Context, Essays in Semitics and Old Testament Texts in Honour of Professor Jan P. Lettinga*, Leiden 2018, pp. 67-88.

⁴⁵ The lands claimed by Abraham's true descendants were not limited to Persian Yehud, but went from the Nile to the Euphrates (Gen 15:18-21). The expansion of the aims of possession was the product of successive historical situations.

⁴⁶ Cf Diana Vikander Edelman, "Nehemiah's Adversary, Tobiah the Patron", in Mogens Müller e Thomas L. Thompson, eds., *Historie og konstruktion. Festskrift til Niels Peter Lemche*, København 2005, pp. 106-114. Tobiah was an Ammonite, as to say a pagan, who, as the theophoric name ('YHWH is benign') shows, worshiped, among other deities, also YHWH.

⁴⁷ Jerome F. D. Creach in his book *Violence in Scripture*, Louisville, Ky, 2013, of the violent passages of the Old Testament attempts an interpretation compatible with Christian doctrine.

⁴⁸ "The *monotheistic* perception of God was initially defined in a reaction to the multiplicity of competing authorities by a solitary community desiring authority for itself... At its origin monotheism was a consequence of a material contest over land and authority... A *monotheistic* god is the ideational product of a self-awaredly exclusionary community" (Jeremiah W. Cataldo, *Breaking Monotheism, cit.*, pp. 3, 6, 9).

⁴⁹ Bob Becking, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Construction of Early Jewish Identity*, Tübingen 2011, p. 62.

marries the Jewish Esther, then Judaism and Zoroastrianism are basically the same religion. It should be noted that Nehemiah, as the king's cupbearer, could only be a Zoroastrian, if one thinks of the importance that the ritual rules of purity had in Persia. Of Babylonian origin was the governor Zerubbabel himself ("seed [son] of Babylon"). In the scribe Ezra is to be seen a Zoroastrian priest (*the priest Ezra, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven* - Ezra 7:12) charged with introducing the new cult⁵⁰.

In the spreading of monotheism the Persian settlers were joined by prophets. These in Neh 6:6-7 are described as an instrument of propaganda available to the holders of power: *In it was written, "It is reported among the nations—and Geshem also says it—that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall; and according to this report you wish to become their king. You have also set up prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'There is a king in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these words. So come, therefore, and let us confer together"* (Sanballat's letter to Nehemiah).

The core of the message of the pro-Persian prophets mostly included a reproach, a call to repentance, the threat of catastrophe (foreign conquest, exile). The threat found its historical realization for the simple reason that they were *ex eventu* prophecies⁵¹, written, well after the Babylonian conquest, by the new settlers or their successors. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and other prophetic books are best interpreted as pseudepigraphic propaganda works written by pro-Persians to persuade Palestinian residents to adopt the monotheistic religion. In this light the reason for the national catastrophe was pointed out in apostasy from the cult of YHWH in favor of the abominable idolizing cults (Baal, Asherah, Tammuz). The situation was the opposite. People indulged in the traditional idolizing cults and balked at embracing a new religion imposed under a cover name. We have also prophets without texts, such as Elijah⁵² and Elisha, who appear in the Deuteronomistic History. These two characters, set in IX century BC and often limned as

⁵⁰ It is a surprise that Sirach, while exalting Nehemiah, Governor Zerubbabel, and the high priest Joshua, ignores altogether Ezra (49:11-13). This has led someone to deny the historical existence of the 'second Moses'. Similarly, the same biblical author, while dwelling at length on the high priests Aaron, Phinehas, and Simon (chapters 45 and 50), is silent on Melchizedek, giving rise to the suspicion that the character (Gen 14:18, Psalm 110:4 - also present in the Dead Sea Scrolls and, in the New Testament, only in the Letter to the Hebrews 5:1; 7:28) was created later. The *argumentum ex silentio*, however, cannot be considered decisive.

⁵¹ The noble art of predicting the past and remembering the future was all the rage for centuries (Matthew Neujahr, *Predicting the Past in the Ancient Near East: Mantic Historiography in Ancient Mesopotamia, Judah, and the Mediterranean World*, Providence 2012).

⁵² The name Elijah contains the prophet's slogan: YHWH is my God.

struggling with rival idolatrous prophets (850 in 1 Kings 18:19; 400 in 1 Kings 22:6), represent the difficulties encountered in missionary activity by the scant group of new Yahwists⁵³.

The ownership of the Promised Land. The foreign missionaries presented themselves as the true Israel, the chosen people, a priestly people who by divine mandate claimed the lands of Yehud. On the possession of the land the battle was fierce. What right did the newcomers have to snatch the lands from the hands of the polytheistic rightful owners? The biblical texts created *ad hoc* insist on the divinely sanctioned right of the Yahwists to ownership of property⁵⁴. In order to corroborate the claim, it was later regarded as suitable to invent a model for the conquest of the Promised Land, a historical precedent placed at the time of Joshua and the Judges⁵⁵. Needless to say, the only real conquest was the one

⁵³ In 1 Kings 18:40 Elijah brings 450 prophets of Baal down to the Wadi Kishon, and slays them one by one. While Sirach (48:1-11) ignores, or prefers to ignore, the ferocious massacre (in 48:2 Elijah's zeal is directed against the unfaithful Israelites, reducing them to a few with the weapon of famine), the Talmud rabbis will instead regard Elijah as Phinehas revived, a virtual reincarnation of the prototype of the Zealot (Hillel I. Millgram, *The Elijah Enigma: The Prophet, King Ahab and the Rebirth of Monotheism in the Book of Kings*, Jefferson, NC, 2014, p. 291).

⁵⁴ For their part, the *returnees* rested their claims on Abraham: *Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land". So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him* (Gen 12: 6-7). See Isa 63:16 (*For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, o Lord, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name*) and Ezek 33:24 (*Mortal, the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel keep saying, "Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given us to possess"*). The Jesuit Jean-Louis Ska thus elucidates the presence in the Bible of two opposing traditions: "Now as we know, and this is a result of recent research, Genesis and Exodus, Abraham and Moses, represent different traditions and different claims by different groups (A. de Pury, Th. Römer, K. Schmid). I see in the Exodus tradition, with its insistence on law and covenant, cult and temple, the mentality of the *returnees*... The people of the land, on the other hand, had in Abraham and the traditions attached to him a basis for their claims against the *returnees*" (*op. cit.*, pp. IX-X). In good vernacular English, each group trotted YHWH out for the sole purpose of bringing grist to their own mill. See in particular Konrad Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story: Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible*, Winona Lake 2010, pp. 254-259. For a Greek precedent see Katell Berthelot, *In Search of the Promised Land? The Hasmonean Dynasty Between Biblical Models and Hellenistic Diplomacy*, Göttingen 2018, p. 196: "The myth known as the 'Return of the Herakleidai' apparently served to justify the settlement of Dorian communities in the Peloponnese and the domination of the Spartans, who saw themselves as a Dorian colony - i.e., 'newcomers' - but claimed they were descended from the Herakleidai".

⁵⁵ The most famous episode, devoid of any historical foundation, is the fall of the walls of Jericho: *So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it* (Josh 6:20). In

pursued by the self-styled *returnees*, who, in order to take possession of the lands, proclaimed themselves unique and authentic worshipers of YHWH, the genuine nucleus of the chosen people, the rest of Israel.

Thus Micah avers (2:12): *I will surely gather all of you, o Jacob, I will gather the survivors of Israel.* Jeremiah promises (23:3): *Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them.* Joel guarantees (2:32): *For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.* Thus also Obadiah (v. 17). However, it is in Isaiah that the concept is expressed in its most developed form and has had the greatest influence on Jewish-Christian culture. He gives a child the symbolic name Shear-Jashub (*a remnant will return*, 7:3) and in 10:22 specifies: *For though your people Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return.* The more detailed description is in 6:13: *Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump*⁵⁶.

The doctrine of the rest of Israel sprouting from the barren stump reflects the numerical disparity between the new Yahwists and the idolatrous majority of the resident population.

In Deuteronomy a hundred times the land is promised forever to the false *returnees*, that is, to the settlers. A single quotation is enough (12:10-11): *When you cross over the Jordan and live in the land that the Lord your God is allotting to you, and when he gives you rest from your enemies all around so that you live in safety, then you shall bring everything that I command you to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, and all your choice votive gifts that you vow to the Lord.*

deference to the presumed command of God *Keep away from the things devoted to destruction* (6:18), the Israelites took care to perpetrate an exemplary 'sacred slaughter': *Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys* (6:21). *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, of course.

⁵⁶ The theory of the 'rest of Israel' as a community of elect will be taken up by the Essenes of Qumran (1QS 5.1-3, 1Q28a 1.1-3) and Paul (Rom 9:27). In the latter, outside of any sectarian logic, the mission of the 'rest of Israel' is to work for the universal salvation of mankind and, in particular, of the non-believing majority of the people of Israel itself ("a saving remnant rather than a saved remnant", Kimberly Ambrose, *Jew Among Jews: Rehabilitating Paul*, Eugene 2015, p. 176).

Ritual sacrifices were a boon to the priestly caste: *No one shall appear before me empty-handed* (Exod 34:20); *All fat is the Lord's* (Lev 3:16). To the priests were due the skin of the sacrificed beast, the grain offerings, and the right thigh (Lev 7:8, 9, 32)⁵⁷. The book of Judith⁵⁸ pointed out, for those who still had doubts, that the tithes for priests should be paid even in times of famine (11:13)⁵⁹.

A religion imposed with terror. The new religion spread and maintained itself with terror⁶⁰. The stories of the Pentateuch and other books, progressively created and propagated over the course of centuries, had to arouse dismay in the people, inducing them to tremble in obedience for fear of running into the hands of a ruthless God who did not hesitate to kill by sword all the firstborn sons of Egypt and made the Levites Korah, Dathan and Abiram, plus 250 of their supporters, be swallowed up alive by the mouth of hearth for daring to challenge the superiority of Aaron's priesthood (Num 16), a glaring signal sent to the present Levites. God himself invariably condemned to death those who cultivated different religious ideas (Deut 17:2-7); those who did not obey a priest or a judge (Deut 17:12-13); those who did not respect the Sabbath⁶¹ - with the convincing explanation: *For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day.* Exod 20:11 - and went so far as to exterminate not only men, but also adult women and male children of the Midianites (Num 31:1-54), saving, so to speak, the

⁵⁷ Other rights of the priests are listed in Numbers 5:9, 10; 15:17-21; 18:8-20 - Deuteronomy 18:3, 4; 26:1-3.

⁵⁸ Not included in the Tanakh, it dates back to the Hasmonean era (Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, Cambridge 2014, p. 138).

⁵⁹ The priestly class could declare itself satisfied: *The chief priest Azariah, who was of the house of Zadok, answered him, "Since they began to bring the contributions into the house of the Lord, we have had enough to eat and have plenty to spare; for the Lord has blessed his people, so that we have this great supply left over"* (2 Chr 31:10). There was no compromise on the tithe: *You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me - the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the Lord of hosts* (Mal 3:9-11).

⁶⁰ For an in-depth discussion of this topic see Jeremiah W. Cataldo, *Biblical Terror: Why Restoration and Law in the Bible Depend Upon Fear*, London-New York 2016.

⁶¹ *When the Israelites were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the sabbath day. Those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses, Aaron, and to the whole congregation. They put him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him. Then the Lord said to Moses, "The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him outside the camp". The whole congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death, just as the Lord had commanded Moses* (Num 15:32-36).

girls, who were taken slaves to satisfy the lust of the victors. For the idolaters there was no escape: *Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the Lord alone, shall be devoted to destruction* (Exod 22:20). And to pass from words to deeds, trampling on even the most sacred bonds of blood: *He said to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor'"*. *The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day. Moses said, "Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves this day"* (Exod 32:27-29).

God burns alive Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, for an unsolicited act of zeal, that is, for the unforgivable guilt of presenting on a brazier an offering of perfumes that the Lord had not ordered (Lev 10:1-2). The father and brothers are not even left with the comfort of tears and mourning: *And Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, "Do not dishevel your hair, and do not tear your vestments, or you will die and wrath will strike all the congregation"* (Lev 10:6).

The bride not found virgin by her husband must be stoned on the threshold of her father's house⁶². The death penalty is imposed on homosexuals, adulterers, those who curse their parents, those who have sex with their stepmother, daughter-in-law, mother-in-law (in this case you go straight to the stake) or with a beast (Lev 20). Miriam is struck by leprosy, as per the fact that with her brother Aaron she dared to criticize Moses for marrying an Ethiopian woman, a union forbidden to Israelites. But God defends the incensurability of Moses (Num 12:1-16), whereas Aaron, no less guilty than his sister, remains inexplicably unpunished. Curses are wasted: *But if you will not obey the Lord your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you*. And he rattles off a string of curses that go far beyond the most sadistic imagination (Deut 28:15-44). In 2 Sam 6:6-7 Uzzah stretches forth his hand to steady the jolting ark and, though moved by the best intentions, is struck down⁶³. In 2 Kings 2:23-24 God sends two bears to eat 42 boys, guilty of the most heinous

⁶² *If, however, this charge is true, that evidence of the young woman's virginity was not found, then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father's house and the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father's house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst* (Deut 22:20-21). Music to the ears of Islamic extremists.

⁶³ Some (and among them Nikola Tesla) physically explain the fact with a discharge emitted by the ark that, in their opinion, would have been designed as a powerful electric capacitor. See Andrew May, *Pseudoscience and Science Fiction*, New York 2016, p. 143+.

of crimes: calling the prophet Elisha 'baldhead'⁶⁴. With no less than sudden death is threatened even the high priest who does not scrupulously follow ritual rules as meticulous as they are spiritually irrelevant⁶⁵.

The invention of the past. On the authority of Napoleon's cynical saying, history is just a fairy tale on which everyone agrees: a spot-on definition for the ingenious creation of Jewish religious intellectuals. They, having to mould an identity, found nothing better than to base it on a fanciful and far-fetched past, smuggled as historical. Certainly, they did not lack the exact perception of the prodigious power of writing in order to generate widely shared convictions, wrapped in the halo of sacredness. In passing off their texts as venerable treasure troves of age-old divine revelations⁶⁶ they were certain that the ploy would work and run thanks to the continuous hammering of propaganda, made more convincing by the threat of frightful punishment. The books of the Pentateuch were attributed to Moses⁶⁷ (set in XIII century BC): thus the whole of the remote history and the Torah (the Law) became venerable and irrefutable⁶⁸. As we have seen, the proven proof that the monotheistic texts of the Bible are not prior to the Persian period lies in the fact that no archaeological or documentary extra-biblical evidence of monotheistic worship before the IV century BC has been discovered in Palestine.

⁶⁴ See Thomas Römer, *Dark God: Cruelty, Sex, and Violence in the Old Testament*, New York, 2013. The author thinks that each piece should be placed in its historical context and interpreted in the light of the evolutionary development of Jewish theology. A criterion suitable to justify any aberration attested to by cultural anthropology. Let us at least have the good sense to forswear the exclusive mark of divine revelation.

⁶⁵ *Aaron shall wear it [the ephod with the golden bells] when he ministers, and its sound shall be heard when he goes into the holy place before the Lord, and when he comes out, so that he may not die* (Exod 28:35). Another earth-shattering prescription, addressed to the whole community of Israel: *You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard* (Lev 19:27). Even today, alas, there is no lack of devotees observing the obligation to ban tonsorial artists.

⁶⁶ "The word about God became the word of God" (Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Developmental Composition of the Bible*, Leiden 2015, p. 7). Human conceptions grew into divine revelations.

⁶⁷ According to the Talmud, in bivouacs Moses would have had leisure to compose to boot the book of Job, which is instead patterned after Babylonian sources (Takayoshi Oshima, *Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers*, Tübingen 2014).

⁶⁸ Specularly, Hermes Trismegistus, the alleged author of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (compiled by pagan authors in the I-III centuries AD), would have been considered a contemporary of Moses, if not even prior to him. Note, however, that the Jew Artapanus had ventured to identify Moses with Hermes/Thoth.

Names under the sand. An indirect evidence that lays bare the counterfeiting is offered by the papyri (datable between 494 and 400 BC) of the abovementioned community of Elephantine/Yeb, where, among the 167 Jewish names present, there is not one that recalls a character of the Pentateuch. The pious forgers could certainly not presage that the re-emergence, after thousands of years, of those papyri from the sand would have unmasked the brilliant invention. Really strange not to find there a Noah, an Abraham, an Isaac, a Jacob, a Joseph or at least a scruple of Moses. Zilch! Nothing at all!⁶⁹. It means that, at that time, these forefathers, these sacred ancestors, had not yet been born from the cornucopian imagination of the manipulators⁷⁰. That these are late innovations is also deduced from the anachronism with which Abraham in Gen 11:28, 31 and 15:7 is said to be a native of Ur of the Chaldeans, whereas the first attestations of this Semite population date, in Assyrian texts, to the IX century BC, several centuries after the time of Moses, the purported author of Genesis⁷¹.

The Alexandrian biblical bookwrights. In the Persian period the Yahwists began the process of creating sacred texts, primarily prophetic, liturgical and catechetical ones. It was only a beginning, since, as claimed by recent studies, the center of formation of the Jewish Bible might not be Jerusalem, which remained at the rank of village for the whole Persian period. This center should be sought outside of Judea. Alexandria under the Ptolemies meets the requirements of a culturally active context, with a massive presence of Jewish emigrants.

⁶⁹ Russell E. Gmirkin, *Berosus and Genesis, Manetho and Exodus: Hellenistic Histories and the Date of the Pentateuch*, New York-London 2006, p. 30.

⁷⁰ This certainly does not exclude the pre-existence of vague and confused legends about the conflictual relationship with Egypt. "The interest of the story [of the biblical exodus] lies not in what really happened, but how, by whom, when, in which form, and for what purpose it was told in the course of millennia. The story is about the revolutionary birth of both a people and a religion. It has a political and a religious aspect and both aspects are inseparably linked. It involves a great amount of violence that is both of a political nature (Egyptian oppression of the Israelites, the 'plagues' against the Egyptians) and of a religious one (the massacre after the cult of the golden calf) - the 'founding violence' that typically accompanies the birth of something radically new" (Jan Assmann, "Exodus and Memory", in Thomas E. Levy, Thomas Schneider and William H. C. Propp, eds., *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience*, Cham, CH, 2015, p. 3).

⁷¹ Cf Eugene H. Merrill, Mark Rooker and Michael A. Grisanti, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Nashville, Tn, 2011, p. 86, notes 27 and 30. The irreducible downgrade the specification 'of the Chaldeans' to a simple explanatory gloss added in later times.

Gmirkin⁷² has shown that the fragment, set in the *Bibliotheca Historica* of Diodorus Siculus, that attributes sacred books to the Jews does not derive from the *Aegyptiaca* of Hecataeus (320-315 BC), but from Theophanes of Mytilene (62 BC). Therefore, once proved the groundlessness of that previous attestation, the Septuagint (LXX - 270 BC) is the first proof of a written Pentateuch. It may be said that this was crafted (from earlier documents and legends) in Alexandria around 273 BC by Jewish scholars (the Greek translation would have occurred at the same time⁷³). The primary evidence is the dependence of Gen 1-11 on the *Babyloniaca* of Berossus (278 BC), the dependence of the Exodus on the *Aegyptiaca* of Manetho (285-280 BC) and geopolitical references to those years in the Table of Nations (Gen 10-11). Furthermore, the curse of Canaan reflects situations identifiable at the end of the First Syrian War (273-272 BC).

Gmirkin's thesis has been criticized because for Genesis and Exodus the sources cannot be reduced to Berossus and Manetho. The story of Eden in Genesis 2, aiming at making man aware of his own limits, derives from the *Poem of Atrahasis* (XVIII century BC), which also contains a narrative of the deluge, later taken up in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In turn, the different story of creation in Gen 1 comes from the *Enuma Elish*. Among the sources of Genesis may be included Hebrew folklore tales derived from immemorial Babylonian legends that in a millennium and a half had had a slew of time to spread. But this does not break up the core of Gmirkin's assert. What is certain is that before the publication of the works of Berossus and Manetho there is no trace of the Pentateuch⁷⁴.

What induced the Alexandrian Jewish scholars to the enterprise? When Ptolemy II Philadelphus wanted to collect texts on all the knowledge for the famous Library, a significant part was assigned to the cultures of the diverse peoples. Given the preponderance of Greek culture, the ethnic groups that were not able to compete with it for literary, historical and religious baggage, thought well to invent it, relying on the poor material already available, often consisting, more than in written texts, in myths and oral stories. The final drafting of the Bible did not always lead to a coherent narrative. It was

⁷² Russell E. Gmirkin, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-71.

⁷³ The other books of the Jewish Bible were translated into Greek in different places and times. The translation of Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth) should be placed at the beginning of the II century AD. See Martin Hengel, *The 'Hellenization' of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*, Eugene 2003, p. 25.

⁷⁴ See Niels Peter Lemche, "Is the Old Testament Still a Hellenistic Book?", in Ingrid Hjelm and Thomas L. Thompson, eds., *Biblical Interpretation Beyond Historicity: Changing Perspectives 7*, London-New York 2016, pp. 61-75.

often preferred to accept and juxtapose different traditions: in 1 Sam, of ten episodes two contrasting versions are given⁷⁵; in 1 Sam 12:8, unlike in the Pentateuch, Moses sets foot in the Promised Land.

Jewish authors wanted to rival Greek culture. With the canon closed, therefore centuries later, the 24 books of the Tanakh (according to the calculation of 4 Ezra⁷⁶) had to counterbalance the Iliad and the Odyssey that counted the same number of books⁷⁷. Not only Jews buckled down to inventing a glorious past. Dionysius Scytobrachion (III century BC) in the *Fabulae Libycae* fabricated stacks of data to enhance the national image of Libya and in particular of Cyrene. For example, he transferred the origin of the gods to Libya, making it the center of a universal empire thanks to the conquests made by the Amazons, indigenous to that region. The queen of Libya, Myrina, would make an alliance with Egypt in the distant mythological past⁷⁸.

The Pentateuch begins with Genesis, which describes the origin of the world and the history of the Patriarchs until the settlement of the Jews in Egypt. The other four books (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) revolve around the figure of Moses and the Law he imposed on the Israelites, a meticulous legislation that covers any aspect of people's life⁷⁹. Leviticus and Deuteronomy claim to report *ad litteram* (notice the suspect accuracy of the dates) the laws that, through Moses, God communicated to the chosen people. In reality, these are norms of which it is not difficult to find precedents in the neighboring societies, beginning with the edict of Hammurabi⁸⁰. Many prescriptions on

⁷⁵ "As for contradictions, these were looked at in a different way from today: consistency was not considered essential" (Shimon Bar-Efrat, "Introduction to First Samuel", in Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler and Michael A. Fishbane, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*, Oxford 2014, p. 560).

⁷⁶ To the 24 public books 4 Ezra 14:45-46 adds bountifully 70 esoteric or secret books.

⁷⁷ Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most and Salvatore Settis, eds., *The Classical Tradition*, "Judaism", Cambridge, Ma, 2010, p. 498.

⁷⁸ Doron Mendels, *The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism*, Grand Rapids, 1997, p. 43.

⁷⁹ Lev 1:1-2: *The Lord summoned Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying: "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them"*. Num 1:1-2: *The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt*. Deut 1:1, 3: *These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan - in the wilderness. In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses spoke to the Israelites just as the Lord had commanded him to speak to them*.

⁸⁰ David P. Wright, *Inventing God's Law: How the Covenant Code of the Bible Used and Revised the Laws of Hammurabi*, Oxford 2009.

purity betray the Persian influence⁸¹. To attribute these late laws, fundamentally aimed at consolidating the power of the priestly caste, to a divine revelation reserved for Moses was a rudimentary expedient to establish, without fear of denial, its authenticity and to assign to the Jews an indisputable primacy.

The feast of Easter preceded the composition of the Pentateuch. As maintained by Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni⁸², it is mentioned in the *ostraca* of Elephantine (probably V century BC). The local Jews celebrated Easter, but without linking it to Moses and the exodus, a sign that this myth had not yet been concocted. Easter had originated as a seasonal canonical feast of fertility, in association with the sacrifice of firstborn babies. In the Pentateuch the sacrifice of firstborns was forbidden (see Isaac's story) and only the firstborn sons of the Egyptians and, at the hands of the Jews, the lambs were killed.

A staggering example of dependence on Greek sources stands out in the salient moment of the exodus, the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea: *Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided* (Exod 14:21).

At the beginning of the expedition against the Persians, in the wake of a sudden change of wind from south to north, the Sea of Pamphilia retreated so as to allow Alexander's troops to pass through a bottleneck cut into the rock and beaten by the stormy sea. The source is the eyewitness Callisthenes (fr. 31), but the narrative is due to Eustace, in whose opinion the sea recognized Alexander as its lord and bowed before him⁸³. Already Flavius Josephus⁸⁴ noted the coincidence. An even earlier anticipation (711 BC) can be traced in the Assyrian king Sargon II, who boasted: "I, Sargon, had my troops cross the Tigris and the Euphrates in full flood, in the high waters of spring, as if on dry land"⁸⁵.

⁸¹ Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, Vol. II, Leiden 1982, p. 190. More recently, Thomas Kazen, *Second Temple Purity Practices*, SBL Annual Meeting, Baltimore, 23-26 November 2013.

⁸² *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*. Vol. IV: *Assorted Ostraca and Inscriptions*, Jerusalem 1999.

⁸³ So Luisa Prandi, *Callistene. Uno storico tra Aristotele e i re Macedoni*, Milano 1985, p. 97. But Peter Bolt (*Jesus' Defeat of Death*), Cambridge 2003, p. 140, attributes the supernatural interpretation to Callisthenes himself.

⁸⁴ *Jewish Antiquities* III 348.

⁸⁵ Charlie Trimm, *Fighting for the King and the Gods: A Survey of Warfare in the Ancient Near East*, Atlanta 2017, p. 138. Even Sargon II, incidentally, had been exposed by his mother in a river. Note that the name Moses is taken from the Egyptian language ('son').

The readers of the Exodus cannot but wonder what was the meaning of such a long and twisted itinerary, involving the crossing of the Red Sea and the forty-year wanderings in the desert, when instead to pass from Egypt to Palestine was available the shorter and more comfortable route along the Mediterranean. Also in this option, if he had wanted to, YHWH would have found no difficulty in worsting Pharaoh's mighty chariots and horsemen and, secondly, in routing the less fearsome Philistines⁸⁶. The comparison with Callisthenes' testimony explains emblematically that the itinerary was changed, as the fabled and storied Jewish prophet could not allow himself to be outdone by the well-chronicled Macedonian leader.

Sources of Judaism. If one looks at the basic features of Judaism, it is evident that on none of them the Jews may claim a trademark. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, Greek culture exerted a sweeping influence not only on Philo of Alexandria, but also on the sacred texts themselves⁸⁷. In the chosenness is detectable a fancy shared by umpteen peoples, each of which enjoyed trumpeting its own pre-eminence. The ancient Canaanite ideas about the council of gods survive in the Tanakh. Two Babylonian versions of the creation are placed side by side in Genesis. Monotheism had already been professed in Egypt by Akhenaten, and even Marduk in Babylon was seen as a god with many names, not to mention the unique god of the Persians, Ahura Mazda. The Sabbath was respected in Babylon as a day unsuitable for business; the Jews added only their own motivations *ad libitum*.

⁸⁶ The narrator/inventor of the Exodus, to justify the adoption of an aberrant itinerary (in both a proper and figurative sense), reveals, and may well do so by virtue of his omniscience, that the divine choice was dictated by the fear of a possible defection of the chosen people up against the threat of the Philistines: *When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, "If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt"* (Exod 13:17). A truly unfathomable logic: the God who was bracing for the most prodigious of miracles, in order to take his people away from the most superb of empires, would have felt incapable of trouncing the brontophobic Philistines, something which, on the other hand, sooner or later he would have been forced to do anyway (*As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel; but the Lord thundered with a mighty voice that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion; and they were routed before Israel.* 1 Sam 7:10).

⁸⁷ See Philippe Wajdenbaum, *Argonauts of the Desert: Structural Analysis of the Hebrew Bible*, Sheffield 2011; Thomas L. Thompson and Philippe Wajdenbaum, eds., *The Bible and Hellenism: Greek Influence on Jewish and Early Christian Literature*, New York 2014; Russell E. Gmirkin, *Plato and the Creation of the Hebrew Bible*, London-New York 2016.

Circumcision, practiced by many peoples⁸⁸, did not distinguish them at all. From Zoroastrianism they drew ritual rules of purity and, as already mentioned, the key doctrines so that, in essence, Judaism may be defined as a Zoroastrianism adjusted to Jewish culture.

⁸⁸ The Philistines, the uncircumcised ('arelim') par excellence (1 Sam 14:6; 17:26 - 2 Sam 1:20), ended up also adopting the practice of circumcision (Avraham Faust, "The Bible, Archaeology, and the Practice of Circumcision in Israelite and Philistine Societies ", in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 134.2 - 2015, pp. 272-290).

Conflicting Judaisms

The Enochian dissidents. The Zadokite priests, constituting the Jewish priestly aristocracy, boasted of descending from Eleazar, son of Aaron. Against them a minority group, excluded from power⁸⁹, began, from the III century BC, an expansion of doctrine in a sense more faithful to Mazdeism, thus giving rise to the Enochian literature⁹⁰, not accepted - and it is easy to understand why - into the Jewish Bible. Vying for the most original and authentic revelation, the Enochian dissidents appealed to Enoch⁹¹, Noah's great grandfather and father of Methuselah, considered the depository of divine secrets, along the lines of the seventh predynastic Sumerian king Emmeduranki, as well as Orpheus and Zarathustra. This faction of visionaries expressed their rejection of the disappointing reality marked by social inequality, injustice and oppression⁹², and therefore shifted their hope into the future, approaching Iranian dualism and its eschatology: the fallen angels have spread evil, so that the world, now lacking in harmony, tends to catastrophe, which will be followed by a new creation⁹³.

A hundred scrolls in search of an author. The Pseudepigrapha⁹⁴, works falsely attributed to venerated figures, claiming a primeval revelation, often in eschatological perspective,

⁸⁹ In the Hellenistic period, beginning with the domination of the Ptolemies, the political and economic role of the high priests became increasingly notable. See Mark R. Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-Science Perspective*, Atlanta 2012, pp. 102-107.

⁹⁰ Richard Bauckham, *The Jewish World Around the New Testament*, Tübingen 2008, p. 271.

⁹¹ See Andrei A. Orlov, *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition*, Tübingen 2005.

⁹² Richard A. Horsley, *Text and Tradition in Performance and Writing*, Eugene, 2013, pp. 152, 153. For example, the Epistle of Enoch (1 Enoch 94-105) contains a sequence of "Woe to you", addressed to the rich and powerful rulers and their scribes, which anticipates the invective of Jesus in Q 11:42, 46, 47, 48.

⁹³ On the influence of Iranian doctrines on Jewish apocalypticism see Jason M. Silverman, *Persepolis and Jerusalem: Iranian Influence on the Apocalyptic Hermeneutic*, New York 2012. Other sources can be found in Canaanite, Mesopotamian and Egyptian conceptions.

⁹⁴ James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols., Peabody, Ma, 2011 (first edition: New York 1983-1985). The Charlesworth collection has 52 documents, but many others remain outside. A monumental continuation/expansion was undertaken by Richard Bauckham, James R. Davila and Alexander Panayotov, eds., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, Vol. I, Grand Rapids 2013. A

are the living demonstration of the intellectual vitality, open to the most diverse influences, of Judaism. Indeed, they show the existence, in the same breath, of many Judaisms. In this case it may be said that the new wine of dissident and minority conceptions was poured into the old wineskins of the traditional religious coordinates.

The false attribution⁹⁵ was so widespread as to exceed the limits of religious doctrines. In the Enochian literature the scientific ideas that abounded in it came from Babylonian sources, but the authors were careful not to present them as imported novelties. They thought it more opportune and nationalistically correct to trace them back to a long-established Jewish tradition, and ultimately to the revelations that Enoch would have received in heaven and then transmitted to men⁹⁶. The artifice of presenting science as divine revelation had already been used by the Egyptians, Babylonians and other peoples.

The most representative pseudepigraphic text is certainly 1 Enoch, a collection of writings by not coeval authors, present in Qumran in several copies, quoted in the Letter of Jude 14-15 and mentioned in the Second Letter of Peter 2:4. Altogether, more than 100 passages of the New Testament recall it in some way⁹⁷. This book lacks scriptural quotations, there is no mention of the Temple, the Law of Moses itself is not central⁹⁸, whereas fidelity to Zoroastrianism increases. A characteristic doctrine is that of the rebellious angels, which also peeps out in Gen 6:1-4. In addition to being a source of the world's evil alternative to Adam's sin, they serve as a metaphor for the corrupt priestly class.

particular case of pseudepigraphy occurs when an author inserts his writings into a pre-existing text, as in the case of the book of Isaiah, where the hand of subsequent prophets is detected.

⁹⁵ On pseudepigraphy and other forgeries, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics*, New York 2013. On the subject, in particular, of the false attribution of the Psalms to David, Eva Mroczek avers: "I argue that rather than texts in search of authors, we have sometimes characters in search of stories... Davidic attribution is not a piece of religious dogma that asserts the literal authorship of the book of Psalms, but an aesthetic, poetic, and honorific act that celebrates an ancient hero and lets him inhabit new literary homes" (*The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity*, Oxford 2016, p. 16).

⁹⁶ Philip S. Alexander, "Enoch and the Beginnings of Jewish Interest in Natural Science", in Charlotte Hempel, Armin Lange and Hermann Lichtenberger, eds., *The Wisdom Texts from Qumran and the Development of Sapiential Thought*, Leuven 2002, p. 233.

⁹⁷ See Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Gabriele Boccaccini, eds., *Enoch and the Synoptic Gospels: Reminiscences, Allusions, Intertextuality*, Atlanta 2016.

⁹⁸ For the wide category of 'Non-Mosaic Judaism' see John J. Collins, *The Invention of Judaism: Torah and Jewish Identity from Deuteronomy to Paul*, Oakland, Ca, 2017, pp. 62-79.

The pseudepigraphic works, ignored or condemned by the rabbis⁹⁹, have been preserved by Christians, who deemed them important to understand and deepen their beliefs¹⁰⁰. For some specialists, they are at the origin of the whole Christian theology¹⁰¹. In 1 Enoch the Messiah is described as a white bull with big horns. Called the Just One and the Son of Man, he is also presented as a pre-existing celestial being who, splendid and majestic, dominates the universe and sits as a judge on the throne of glory¹⁰². At the end of time he will appear to bring into being his kingdom and build the new Jerusalem.

In the Parables of Enoch (chapters 37-71 of 1 Enoch – a later insertion), we hear about the Messiah, but not about Israel, Abraham, Moses, Torah. This work underlines the variety of Second Temple Judaism and challenges the centrality of the Mosaic Torah as a founding and permanent element of Jewish identity¹⁰³. The supernatural character of the Son of Man in the Parables allows him to defeat the angelic forces devoted to evil, something that no human Messiah could do.

⁹⁹ For a more detailed view I refer to Annette Y. Reed, "The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and post-70 Judaism", in Claire Clivaz, Simon Claude Mimouni and Bernard Pouderon, eds., *Les judaïsmes dans tous leurs états aux Ier-IIIe siècles (les Judéens des synagogues, les chrétiens et les rabbins). Actes du colloque de Lausanne, 12-14 décembre 2012*, Turnhout 2015, pp. 117-148.

¹⁰⁰ Marinus De Jonge, *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament as Part of the Christian Literature*, Leiden 2003. Eva Mroczek goes so far as to say: "The apocryphal [pseudepigraphic] texts were superior to biblical Old Testament literature, because they are a sign of spiritual progress that culminates in the New Testament. Christianity inherits their ethical and spiritual richness, their apocalyptic energy, while rabbinic Judaism regresses into a dead tradition" (*The Literary Imagination...*, cit., p. 131).

¹⁰¹ Ernst Käsemann, "Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie", in *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, Vol. II, Göttingen 1964, p. 108.

¹⁰² 1 Enoch 62:5, 7: *When they see the Son of Man seated on the throne of his glory ... Since the beginning the Son of Man was hidden, and the Most High preserved him in the presence of his power, and revealed him to the elect.* The description of the Son of Man/Messiah in 1 Enoch as a pre-existing being seated on the throne at the right hand of God sets a real precedent for the exaltation of Jesus, thus implying his pre-existence (Aquila Lee, *From Messiah to Preexistent Son*, Eugene 2009, p. 281).

¹⁰³ Gabriele Boccaccini, ed., *Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man: Revisiting the Book of Parables*, Grand Rapids 2007, pp. 12-13. James A. Waddell traces the Parables back to the second half of the I century BC (*The Messiah in the Parables of Enoch and the Letters of Paul: A Comparative Analysis*, Ann Arbor 2010, pp. 20-27). Leslie W. Walck in *The Son of Man in the Parables of Enoch and in Matthew*, London-New York 2011, elucidates the specific features of the Son of Man shared by both the Parables and the Gospel of Matthew.

According to Boccaccini¹⁰⁴, the presence of a supernatural Messiah was meaningless to Qumran's predestinarians, who did not appreciate the development of Enochian thought. If the Parables were not tracked down in Qumran, the reason was that Enochian Judaism had separated from Qumranic Essenism. However, the Enochian group, urban Essenes and Qumranites were part of the same trajectory of thought: "The Enochians were and remained a single social group, while the term 'Essene' denotes the much larger intellectual movement that historically manifested itself in a proliferation of different social groups such as the Enochians, the Qumran community (perhaps the Therapeutae), and later the Jesus movement"¹⁰⁵.

Even the Pharisees did not find anything better but to pour their new wine into old wineskins, that is, into the flow of a tradition that was supposed to go back to hoary antiquity. They can rightly aspire to the Academy Award for Best Thrift for the crafty wheeze that allowed them not even to bother to produce pseudepigraphic texts under which to sell their legal innovations. Reaching the maximum result with the minimum effort and avoiding exhausting exegetical squabbles, they went straight to the goal, framing, next to the written one, a malleable oral Torah, also revealed by God to Moses and since then for more than a millennium transmitted through channels unknown to all, except of course to them¹⁰⁶.

Hellenizers v Hassidim. Under Persian rule the Jews ended up identifying themselves with or at least feeling very akin to the conquerors¹⁰⁷. For the loyalty to the Iranian king strove the priestly class that promoted the worship of the common "God of heaven".

¹⁰⁴ Gabriele Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: The Parting of the Ways Between Qumran and Enochic Judaism*, Grand Rapids 1998.

¹⁰⁵ Gabriele Boccaccini, *Enoch and Qumran Origins: New Light on a Forgotten Connection*, Grand Rapids, 2005, p. 422-423. The same author in *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism: An Intellectual History, From Ezekiel to Daniel*, Grand Rapids 2002, p. 103, had otherwise outlined the relationship between Enochians and Essenes: "Only the Maccabean revolt caused the Enochian Judaism to grow into something different and broader - a movement of dissent basically known as Essenism".

¹⁰⁶ Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE - 400 CE*, Oxford 2001.

¹⁰⁷ "The Psalms abound in invectives against the Babylonian yoke (just think of Ps 137), while against the Persian kings such a venom is not found in all the Hebrew literature" (Stephen J. Vicchio, *Job in the Ancient World. The Image of the Biblical Job: A History*, Vol. I, Eugene 2006, p. 36).

Everything changed with the advent of the Greek sovereigns, successors of Alexander the Great, first the Ptolemies of Egypt and later the Seleucids of Syria.

A part of the aristocracy willingly opened up to the Hellenistic lifestyle (learning Greek, participating in parties and entertainment, use of a polytheistic greeting formula). At the end of the Ptolemaic reign the cultic community of Jerusalem had sided with the Seleucids and therefore, when these prevailed, they obtained tax privileges. With the change of dynasty (198 BC) we witness the clash between Pious (Hassidim) and Hellenizers. From 175 the latter ousted the adversaries, causing a civil war. Their line-up, however, was not unitary. If the moderates limited themselves to political reforms (Jason, 175-172), the extremists wanted to do away with the peculiarities of Judaism (Menelaus, 172-162). In the civil war, what was at stake was the integration of Judaism into Hellenistic society¹⁰⁸.

The conflict began with political reformism, then moved on to a cultural-religious confrontation and finally ended in a war of national liberation. The subordinate strata of the capital and the poor rural population joined forces with the core of conservative religious intellectuals who gave the struggle a theological legitimacy (zeal for the Law and for the Covenant). These coalition forces, under the leadership of Judas Maccabee, prevailed and on 14 December 164 BC, restored the cult of YHWH, removing the *abomination of desolation*, the desecration of the Temple by Gentiles and Hellenizing Jews. Having come to power in Antioch, in 162 Demetrius Soter recognized Jewish religious freedom and appointed a high priest who was attached to traditions. This satisfied the Hassidim. But the Maccabees went on fighting until Alexander Balas bestowed the title of high priest on Jonathan, a title confirmed by Demetrius II, whereas later on Diodotus Tryphon came into conflict with him and killed him. The successor of Jonathan, his brother Simon, drove the Gentiles away from the Akra (the fortress of Jerusalem) and became recognized ruler, setting up the Hasmonean dynasty (from his ancestor Asamon or Hashmon)¹⁰⁹.

The second book of Maccabees presents the clash as a dispute between Judaism and Hellenism, terms it uses first. In reality, today we prefer to speak of an intra-Jewish civil

¹⁰⁸ Justin Michael Motter-Hugenin, *The Tobiads and the Maccabees: Hellenism and Power in the Ancient Judean Community*, Columbus, Oh, 2013.

¹⁰⁹ For an overview of the dynasty I point out Kenneth Atkinson, *A History of the Hasmonean State: Josephus and Beyond*, London 2016.

war between Hellenizing reformers and conservative orthodox reformers. In short, it was an internal contrast within Judaism, or rather between two conflicting Judaisms, on the value of tradition.

Unity was not found even after the victory of the Maccabees and the defeat of the Hellenizers. On the contrary, further divisions arose. The Maccabees wanted to push on with the war until political independence, while the Hassidim, pleased with the recognized religious freedom, sought a compromise with the Seleucids. The Maccabees aimed not only at independence, but also at the conquest of new territories, where they intended to impose Judaism by force on the pagans. They also aspired to lay hold, in addition to the political role, also of the religious one, taking away from the Zadokites the office of high priest with annexed management of the Temple treasure. At that point the Hasmoneans (and the Sadducees, who supported them) were accused of being the new Hellenizers.

Within the anti-Maccabean Hassidim, opposed to the encroachment of religious struggle into political and economic greed, the Pharisees ("the separate ones") and the Essenes stood out. In the middle of the latter arose the even more rigorous Qumranites, hard and pure extremists¹¹⁰, convinced of their divine election, meant as a clear-cut separation from the rest of Israel and the world, and with a special predilection for the rules of ritual purity that were the sign of their exclusivity¹¹¹. In the service of Hasmonean ideology, the two books of Chronicles, in order to justify the dual role of the Hasmoneans and to fight the schismatic Samaritans, who around 330 had erected their own temple on Mount Gerizim, emphasize the leading role of Judea and the cultic centrality of Jerusalem, mythologizing King David and his son Solomon as successful rulers and initiators of legitimate worship.

¹¹⁰ John J. Collins in his *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, Grand Rapids 2015, pp. 84-88, in declaring the theory of schism between the Enoch tradition, the Essenes and the Qumran community unfounded, maintains that the movement reflected in the Scrolls has operated a synthesis of four traditions: Enochian, sapiential, Mosaic and apocalyptic. Surprisingly, the Qumran community, according to Martin Hengel's well-known thesis (*Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period*, Vol. I, London 1974, pp. 243-247), was affected, albeit indirectly and unconsciously, by Hellenistic influence at the level of ideas, structures and institutions. It can be considered a version, adapted to Judaism, of the well-known voluntary Hellenistic associations (Per Bilde, "The Essenes in Philo and Josephus", in Eve-Marie Becker, Morten Hørning Jensen and Jacob Mortensen, eds., *Collected Studies on Philo and Josephus*, Göttingen 2016, p. 149).

¹¹¹ The eagerness for differentiation will lead these sectarians to elaborate a peculiar type of Hebrew, characterized by classicist purism and archaizing spelling (William M. Schniedewind, "Qumran Hebrew as an Antilanguage", in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 118 - 1999, pp. 235 -252).

The position of the Hassidim in the conflict is reflected in the book of Daniel (164 BC), which in the downtrodden subordinate strata wants to raise hope for the final victory, guaranteed by divine intervention: *At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt* (Daniel 12:1-2). In oppressed men faith in the resurrection is an expression of the will of revenge. Hebrew Daniel comes from the quietist wing of the Hassidim, whose model was the martyrs, not the victorious Maccabees.

The mechanisms of oppression of the Hasmonean society, with connected exploitation and downgrading of the poor, transformed apocalypticism into a theology of social resistance¹¹². The poor built an alternative world of faith from which they drew the certainty that soon YHWH, directly or through his Messiah or the Archangel Michael¹¹³, would intervene to ensure justice and equality. This kind of apocalypticism was very widespread in the lower strata until the time of Jesus, keeping alive the hope of social redemption.

The Hasmonean sovereigns, in order to legitimize their political-religious power, emphasized the distinctive features of Judaism - monotheism, antidolatry, aniconism¹¹⁴, Sabbath observance, circumcision¹¹⁵-, engendering an exclusive and intolerant, xenophobic and antic cosmopolitan ideology¹¹⁶. It was they who eliminated all traces of polytheism with

¹¹² Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, Vol. II, Louisville, Ky, 1994, pp. 595-597.

¹¹³ Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*, Leiden 1998; Darrell D. Hannah, *Michael and Christ*, Tübingen 1999.

¹¹⁴ The decorations of the synagogue of Dura Europos show that, in spite of the Hasmoneans, a Jewish art existed. "The development of Christian art and its very existence depended on now lost models of Jewish art. Jewish art precedes Christian art and influences it" (Matthew Baigell and Milly Heyd, eds., *Complex Identities: Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art*, New Brunswick, NJ, 2001, p. 19).

¹¹⁵ See Nina E. Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, Tübingen 2010. In 1 Macc circumcision counts as a sign of fidelity to the Hasmonean party: "Accepting circumcision meant identifying with the Hasmoneans" (p. 11). Note that Moses, after leaving Egypt, refrained from imposing this practice (Josh 3:4-5).

¹¹⁶ On the Hasmonean ideology, in particular the concept of holy war, see two papers by Kai Trampedach: "Zwangsbeschneidung und religiöse Säuberung. Der Heilige Krieg der Hasmonäer", in Birgit Emich, Ulrich Gotter and Gabriela Signori, eds., *Kriegs-Bilder I*, Teil 1, H-Soz-Kult 2006; "Die Hasmonäer und das Problem der Theokratie", in Andreas Pečar and Kai Trampedach, eds., *Die Bibel als politisches Argument*, München

destructions¹¹⁷, exiles, forced conversions, murders: a militant, warmongering Yahwism. But the Hellenistic cultural influence kept up: Aristobulus (104-103 BC) was called 'philhellene'; in coins of his successor Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 BC) stood out the Greek inscription. Suffice it to say that both bore Greek names. The twofold role of the sovereigns allowed them to intervene with complete impunity on the religious texts destroyed by the Hellenizers and their patrons¹¹⁸. It is probable that to this hyper-nationalist editing may be traced back the most hateful and intolerant biblical passages: the passages of the jealous God and the holy homicidal zeal.

The Hasmoneans were ethnarchs (only with Aristobulus I did they attribute themselves the title of king), subject to the Seleucids, to whom they paid a regular tribute and with whom they skillfully coped and managed, taking advantage of the critical periods of the Hellenistic dynasty. Proof of their subjection lies in the fact that in 132 BC John Hyrcanus (134-104 BC) had to humiliate himself at the feet of Antiochus Sidetes. In this period the

2007, pp. 37-66. I also point out Gabriela Signori, ed., *Dying for the Faith, Killing for the Faith. Old-Testament Faith-Warriors (1 and 2 Maccabees) in Historical Perspective*, Leiden 2012, containing, among other items, another article by Kai Trampedach ("The War of the Hasmoneans", pp. 61-78).

¹¹⁷ Giovanni Garbini draws attention to the strange absence of monumental inscriptions in the hilly area of Palestine. He states that the monuments of the past were destroyed by people who had an interest in preserving from doubt the mythical history proposed by the Bible. The Hasmoneans would be the most credible candidates. We can read the texts that escaped the clean sweep in Graham Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions: Corpus and Concordance*, Cambridge 1991-2004. It is astonishing that the only ancient inscription in which individuals proclaim themselves Israelites was discovered outside Palestine, on the Greek island of Delos. These Israelites from Crete (Knossos and Herakleion) expressly mention their attachment to the temple on Mount Gerizim. They are therefore Samaritans, who nevertheless call themselves Israelites. Let us remember that the name Israel is already present in tablets from Ebla and Ugarit.

¹¹⁸ *In the same way Judas also collected all the books that had been lost on account of the war that had come upon us, and they are in our possession* (2 Macc 2:14). For Joseph Blenkinsopp, former president of the Catholic Bible Association of America, a clear example of editorial intervention of the Hasmonean era can be found in the reorganization of the chronology, designed to coincide the date of the new dedication of the Temple (164 BC) with the year 4000 since the creation of the world, on the basis of the Zoroastrian conception of cosmic cycles (*Creation, Un-creation, Re-creation: A Discursive Commentary on Genesis 1-11*, London-New York 2011, p. 110). Of different opinion, however, is Ronald Hendel ("A Hasmonean Edition of MT Genesis? The Implications of the Editions of the Chronology in Genesis 5", in *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel*, 1.4 - 2012, pp. 448-464). For a general discussion of the Hasmonean redaction of the Tanakh I refer to David M. Carr (*The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction*, Oxford 2011, pp. 153-179), who indicates many cases of functional alteration in the interests of the dynasty, as in passages alluding to the cultic centrality of Jerusalem, in the context of the controversy with the Samaritans.

capital reached 30,000 inhabitants. Only then was Jerusalem¹¹⁹ imposed as the exclusive place and seat of worship¹²⁰, so that the rival Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim was destroyed in 128 or around 111 BC¹²¹. At that time became established the custom to turn to the capital in the act of praying, attested to only in 2 Chr 6:36-39 and therefore late¹²². Pilgrimages (with the payment of more or less spontaneous offerings) were enforced. Then the myth of the chosen people was strengthened, a psychological defense against the specter of insignificance and cultural annihilation, in the words of the Jewish psychoanalyst Avner Falk¹²³. John Hyrcanus forcibly imposed Judaism on the Idumaeans¹²⁴ (the holy violence, a Compelle intrare ante litteram). According to Flavius

¹¹⁹ The name means "city of Shalem". Shalem (the patron Canaanite god) is also found in the name Absalon. Ab Shalem = Shalem (the perfect) is my father.

¹²⁰ The passages of Isaiah that highlight the centrality of Zion/Jerusalem find their more proper Sitz im Leben in the Hasmonean period (Antti Laato, *About Zion I Will Not Be Silent: The Book of Isaiah as an Ideological Unity*, Stockholm 1998; Ingrid Hjelm, *Jerusalem's Rise to Sovereignty: Zion and Gerizim in Competition*, London-New York 2004, pp. 7-9).

¹²¹ See Jonathan Bourgel, "The Destruction of the Samaritan Temple by John Hyrcanus: A Reconsideration", in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 135.3 - 2016, pp. 505-523. The author opts for the second date.

¹²² In the common opinion, Muhammad also remained faithful to tradition, until it was supernaturally revealed to him in Medina (Qur'ān II 141-150) that it was more pleasing to Allah to pray by turning the face to Mecca and the back, consequently, to the holy city, al-Quds. The name 'holy city' for Jerusalem is already in Isa 48:2 - Neh 11:1, 18 - Sir 24:11; 36:11; 49:6 - Matt 4:5; 27:53. In reality, according to Dan Gibson's research (*Qur'ānic Geography: A Survey and Evaluation of the Geographical References in the Qur'ān with Suggested Solutions for Various Problems and Issues*, Surrey, BC, 2011), until 724 AD the mosques were oriented neither towards Jerusalem nor towards Mecca, but, without exception, towards the Nabatean city of Petra, in present-day Jordan.

¹²³ *A Psychoanalytic History of the Jews*, Cranbury-London-Mississauga 1996, p. 11.

¹²⁴ "Antiochus did not combat Judaism, which - as I said before - would be atypical, or even unparalleled in the Hellenistic era. Rather his actions were based on cool, political and rational calculations to ensure peace and obedience in the frontier region. As the consequences of this proposal, we will accept (as has already been done in some older works) the king's anti-Judaic edict as a fictitious literary feature. The depiction of Antiochus' prejudice should not be seen as the result of the unexplained bias of the king, but rather as the result of the ideological and literary needs of the writer. The insertion of this tale, and the blaming of the king for the entire confusion, served as justification for the violence and allowed silence about internal splits and conflicts. Obviously, the creation of a religious cause for the uprising against the legal authorities helped to justify the very act of rebellion. In such a way, the writer justifies the Hasmonean usurper and his heirs" (Łukasz Niesiołowski-Spano, "Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the Jews - A Reassessment", in Ingrid Hjelm and Thomas L. Thompson, eds., *History, Archaeology and the Bible Forty Years After "Historicity": Changing Perspectives 6*, London-New York 2016, pp. 137). "The way in which the first book of Maccabees (1:41+) bases

Josephus¹²⁵, Alexander Jannaeus around 80 BC demolished the city of Pella "because the inhabitants did not want to accept the Jewish customs"¹²⁶. An antecedent that laid the ideological foundations to which might appeal much later, in 524 AD, Dhu Nuwas, the Jewish sovereign of Yemen, the exterminator of 20,000 Christians who refused to convert to Judaism.

An Essene Yahad: Qumran. In the context of political-religious dissent is to be placed the community (Yahad) that, in the common opinion, met in Qumran. It had no more than 200 members and, according to Marcus K. M. Tso¹²⁷, it flourished from 100 BC to 68 AD, with an interruption at the time of Herod. The site, for Lena Cansdale, was only a commercial hub; for Robert Cargill, a Hasmonean fortress occupied, once disused, by the Essene rebels. The discovery of a supposedly Sadducean text and a hymn in honor of a Hasmonean sovereign raises some doubts, but the prevailing reconstruction suggests that this group was a branch of the Essenes, whose hostility towards the Temple of Jerusalem, when the figure of the high priest coincided with that of the sovereign, they would have stressed.

At the dawn of the community there had been a Teacher of Righteousness, probably a high priest dismissed and persecuted by the Hasmoneans¹²⁸. The common view is that he

the story of the [Seleucid] persecution on the order - historically disputable - given by Antiochus IV that all subjects should become one people, even at the cost of renouncing their own customs, recalls the policy of Judaization of John Hyrcanus and his successors, who forced first the Idumaeans and then the Itureans of Galilee to adopt the Jewish law, just at the time when the *Chronicle of the Heroes Maccabees* was composed" (Martin Hengel, *The 'Hellenization' ..., cit.*, p. 31).

¹²⁵ *Jewish Antiquities* XIII 397.

¹²⁶ The massacres perpetrated by this king against his political and religious adversaries, besides denoting the extreme degeneration of intra-Jewish conflicts, dwarf even Herod's archetypal cruelty. As attested to by Flavius Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* XIII 380), he ordered 800 Pharisees to be crucified. To the pain of the long agony was added the torment of the sight of relatives being slaughtered by the executioners. In the same work (XIII 373 and 376) there is news of massacres even more relevant for the number of victims.

¹²⁷ *Ethics in the Qumran Community: An Interdisciplinary Investigation*, Tübingen 2010, p. 5. On Qumran I point out a volume by Devorah Dimant, containing 27 updated and partly rewritten articles published by the author over the last three decades: *History, Ideology and Bible Interpretation in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Tübingen 2014.

¹²⁸ A group of Zadokite priests ousted from the Jerusalem Temple would have founded the Qumran Yahad (Heerak Christian Kim, *Zadokite Propaganda in the Late Second Temple Period: A Turning Point in Jewish History*, Lanham, Md, 2014, p. 2). According to Richard A. Freund (*Digging through the Bible: Modern Archaeology and*

emerged around 150 BC, therefore before the founding of the settlement in Qumran, and was the author of hymns inspired by the Psalms, Jeremiah and Job. Dupont-Sommer put forward the hypothesis that it was the Essenes who inserted the passages relating to the Suffering Servant into the text of Isaiah, transmuting the Teacher of Righteousness into a symbol¹²⁹.

The community, in dissension with the clergy of the Temple¹³⁰ also for the adoption of a new calendar, held itself to be the *rest of Israel*¹³¹, *Israel walking along the path of perfection* (1QS 9 6), the pure and immaculate part of the nation¹³², the only one to have kept faith with the Mosaic covenant and therefore to be able to aspire to salvation. In the imminent war with the children of darkness (the Gentiles or Kittim¹³³ in cahoots with the infidel Jews

the Ancient Bible, Lanham, Md, 2009, p. 287), the title *Teacher of Righteousness* was also attributed to later community leaders.

¹²⁹ André Dupont-Sommer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Preliminary Survey*, New York 1952. By the same author: *The Essene Writings from Qumran*, New York 1962.

¹³⁰ "The sect itself was seen as a sanctuary that replaced the actual physical sanctuary, the Jerusalem Temple... The spatial sanctity of the Temple was transferred to the group" (Lawrence H. Schiffman, "The Dead Sea Scrolls Sect as a Replacement Temple", in David Birnbaum and Benjamin Blech, eds., *Sanctification / Kedushah*, New York 2014, pp. 314, 315). The Qumranites, however, did not renounce the cultic centrality of the 'divine abode'. At the end of the usurpation consummated by the illegitimate clergy - therefore in eschatological perspective - Jerusalem would return to its role as the privileged place of God's presence thanks to a renewed Temple and priesthood. See Florentino García Martínez, "New Jerusalem at Qumran and in the New Testament", in Jacques van Ruiten and J. Cornelis de Vos, eds., *The Land of Israel in Bible, History, and Theology. Studies in Honour of Ed Noort*, Leiden 2009, pp. 277-289. The reference texts are 4Q177 (4QCatena A), 1QM II 1-5, 1QM XII 10-16. This last passage has relevant affinities with the Isaian exaltation of the New Jerusalem (chapters 60-66).

¹³¹ In this respect the Qumranites inherit the ideology of the self-styled *returnees* of the Persian period. See Stephen Hultgren, *From the Damascus Covenant to the Covenant of the Community: Literary, Historical, and Theological Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Leiden 2007, esp. p. 213+.

¹³² Physical purity was of no less moment to them than moral purity. Some extremely strict standards still arouse the bewildered admiration of hygienists today (see Ian Werrett, "A Scroll in One Hand and a Hatchet in the Other: Latrines, Essenes, and the Dead Sea Scrolls", SBL Annual Meeting, Boston, 22-25 November 2008). The considerable distance of the latrines from the city (3000 cubits) and the camp (2000 cubits) can make sense of the ban on going to stool on the Sabbaths (Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War* II 147), when it was not permissible to travel more than 1000 cubits.

¹³³ After the conquest of Jerusalem by Pompey (63 BC) the Romans were perceived as the eschatological enemy whose defeat would inaugurate the Messianic era (Brian Schultz, "Not Greeks but Romans: Changing Expectations for the Eschatological War in the *War Texts* from Qumran", in Mladen Popović, ed., *The Jewish*

and a demonic horde at the command of Belial), the Yahad would have constituted the small army of light trusting in victory, inasmuch as it was led by the archangel Michael¹³⁴. The Qumranites believed they had realized the bidding of Isaiah 40:3 (interpreted out of context¹³⁵, as later by the Baptist) *In the desert prepare the way of the Lord* for the imminent final judgment (1QS 8:13-14). The enemies of the group were given code names: the house of Absalon = the traitors of the Teacher of Righteousness; Ephraim = the Pharisees; Manasseh = the Sadducees. By 'Judah' the Essenes meant themselves¹³⁶. They were for rigid predestination (1Q 7: *Every being will carry out the plan prepared for him by God*), even if in some passage there seems to be room for human responsibility¹³⁷. At Qumran an esoteric doctrine was taught, hidden from the profane. There the revelation was continuous and the doctrine kept evolving. The Essene *Community Rule* prescribes that the new members must swear to hate the children of darkness for eternity¹³⁸ and, on the contrary, to love the children of light. In any case, hatred for enemies should not turn into

Revolt against Rome, Leiden 2011, pp. 107-128). The Psalm of Solomon repeatedly mention (2:1-13; 8:15-21; 17:5-14) the sacrilegious undertaking of the Roman leader, whose death in Egypt is interpreted as divine punishment (2:26-29).

¹³⁴ See Michael E. Fuller, *The Restoration of Israel: Israel's Re-gathering and the Fate of Nations in Early Jewish Literature and Luke-Acts*, Berlin 2006, pp. 133-148; David Flusser, *Judaism of the Second Temple Period*. Vol. I: *Qumran and Apocalypticism*, Grand Rapids 2007, pp. 140-158.

¹³⁵ Isaiah was hinting at the return of the exiles from Babylon. A recent interpretation (cf Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer and Hans M. Barstad, eds., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Chronological and Thematic Development in Isaiah 40-66*, Göttingen 2014) sees in the return from Babylon only a metaphor for the restoration of the true cult of YHWH. This inevitably requires a later date. However, in the opinion of James C. VanderKam ("Sinai revisited", in Matthias Henze, ed., *Biblical Interpretation at Qumran: Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature*, Grand Rapids 2005, p. 48), the *Community Rule* shows that the Qumran Yahad was modeled on Israel in the desert period and, more specifically, on the archetype of Israel camped at the foot of Sinai, identifying the pre-eminent scriptural foundation in chapters 19, 20 and 24 of Exodus.

¹³⁶ In Isaiah 9:21 (*Manasseh devoured Ephraim, and Ephraim Manasseh, and together they were against Judah*) one might see the hand of the final Essene editor.

¹³⁷ The plurality of the theses should come as no surprise: "I am convinced that at Qumran divergent ideas were supported at different times... and even simultaneously" (James H. Charlesworth, "Challenging the *Consensus Communis* Regarding Qumran Messianism", in James H. Charlesworth, Hermann Lichtenberger and Gerbern S. Oegema, eds., *Qumran-Messianism*, Tübingen 1998, pp. 120-121). For a comparison with Zoroastrian texts see Mladen Popović, "Apocalyptic Determinism", in John J. Collins, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, Oxford 2014, pp. 255-270.

¹³⁸ "Eternal hatred for the men of destruction" (1QS 9:21-2).

offense or violence (*I will not return evil to anyone*¹³⁹) until the end of time and the decisive clash, when sectarians would move from meekness to the inexorability of revenge¹⁴⁰.

The Qumranites were sure they were already participants in the heavenly liturgy¹⁴¹. The songs of the sabbatical sacrifice describe the divine throne (the Merkabah). The one of the seventh Sabbath, with its intentional and emphatic repetitions, was to generate ecstasy and vision¹⁴².

Essenism and Christianity are very similar in their vital structures. Philo and Flavius Josephus do not speak of Christians, but only of Essenes. In turn, the Christian sacred texts never mention the Essenes, but only the Nazarenes, a branch of them¹⁴³. Also Jesus and Paul are expressly called Nazarenes. Both Essenes and Christians believed in the traditional God of Second Temple Judaism, in the establishment of a New Covenant¹⁴⁴ and in the coming of a Savior Messiah; both called themselves "children of light", "the Poor"¹⁴⁵ and "the Way"¹⁴⁶; both awaited the end of time with the cosmic battle between good and evil; both preferred the same books of Scripture (Deuteronomy, Isaiah and the Psalms) and

¹³⁹ David Flusser, *Judaism...*, *cit.*, p. 198.

¹⁴⁰ See Alex P. Jassen, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and Violence: Sectarian Formation and Eschatological Imagination", in Ra'anan S. Boustan, Alex P. Jassen and J. Calvin Roetzel, eds., *Violence, Scripture, and Textual Practice in Early Judaism and Christianity*, Leiden 2010, pp. 13-44.

¹⁴¹ "In the case of Qumran the worship in the earthly Temple of Jerusalem was considered invalid and therefore the heavenly liturgy in fact replaced it" (John J. Collins, *Apocalypse...*, *cit.*, p. 168.

¹⁴² Adela Yarbro Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism*, Leiden 2000, p. 14.

¹⁴³ "The Nazarenes and the Osseans were two ancient offshoots of the Essenes. The Nazarenes, living in the north, on Mount Carmel, encouraged celibacy, the Osseans encouraged marriage" (Dianne Bergant, *Israel's Story*, Part Two, Collegeville 2007, p. 94). For the relationship between Essenes, Osseans and Nazarenes in Epiphanius see Gerard P. Luttikhuisen, *The Revelation of Elchasai: Investigations into the Evidence for a Mesopotamian Jewish Apocalypse of the Second Century and its Reception by Judeo-Christian Propagandists*, Tübingen 1985, p. 114+.

¹⁴⁴ Both groups believed that the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31 had been fulfilled in them: *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*

¹⁴⁵ This original name of the Christians did not turn into a mere scholarly curio in don Tonino Bello.

¹⁴⁶ For the "Way" see Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Grand Rapids 1998, p. 316.

attached particular importance to Isaiah 40:3; both followed charismatic leaders¹⁴⁷, shared property, despised the corrupt priests of the Temple, devalued the sacrifices offered there, emphasized the purifying power of water, condemned divorce, held in high regard celibacy, believed in a divine power called the Holy Spirit and in his guidance for the creative interpretation of the Scriptures¹⁴⁸.

Unlike the Essenes, Christians were open, inclusive; they spurned nationalism, preached love even for their enemies, disregarded the strict rules of ritual purity, frequented sinners and Gentiles, were dedicated to missionary work.

In conclusion, "the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament are the product of two similar Jewish reform movements, two different expressions of the multiform reality that was Palestinian Judaism"¹⁴⁹.

¹⁴⁷ For the similarities between the Teacher of Righteousness and Jesus, I refer to Per Bilde, *The Originality of Jesus: A Critical Discussion and a Comparative Attempt*, Göttingen 2013, p. 187+.

¹⁴⁸ As for the Holy Spirit I point out Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, "Historical Origins of the Early Christian Concept of the Holy Spirit: Perspectives from the Dead Sea Scrolls", in Jörg Frey and John R. Levison, eds., *The Holy Spirit, Inspiration, and the Cultures of Antiquity: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, Berlin 2014, pp. 167-240.

¹⁴⁹ Florentino García Martínez, "Qumran Between the Old and the New Testament", in Florentino García Martínez, ed., *Echoes from the Caves: Qumran and the New Testament*, Leiden 2009, pp. 1, 5.

National Identity

E. Theodore Mullen argues¹⁵⁰ that Pentateuch and Deuteronomistic History aimed at the creation of an idealized past, indispensable for the formation and preservation of national identity. They addressed an audience of conflicting groups with the intention of amalgamating them. A thesis taken up by Franz Volker Greifenhagen, who in his essay *Ethnicity In, With, or Under the Pentateuch*¹⁵¹ notes that much of the Tanakh, including the Pentateuch, serves to establish a particular ethnic identity based on a mythology of common origin and affinity. Identity is more important for marginal peoples subject to the domination and influence of imperial states.

From this point of view, it is essential to establish who is the other from whom to distinguish oneself. For the Jewish Bible "other" is certainly the Canaanite people, but even more so the Egyptian people, mentioned in the Pentateuch 376 times against 96 of the first. By dint of insisting on the opposition with the Egyptians, the Bible raises the suspicion that among the Jews more than one was not convinced¹⁵². The reason for the rebellion in the desert (Exod 16, 17 - Num 11, 14, 16, 20) recognizes Egypt as a seductive land. Such a thought is condemned as revolting against the benefits received from God. Understandably, in the Persian period anti-Egyptian propaganda aimed at disparaging the former rulers and encouraging loyalty to the new masters and benefactors. Ezekiel 20:7-8 goes so far as to trace the idolatry of Israel back to its stay in Egypt. The learned Alexandrian biblical authors maintained an anti-Egyptian attitude, for that was the only

¹⁵⁰ *Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations: A New Approach to the Formation of the Pentateuch*, Atlanta 1997, pp. 88, 126.

¹⁵¹ Appeared in the *Journal of Religion and Society*, 3 - 2001, pp. 1-17. More recently: David Goodblatt, *Elements of Ancient Jewish Nationalism*, Cambridge 2006; Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, London 2009; Erich S. Gruen, *The Construct of Identity in Hellenistic Judaism: Essays on Early Jewish Literature and History*, Berlin 2016. Not included in the Tanakh, Esther is the handbook of Jewish nationalism and military triumphalism, flowing from the awareness of Israel's indestructibility. See Jo Carruthers, *Esther through the Centuries*, Malden, Ma, 2008, esp. pp. 41-43.

¹⁵² "The other is often almost indistinguishable from the us, but some traits are deformed by the us in order to create an abyss between them... The us feels constantly at risk of being seduced by the other... The description of the other is often unreal, distorted, monstrous, mythical" (Lawrence M. Wills, *Not God's People: Insiders and Outsiders in the Biblical World*, Lanham, Md, 2008, p. 13).

way to buttress a Jewish identity. Even the Alexandrian Philo, when Egypt, firmly under Rome's rule, was no longer a danger, kept on seeing the other in the Egyptians: "Philo describes the Egyptians in the most negative terms. His exasperated and incessant criticism plays a key role in his construction of Jewish identity. The Egyptians emerge as the extreme 'other' whose perversions implicitly define the positive characters of the Jews"¹⁵³.

The sense of belonging to a given community and the consequent differentiation from others is the result of a choice individuating the ethnic markers, by nature subjective and arbitrary, depending on particular socio-political situations. On the authority of the revolutionary thesis of the anthropologist Thomas Fredrik Weybye Barth¹⁵⁴, first comes the choice of identity, then culture; not the other way around. Ernest Geller draws this conclusion: "Two men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation", that is, only if they share the same *self-ascription*¹⁵⁵. In short, the keystone is not cultural difference, but *ascription*, the way people identify themselves and are identified by outsiders. Confines are a social construction and therefore do not coincide with cultural distinctive features. Group consciousness, the self-aware sharing of a peculiar common heritage, is a social construction. The common belonging is then highlighted by external symbols that act as boundary stones and reinforced by gatherings and pilgrimages.

The theory of *self-ascription* (i.e., the arbitrary creation of ethnic markers) is ideal for understanding the formation of Judaism. A small, piddling people, so kindred to Canaanites, Moabites and Ammonites, so far from God and so close to rival imperial powers, an earthen pot set amidst iron bowls, in any geopolitical situation swaying between the devil and the deep blue sea, could only survive by recognizing itself as different, because of its uniqueness, from the neighboring peoples in which in the unfolding of events he saw a threat. In this light, history might only be deemed by biblical authors as an instrument of propaganda and exercise of creative ingenuity.

¹⁵³ Maren Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture*, Tübingen 2001, pp. 45-46. Artapanus, on the other hand, while exalting the Jewish cultural primacy, did not spill vitriol against the Egyptians (p. 74).

¹⁵⁴ *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*, Oslo 1969.

¹⁵⁵ *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca 1983, pp. 6, 7.

Jewish identity was, in the Hellenistic period, above all the product of the political-cultural conflict with the Greeks¹⁵⁶, a conflict in which the Jews were involved alongside other peoples. Even centuries later, the Persians continued to nickname the Macedonian conqueror 'gojastak' (cursed), since, in addition to ousting them from power, he was guilty of a perhaps even more serious offence, the destruction of their sacred texts in the fire of the palace of Persepolis. In this regard, scholars are divided. Some (such as A. T. Olmstead, E. E. Herzfeld, H. S. Nyberg) deny that copies of the *Avesta* ('Foundation' or 'Law') existed at the time and that they could therefore have been burned. Others (K. F. Geldner, A. V. W. Jackson, W. B. Henning) argue the opposite. However, even in the case of the non-existence of written texts, the killing of sundry priestly authorities (the repositories of the oral religious tradition) was of equal gravity in the eyes of the Persians. Moreover, given the indissoluble link between the Achaemenid dynasty and the local religion, a Macedonian king from a distant Greek province could not be accepted without resistance. Echoes of the rebellion resound in an oracle that cannot have been written *ex eventu*, since its predictions did not come true, and therefore must be prior to 323 BC: "The wicked Alexander, the impious, will perish because of his false religion and leave the world, defeated and lost"¹⁵⁷. The political eschatology is widely documented in the ideology of resistance to Greece and, later, to Rome. The best known examples are, for Egypt, the *Demotic Chronicle* and the *Oracle of the Potter*, and, for Persia, the *Oracle of Istaspe* and the *Bahman Yasht*.

Quarrels and frictions between Jews and Greeks did not begin at home but in Alexandria, where a very large Jewish colony flourished. The history of the Jews of Alexandria dates back to the founding of the city by Alexander the Great in 332 BC, at which they were present¹⁵⁸. Under the successors of the Macedonian sovereign they formed a significant portion of the population, so much so that by the first Ptolemies they were assigned, in the eastern sector, a neighborhood, so as not to be prevented in the observance of their religious customs by continuous contact with the pagans. Anyhow, in Roman times synagogues were available in each district.

Alexandria's Jews, some very rich, were traders, money lenders, craftsmen. The community had regular relations with the motherland. With regard to Greek culture, the

¹⁵⁶ Anthea E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism*, Grand Rapids 2011.

¹⁵⁷ *Handbuch der Orientalistik. Der Nahe und der Mittlere Osten*, Leiden 1991, p. 384.

¹⁵⁸ Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion* II 4; *Jewish Antiquities* XIX 281.

Jews suffered from a serious inferiority complex that might make the weaker ones give in to the temptation to integrate into that world. In order to prevent this ominous eventuality, the intransigent had to invent a tradition, a series of identity myths that even entailed their own cultural supremacy. The religion of the Kittim (the Greeks), adversaries of their Persian friends and former patrons, was felt to be different and even offensive. For the nationalists, YHWH was the only one, a god who did not abide rivals, let alone superiors. The stiffening of religion, or rather its Taliban transmogrification, was a consequence of the cultural and political confrontation with the dominating Kittim.

From the standpoint of the Greeks, the Jews with their customs, primarily circumcision, seemed grotesquely outlandish. The refusal to attend the gymnasiums, showing themselves in the bare scud, and the strict dietary and ritual purity rules estranged them from the human consortium, hindering their integration into the civilization of the new rulers. The tendency of Jews to treat the Gentiles as ritually impure and to forbid marriages with them was considered a crime against mankind. In 133 BC the Seleucid sovereign Antiochus Sidetes was advised by his collaborators to destroy Jerusalem and annihilate the Jewish people, the only one in the world to refuse integration. Agatharchides of Knidus in II century BC ridiculed the practices of the Jews and the "absurdity of their Law", with an ironic reference to the occupation of Jerusalem in 320 by Ptolemy I Soter, propitiated by the fact that on that day the inhabitants, intent as they were to observe the Sabbath, did not defend themselves. On the basis of the anti-Jewish writings of Manetho it seems that anti-Semitism, born in Egypt, was spread by the Greeks who, under the Ptolemies, resumed the long-standing Egyptian prejudices.

In composing the Bible the Alexandrian Jewish scholars wanted to convey the view that their people overtopped any other nation for civilization and knowledge. Later Jewish writers extolled the culture of their homeland, proposing it as the oldest in the world¹⁵⁹. According to the Jewish historian Eupolemus, son of John and friend of Judas Maccabee, ambassador to Rome in 161 with Jason (1 Macc 7:17 – 2 Macc 4:11), Moses was the first legislator and the first sage of antiquity. He taught the alphabet to the Jews, who transmitted it to the Phoenicians and the Greeks. The same historian did not doubt that the foundation of Babylon was due to Abraham¹⁶⁰. The Jewish philosopher Aristobulus of

¹⁵⁹ See Erich S. Gruen, *The Construct...*, *cit.*, passim.

¹⁶⁰ The idea that Abraham was also progenitor of the Spartans emerges in the letter that, according to 1 Macc 12:20-21, the Spartan king Areus/Arius I (300-265) sent to the Hebrew high priest Onias I: *King Arius of the Spartans, to the high priest Onias, greetings. It has been found in writing concerning the Spartans and the Jews that they are brothers and are of the family of Abraham.* The same concept recurs in 2 Macc 5:9 about the exile (168

Alexandria and the historian of Jewish origin Artapanus supported the derivation of Greek culture from Moses, a thesis condensed later by Numenius of Apamea (II century AD) in the famous slogan: "Plato is none other than Moses translated into Greek". Furthermore, Artapanus in a book *On the Jews* claimed that in Musaeus, a legendary seer, wise man and poet, taken by the Greeks for the master of Orpheus¹⁶¹, we should see Moses himself, described as the promoter of the cult of the gods in the guise of an animal¹⁶² and forerunner of Egyptian culture in areas such as military technology, philosophy, navigation, agricultural hydraulics and construction¹⁶³. Another writer, named Cleodemus Malchus (a Jew, as stated by Emil Schürer¹⁶⁴), averred that three sons of Abraham and Keturah had joined Hercules in his expedition against the Libyan giant Antaeus and that the mythical Greek hero had ended up marrying the daughter of one of them. The contestations of Aristobulus and Artapanus were taken up and divulged by Philo especially in *De opificio mundi* and by Flavius Josephus in *Against Apion* and *Jewish Antiquities*¹⁶⁵, so it is no wonder that they were uncritically accepted, championed and heralded by Christian authors such as Justin Martyr, Tatian, Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius.

God-Inspired Flag-Waving

The holy zeal. *When Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he got up and left the congregation. Taking a spear in his hand, he went after the Israelite man into the tent, and pierced the two of them, the Israelite and the Midianite woman, through the belly. So the plague*

BC) of the high priest Jason: *There he who had driven many from their own country into exile died in exile, having embarked to go to the Lacedaemonians in hope of finding protection because of their kinship.*

¹⁶¹ On the authority of the tradition opted for by Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, 4.25.1-2, Musaeus was Orpheus' son.

¹⁶² Embarrassing primacy, attributable to the nationalistic obsession that animates 'competitive historiography'.

¹⁶³ See John J. Collins, "Artapanus", in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. II, Peabody, Ma, 2011, pp. 889-903. According to Collins, the writings of Artapanus should be placed between 250 and 100 BC, with a greater probability for the end of the III century (p. 891).

¹⁶⁴ *The Literature of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus*, New York 1971, pp. 209-210.

¹⁶⁵ In *Jewish Antiquities* I 166-168 Abraham is described as a Chaldean scientist who would teach the Egyptians (and through them the Greeks) mathematics and astronomy.

*was stopped among the people of Israel (Num 25:7-8). Phinehas becomes a model of religious zeal that passes into violence. He is the progenitor of the Zealots¹⁶⁶. Following his example, Mattathias, the father of the Maccabees brothers, does not hesitate to suppress a Hellenizing Jew in the act of sacrificing to an idol: *When he had finished speaking these words, a Jew came forward in the sight of all to offer sacrifice on the altar in Modein, according to the king's command. When Mattathias saw it, he burned with zeal and his heart was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and killed him on the altar. At the same time he killed the king's officer who was forcing them to sacrifice, and he tore down the altar. Thus he burned with zeal for the law, just as Phinehas did against Zimri son of Salu (1Macc 2:23-26)*. In the presence of this perfect parallelism, the question arises: was it Mattathias who inspired Phinehas or did the Hasmoneans forge Phinehas' gesture to justify Mattathias's behavior?¹⁶⁷.*

An exemplary text. *When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you - the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you - and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who*

¹⁶⁶ See Martin Hengel, *The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until 70 A. D.*, Edinburgh 1989. In the United States, members of the Phinehas Priesthood have spread violence. See Danny W. Davis, *The Phinehas Priesthood: Violent Vanguard of the Christian Identity Movement*, Santa Barbara 2010.

¹⁶⁷ In this latter case, not without a practical outcome: "As for Phinehas (Num 25:11-13), so too for the Hasmoneans, zealotry entitled them to the high priesthood" (Daniel R. Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, Berlin 2008, p. 13, n. 30) - "Referring to Phinehas as their 'father', the Hasmoneans implicitly entered the line of the pre-Hasmonean high priests who boasted the 'descendance' from Aaron through Phinehas" (Vasile Babota, *The Institution of the Hasmonean High Priesthood*, Leiden 2013, p. 291).

love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and who repays in their own person those who reject him. He does not delay but repays in their own person those who reject him. Therefore, observe diligently the commandment - the statutes and the ordinances - that I am commanding you today (Deut 7: 1-11). This passage is the psychoanalyst's delight. God serves as a justification for limitless aggressiveness unleashed by the inferiority complex. The claimed chosenness¹⁶⁸ engenders xenophobia.

No mercy. God orders the extermination of all enemies to the last, along with the whole of their cattle. *Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey' (1 Sam 15:2-3). Saul's soldiers spare the best sheep and oxen, not to appropriate them, but to offer them in Gilgal as a sacrifice to the reluctant Lord. So the prophet Samuel tells Saul about the repudiation: I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel (1 Sam 15:26). Immediately thereupon (15:33) the inexorable man of God, in front of the sanctuary of Gilgal, does away with Agag, king of the Amalekites, whom Saul had taken prisoner and pardoned.*

So they killed him [King Og], his sons, and all his people, until there was no survivor left; and they took possession of his land (Num 21:35).

This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples everywhere under heaven; when they hear report of you, they will tremble and be in anguish because of you (Deut 2:25).

The Lord our God gave him [king Sihon of Heshbon] over to us; and we struck him down, along with his offspring and all his people. At that time we captured all his towns, and in each town we utterly destroyed men, women, and children. We left not a single survivor (Deut 2:33, 34).

All of its spoil you shall gather into its public square; then burn the town and all its spoil with fire, as a whole burnt offering to the Lord your God. It shall remain a perpetual ruin, never to be rebuilt. Do not let anything devoted to destruction stick to your hand, so that the Lord may turn from his fierce anger and show you compassion, and in his compassion multiply you, as he swore to your ancestors, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God by keeping all his commandments that I

¹⁶⁸ Deut 14:2: *For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; it is you the Lord has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. Amos 3:2: You only have I known of all the families of the earth. Zech 2:8, 12: Truly, one who touches you touches the apple of my eye. The Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem.*

am commanding you today, doing what is right in the sight of the Lord your God (Deut 13:16-18)¹⁶⁹.

So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded (Josh 10:40).

On that day I will make the clans of Judah like a blazing pot on a pile of wood, like a flaming torch among sheaves; and they shall devour to the right and to the left all the surrounding peoples... And on that day I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem (Zech 12:6, 9).

O daughter Babylon, you devastator! What you have done to us! Happy shall they be who pay you back. Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock! (Psalm 137:8-9)¹⁷⁰.

¹⁶⁹ Note the startling correspondence with 1 Macc 5:28, 35: *Then Judas and his army quickly turned back by the wilderness road to Bozrah; and he took the town, and killed every male by the edge of the sword; then he seized all its spoils and burned it with fire... Next he turned aside to Maapha, and fought against it and took it; and he killed every male in it, plundered it, and burned it with fire.* The suspicion arises that the aforementioned brutal commandment of Deuteronomy and the passages, strewn in copious biblical texts and formulaically repetitive, which attest to its punctual fulfillment, have been artfully inserted to justify the cruelties of the "warrior of God" and, generically, of the Hasmoneans. "Were the Israelites to become a holy nation through the crucible of a holy war conducted under the aegis of a 'kingdom of priests' (Exod 19:5)? Are the warring priests of the wilderness and conquest none other than a retrojection of the Hasmonean priest-kings? The late authoring of the wandering and conquest narrative is betrayed by the Priestly obsession with holy wars of annihilation" (Michael Nathanson, *Between Myth and Mandate...*, cit., p. 212). Similarly, Israel Finkelstein ("The Expansion of Judah in 2 Chronicles: Territorial Legitimation for the Hasmoneans?", in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 127.4 - 2015, pp. 669-695) puts forward the hypothesis that the description of the territorial increase of the kingdom of Judah present in 2 Chronicles, without any correspondence in the Books of Kings, is nothing more than an addition devised with the intention of offering a plausible legitimacy to the expansionist policy of the Hasmoneans. It should be noticed that the Jewish freethinker Hiwi al-Balkhi (IX century AD) held the biblical concept of the divine as primitive and in fact unworthy of God himself.

¹⁷⁰ Psalm 137 is to be placed in a period of inflamed nationalism, most likely under the Hasmoneans. Ivan Engnell considers it the last of the psalms by date of composition. Cf Armin Lange et al., *Mythos in Alten Testament und in seiner Umwelt. Festschrift für Hans-Peter Müller zum 65. Geburtstag*, Berlin 1999, p. 167. To save the salvageable, someone hazards supercreative interpretations: "In spite of the horrors of her destruction, it was indeed a happy day when Jerusalem was destroyed, because it was that event that provoked repentance. Just so, it will be a happy day when the children of Babylon are 'dashed' into union with the Rock of Salvation" (James B. Jordan, "The Problem of Psalm 137", in *Biblical Horizons*, 3, April 1989).

Conversions propitiated by terror. Esther (Hasmonean era) 9:6, 15: *In the citadel of Susa the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred people. The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they killed three hundred persons in Susa. 9:16: Now the other Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and gained relief from their enemies, and killed seventy-five thousand of those who hated them. An anticipated epilogue (8:17): Many of the peoples of the country professed to be Jews, because the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them.*

Dreams of glory. Megalomaniac fantasies triggered by frustration and supported by an alleged divine promise, a product of a psychological defense mechanism. Monotheism as privatization of God, jealous worship of a manipulated God.

Today the Lord has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep his commandments; for him to set you high above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honor; and for you to be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised (Deut 26:18, 19).

I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children. I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine (Isa 49:25, 26)¹⁷¹.

Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you; for in my wrath I struck you down, but in my favor I have had mercy on you. Your gates shall always be open; day and night they shall not be shut, so that nations shall bring you their wealth, with their kings led in procession. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish; those nations shall be utterly laid waste (Isa 60:10-12). I trampled down peoples in my anger, I crushed them in my wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth (Isa 63:6). Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following the one in the center, eating the flesh of pigs, vermin, and rodents, shall come to an end together, says the Lord (Isa 66:17)¹⁷². And the last verse, the

¹⁷¹ In Mesopotamia for several millennia it was thought that the gods manifested themselves in history, especially in battles. Assurbanipal: "Not with my strength, but with that of the god and goddess I have subdued the people". Bertil Albrektson in *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and Israel*, Lund 1967, demonstrated the spread, in the Near East, of the concept that it is the gods who direct history, going so far as to punish their own protégés, if they are unfaithful. This is the message of the Mesha stele: the Moabites were humiliated by Israel, since the god Chemosh was angry with them. Cf Psalm 80:5.

¹⁷² Classic example of cultural prejudice ennobled into alleged divine revelation, coupled with a threat no less thundering than futile. I point out Max D. Price's upcoming book, *Evolution of a Taboo: Pigs and People in the Ancient Near East*, Oxford University Press.

worthy end of the book: *And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh* (Isa 66:24).

In the days of those kings [the Greek rulers of Syria and Egypt] the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever (Dan 2:44). *As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed* (Dan 7:13, 14). *As for these four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the earth. But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever - forever and ever* (Dan 7:17, 18). *The kingship and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them*¹⁷³ (Dan 7:27). Hegemonic aspirations to compensate for political worthlessness.

May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. May his foes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust. May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service (Psalm 72: 8, 9, 11). Pious wishes on the occasion of the new king's accession to the throne.

And the nations will take them and bring them to their place, and the house of Israel will possess the nations as male and female slaves in the Lord's land; they will take captive those who were their captors, and rule over those who oppressed them (Isa 14:2). *The descendants of those who oppressed you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet* (Isa 60:14). Don't hold your breath!

I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (Psalm 2:7-9).

¹⁷³ Exodus (23:31) held within narrower limits: *I will set your borders from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates.*

*Awesome is God in his sanctuary, the God of Israel; he gives power and strength to his people (Psalm 68:35). God subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet (Psalm 47:3)*¹⁷⁴. The optative of the human heart transformed into the *tempus finitum*, the certain, blissful “is” (Feuerbach).

Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord, the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph! Your enemies shall come fawning to you, and you shall tread on their backs (Deut 33:29).

Joel. *Let the nations rouse themselves, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the neighboring nations. Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great (3:12-13).* The judgement will consist of the final confrontation with a foregone conclusion: *Egypt shall become a desolation and Edom a desolate wilderness, because of the violence done to the people of Judah, in whose land they have shed innocent blood. But Judah shall be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem to all generations (3:19, 20)*¹⁷⁵.

Haggai. *For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts (2:6, 7).* *Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders; and the horses and their riders shall fall, every one by the sword of a comrade. On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, son of Shealtiel, says the Lord, and make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts (2:21-23).* The prophecy hinted at an immediate future, but Zerubbabel has not been heard of since¹⁷⁶.

¹⁷⁴ Other translators shift to the present or the future the in itself timeless divine action: *Mirabilis et vere angelica loquela*, Hebrew! For the multiple translation possibilities I refer to Samuel Edward Tesh and Walter Zorn, *Psalms*, Vol. I, Joplin, Mo, 1999, p. 342; John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, Nashville, Tn, 2013, p. 772.

¹⁷⁵ As stated in Jubilees 8:19 (II century BC), *Mount Zion is the navel of the earth*. Ezekiel 5:5: *Thus says the Lord God: This is Jerusalem; I have set her in the center of the nations, with countries all around her*. A naive ubiquitous ethnocentrism.

¹⁷⁶ Diana Vikander Edelman suggests the possibility of Zerubbabel's identification with Nehemiah ("Were Zerubbabel and Nehemiah the Same Person?", in Duncan Burns and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Far From Minimal: Celebrating the Work and Influence of Philip R. Davies*, London-New York 2012, pp. 112-131).

Micah. *And among the nations the remnant of Jacob, surrounded by many peoples, shall be like a lion among the animals of the forest, like a young lion among the flocks of sheep, which, when it goes through, treads down and tears in pieces, with no one to deliver. Your hand shall be lifted up over your adversaries, and all your enemies shall be cut off (5:8-9).*

Nahum. *Thus says the Lord, "Though they [your enemies] are at full strength and many, they will be cut off and pass away (1:12)¹⁷⁷.*

Separating these prophecies from their context and interpreting them in an allegorical and spiritual sense was harmless, indeed ultimately also helpful. But if they were taken for what they actually were, calls for holy war¹⁷⁸ addressed to Israel, the armed wing of God¹⁷⁹, they could lead to fanaticism and disaster, as occurred in the three anti-Roman uprisings¹⁸⁰, stirred up and enkindled by such predictions¹⁸¹, a product of the nationalist

¹⁷⁷ For other prophecies cut from the same cloth see Zeph 2 - Zech 14: 5, 7, 12 - Amos 9:12 - Obad 15-16.

¹⁷⁸ "Holy war is a common theme in the Hebrew Bible. Divinely legitimized through the authority of biblical scripture and its interpretation, holy war became a historical reality for the Jews of antiquity. Among at least some of the Jewish groups of the late Second Temple period until the middle of the second century, C. E., holy war was an operative institution. That is, Jews engaged in what is defined here as holy war" (Reuven Firestone, *Holy War in Judaism: The Fall and Rise of a Controversial Idea*, Oxford 2012, p. 3). Jonathan Sacks, emeritus Chief Rabbi of Britain, in his book *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, London 2015, launches an appeal for rejection of religiously motivated violence.

¹⁷⁹ The concept is clearly expressed in Psalm 149, dating back to the Hasmonean period: *Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their couches. Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, to bind their kings with fetters and their nobles with chains of iron, to execute on them the judgment decreed. This is glory for all his faithful ones. Praise the Lord! (vv. 5-9).* Harm van Grol notes: "The universal peace envisaged by the book [of the Psalms] is characterized by particularism. It is a *Pax Judaica*. The mother of all wars will not end with a universal agreement, but with the subjugation of pagan nations... In Psalm 149 Israel has taken the place of the Anointed One [of Psalm 2]" ("War and Peace in the Psalms: Some Compositional Explorations", in Jan Liesen and Pancratius Beentjes, eds., *Visions of Peace and Tales of War*, Berlin 2010, p. 178). The prophet Zechariah transposes the military role of Israel into plastic images: *For I have bent Judah as my bow; I have made Ephraim its arrow. I will arouse your sons, o Zion, against your sons, o Greece, and wield you like a warrior's sword. The Lord of hosts will protect them, and they shall devour and tread down the slingers; they shall drink their blood like wine, and be full like a bowl, drenched like the corners of the altar (9:13, 15).* An echo of Num 23:24: *Look, a people rising up like a lioness, and rousing itself like a lion! It does not lie down until it has eaten the prey and drunk the blood of the slain.*

¹⁸⁰ The first one (66-70) ended with the destruction of the Temple, the second (115-117, known as the Kitos revolt after the name of the Roman general, Lusius Quietus, who tamed it) mainly involved the Jewish diaspora, the third (132-136) was led by Bar Kokhba.

resentment of a people looked on as trivial and footling in the international arena and, as such, trampled upon with blatant impunity.

Emboldened by the wishful thinking of the prophets, the Jews dreamed they would turn into overlords. Philo in *De praemiis et poenis* 95 warrants: "A man [the Messiah] will rise up who will fight and make war, subjugating great and populous nations, on the grounds that God will give the saints [the Jews] the suitable help". 2 Baruch 39:1-40:3 ventures to foretell that the last Roman emperor will be cast into chains at Zion to be judged and executed by the Jewish Messiah¹⁸².

¹⁸¹ Thus Flavius Josephus in reference to the first revolt: "But what more than anything else incited them to go to war was an ambiguous oracle also found in their holy scriptures, which revealed that at that time someone from their country would become ruler of the world. They took this to mean someone of their own race" (*The Jewish War* VI 312 - trans. Martin Hammond, Oxford 2017, p. 330). On the relationship between Dead Sea Scrolls and the First Jewish War investigates a research project elaborated and directed by Mladen Popović: *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Jewish War against Rome (66-70): New Sources, New Perspectives*.

¹⁸² 2 Baruch is placed around 100 AD, in a period following the destruction of the Temple. However, in the opinion of Géza Vermes ("The Oxford Forum for Qumran Research: Seminar on the Rule of the War from Cave 4 (4Q285)", in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 43 - 1992, p. 89), an anticipation of the concept might be seen in 4Q285, dating back to the middle of I century BC, where the battle between the 'offshoot of David' and the 'king of the Romans' is described.

THE CHRISTIAN PROPOSAL

The Creative Interpretation of the Sacred Texts That Is New Wine from Old Wineskins

Biblical interpretation in Qumran. With respect to prophecies and, in general, to Scripture, the attitude of the Qumranites may be summed up as follows: it is not enough to elucidate what the sacred author seems to say (which, putting it in the appropriate context, everyone can understand). One must discover what God wanted to allude to, and this is work only for other prophets! The sacred text is read as if it were an enigma. Whoever solves it is more a prophet than the prophet himself, who evidently wrote things of which he did not grasp the deepest drift. The Qumranites were convinced that there was a divine revelation going on amidst them in matters of faith and ethical norms. Hence the obligation for each member of the community to share with other followers the gist of personal revelation: *Every matter hidden from Israel [the Yahad, the true Israel] but which has been found out by the Interpreter, he should not keep hidden from them for fear of a spirit of desertion* (1QS 8:11-12).

The Qumranites held themselves as heirs to the established prophetic tradition (which they sometimes rewrote), believing they were receiving messages from God now that the world was entering the end of time. The *Damascus Document* (prior to Qumran or placed at the beginning of that community) fixed it in a year of the I century BC. When the date passed without wreaking havoc, then 1QpHab 7:7-14 interpreted Habakkuk 2:3 for this purpose (*For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay*)¹⁸³.

The Qumranic exegetical technique was not without precedent. For instance, Isa 9:14 (*So the Lord cut off from Israel head and tail; palm branch and reed in one day*) is interpreted allegorically by the following verse (*elders and dignitaries are the head, and prophets who teach lies are the tail*), which sounds as a gloss. In addition, the contemptuous judgment of Sirach on the Samaritans (*Two nations my soul detests, and the third is not even a people: Those who*

¹⁸³ See Marcus K. M. Tso, *Ethics...*, *cit.*, p. 149.

live in Seir, and the Philistines, and the foolish people that live in Shechem, 50:25, 26) sounds as an actualizing comment of Deut 32:21c-d (*So I will make them jealous with what is no people, provoke them with a foolish nation*), a comment borrowed by the Testament of Levi (in Greek) and 4Q371-372.

The Essenes used artifices galore to propose their new ideas, always giving the impression to remain anchored in Scripture as mere interpreters of it. In addition to commentaries, the texts of the Bible were rewritten¹⁸⁴ or paraphrased or subjected to further editing in order to bring new theories in. "The dependence upon biblical compositions on the process of creating new works is a product of the author's desire to impute authority to his work; by associating the composition with the holiest of texts, the new work is also granted the same stamp of authority. The author's worldview and his interpretation of biblical passages are not presented as revolutionary ideas, created *ex nihilo* by the writer. The inclusion of this material within the framework of the biblical passages under interpretation transforms the ideas of the later writer into authoritative and accepted beliefs... The rewritten texts ask the readers to accept the authority of their sources, but to understand those sources according to the rewritten text's interpretation"¹⁸⁵.

The sacred page was not considered something intangible. On the contrary, one can speak of a veritable school of manipulation that resorted to the most ingenious gimmicks to show a surface veneration of Scripture just in the act of overturning it. For example, 11QPsa 27:11 looks on David as the author of all the Psalms because of the 'spirit of prophecy' given to him by God. And this bang as the psalter was still being formed and new psalms were being added¹⁸⁶. The same scroll credits David with the authorship of no less than 4050 psalms, a number so big and uncontrollable as to allow without difficulty the surreptitious insertion of late additions¹⁸⁷. And in fact, in some texts, non-canonical

¹⁸⁴ The expression 'rewritten Bible' is anachronistic, since at that time a biblical canon did not exist (Eva Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination..., cit.*, p. 8). Even the concept of 'book' is to be understood only metaphorically (*ibid.*, p. 10).

¹⁸⁵ Michael Segal, "Between Bible and Rewritten Bible" in Matthias Henze, ed., *Biblical Interpretation in Qumran*, Grand Rapids 2005, pp. 11-12. See also Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts*, London, 1960.

¹⁸⁶ David Flusser, *Judaism..., cit.*, p. 281. Gerald H. Wilson ("A First Century C.E. Date for the Closing of the Hebrew Psalter?", in *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 28.2 - 2000, pp. 102-110) cautiously suggests that the psalter has reached its final form only after the first Jewish revolt. On this subject I point out the volume of David Willgren, *Like a Garden of Flowers: A Study of the Formation of the 'Book' of Psalms*, Lund 2016.

¹⁸⁷ Similarly, 1 Kings 4:32 attributes to Solomon the composition of 3000 proverbs and 1005 songs.

psalms are attributed to David¹⁸⁸. The authority of David was not enough. In the opinion of A. Dupont-Sommer the Psalms of Solomon would in reality be of Essene origin, but carefully attributed - not however by the various authors, but by a final editor - to the wisest of kings in order to confer sacredness on them¹⁸⁹.

The rewriting was not an invention of the Essenes. Inside the Tanakh the Chronicles rewrite the books of Samuel and the Kings. The book of Jeremiah was also rewritten. "The active intervention of scribes in biblical texts was accepted in this period and was not viewed as an affront to the sanctity of the text. The text was of secondary importance to the composition itself, and thus scribes allowed themselves the freedom to 'improve' these works"¹⁹⁰. The consequence is that the text of the Scriptures was presented in a plurality of forms until a few decades ago difficult to imagine¹⁹¹. To be rigorous, it would indeed be anachronistic to speak of the Bible, given that the number of sacred texts was not sharply determined and an 'authorized' version was yet to come¹⁹². The book of Esther has survived in three different drafts¹⁹³.

Apart from interpretation and rewriting, the doctrinal novelties peeped out as variations. In this sense the texts in use at Qumran and the LXX translation are sometimes an innovation. 4QFor 1:10-12 (*I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to me. This is the*

¹⁸⁸ Howard N. Wallace, "King and Community", in Bob Ecking and Eric Peels, eds., *Psalms and Prayers*, Leiden 2007, p. 268, n. 2.

¹⁸⁹ See Robert B. Wright, *Psalms of Solomon: A Critical Edition of the Greek Text*, New York-London 2007, pp. 1-11.

¹⁹⁰ Michael Segal, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁹¹ Molly M. Zahn, *Rethinking Rewritten Scripture: Composition and Exegesis in the 4QReworked Pentateuch Manuscripts*, Leiden 2011, p. 1.

¹⁹² "At Qumran we do find biblical books, many biblical books - scrolls, strictly speaking - and in many different forms, be it in clearly different textual forms or in different editions, or rewritten in the form of new compositions, and all of them used indiscriminately" (Florentino García Martínez, "Rethinking the Bible - Sixty Years of Dead Sea Scrolls Research and Beyond", in Mladen Popovic, ed., *Authoritative Scriptures in Ancient Judaism*, Leiden 2010, p. 21). Therefore, the concept of "book of the Bible" is a pure abstraction (Ronald Hendel, "What is a Biblical Book?", in Cana Werman, ed., *From Author to Copyist: Essays on the Composition, Redaction, and Transmission of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of Zepi Talshir*, Winona Lake 2015, p. 296).

¹⁹³ The scribes often wedged their revisions in the form of an introduction to a book or to a block of chapters. See Sara J. Milstein, *Tracking the Master Scribe: Revision through Introduction in Biblical and Mesopotamian Literature*, Oxford 2016.

offshoot of David who will come forth with the law-abiding men and sit on the throne of Zion at the end of days) gives a messianic interpretation of 2 Sam 7:11-14, not accepted by the rabbis, because the parallel text of the Hebrew Bible is different¹⁹⁴. The LXX text of Psalm 110:3 (*ek nyktós pro heōsphórou egénnēsá se* - before the morning star I have begotten you) is seen by Christians as an attestation of the messianic king in the form of an angelic spirit waiting to appear and become incarnated, while the related Hebrew text has a downright different meaning.

The *Pesher Habakkuk* allows us to better understand the nature of this particular exegesis¹⁹⁵. The term and concept of Pesher [commentary] derives from the explication of dreams, which flourished in Babylon and Egypt. Daniel 9 (not for nothing Daniel is portrayed as an oneiromancer) provides an allegorical interpretation, with the help of the archangel Gabriel (Dan 9:21), of Jeremiah's prophecy (25:11) concerning the 70 years, meant as 70 weeks of years (a terminology taken from Leviticus 25), which is applied to the II century BC (the last week would have begun in 170 with the murder of Onias III). On the contrary, Zechariah and Chronicles believed the prophecy to have been fulfilled already in VI century.

The Pesher in question links the prophecy of Habakkuk to the Kittim (the Romans, in this case), although the prophet has made it clear that he is predicting the imminent destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Chaldeans (the Babylonians). The commentary does not dwell upon expounding what the prophet historically and philologically intended. He had certainly recorded a sub rosa message communicated to him by God, but its meaning remained sealed until God confided the correct interpretation to someone else, in this case the Essene Teacher of Righteousness. The concept is explicit in the *Pesher Habakkuk*: *God told Habakkuk to write down that which would happen to the final generation, but he did not make known to him when time would come to an end... Interpreted, this concerns the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God made known all the mysteries of the words of his servants the prophets* (1QpHab 7:1-5). The Teacher of Righteousness knows, first and foremost, that the time is now ripe. Therefore, if the prophecies of Habakkuk were actually an instruction

¹⁹⁴ The underlined part is different in the Jewish Bible.

¹⁹⁵ Paleographic examination has prompted some to ascribe the Pesher to the Herodian period, but traces of two *Vorlagen* or earlier versions were found in it. Cf Stephen Llewelyn, Stephanie Ng, Gareth Wearne and Alexandra Wrathall, "A Case for Two Vorlagen Behind the Habakkuk Commentary (1QpHab)", in Shani Tzoref and Ian Young, eds., *Keter Shem Tov. Collected Essays on the Dead Sea Scrolls in Memory of Alan Crown*, Piscataway 2013, pp. 123-150.

for the end of time, then they had to be interpreted within that precise historical context. At this point, "Chaldeans" might only be a code word for "Kittim".

The actualizing interpretation is not always unambiguous. A classic example of hermeneutical polyvalence may be traced in the *Pesher Nahum*, where, in two successive verses (2:11 - 2:12), the term 'lion' is understood as hinting first at 'Demetrius, king of Yavan' (probably the Seleucid sovereign Demetrius III Eucuerus), then at Alexander Jannaeus¹⁹⁶.

Individual verses are atomized, that is, extrapolated and removed from their obvious meaning, to take on a flat out different connotation. For example, verses 1:12 and 1:13 of Habakkuk refer to the Babylonians and God, but the commentator devises a way to interpret them, bravely coercing the text, as alluding to his community of elect or Yahad¹⁹⁷. In another passage we see not only the choice, between two variants, of the one more appropriate to the intentions of the commentator, but also the use of allegorical interpretation. Habakkuk 2:17 reads: *For the violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you; the destruction of the animals will terrify you*. The commentator links the text to the Evil Priest, the persecutor of the Teacher of Righteousness. In this allegorical interpretation Lebanon stands for Essene community and animals for the simple men of Judah, the observers of the Law (1QpHab 2:2-5). A further example of an interpretation out of context: Habakkuk 1:13b (*Why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?*) is connected with an unspecified 'house of Absalon' that did not lift a finger to save the Teacher of Righteousness. In some cases even anagrams are employed¹⁹⁸.

"From a modern critical point of view, this exegetical method involves the manipulation of the prophetic text to meet the needs of the community. As Silberman has put it, the text provides pegs on which the commentator hangs his message, although he uses much

¹⁹⁶ Markus Bockmuehl, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of Biblical Commentary", in Ruth A. Clements and Daniel R. Schwartz, eds., *Text, Thought, and Practice in Qumran and Early Christianity: Proceedings of the Ninth International Symposium of the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature*, Leiden 2004, p. 19.

¹⁹⁷ On the basis of this criterion, if we read in a 'ndranghetistic key the well-known verse of Leopardi "Canti, e così trapassi" (*Il passero solitario*, v. 15), it would be easy to descry in it a cryptic allusion to the fate incumbent on collaborators of justice who tipped the police off. Cantare = to sing, but also to tip off.

¹⁹⁸ From *hykl* (temple) of Habakkuk 2:20 *yklh* (will destroy) is drawn. See George J. Brooke, "Prophetic Interpretation in the *Pesharim*", in Matthias Henze, ed., *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism*, Grand Rapids, 2012, p. 250.

ingenuity to justify the connections... What is manipulation to us was to them the revelation of the mysteries hidden in the text"¹⁹⁹.

From the *Pesher Habakkuk* it overtly emerges that in Qumran the Teacher of Righteousness was not only a spiritual leader, but also a figure of soteriological importance. The acceptance of his teachings and the adherence to the path he had indicated guaranteed eternal salvation. In fact, the famous expression of Habakkuk (later adopted by Paul) *The righteous live by their faith* (2:4b) is thus reinterpreted, or, if you like, twisted: *The interpretation of the verse concerns all law-abiding people in the house of Judah, those whom God will save from the house of judgment, because of their labors and their faith in [or fidelity to] the Master of Justice* (1QpHab 8:1-3). However, the passage from fidelity to God to fidelity to the Teacher of Righteousness does not represent a case of Pindaric flight. There is a logic, inasmuch as the Teacher of Righteousness was considered the guide that would infallibly lead Israel's chosen ones to God. Therefore, if the Teacher of Righteousness is faithful to God, he who is faithful to the Teacher of Righteousness will be faithful to God.

Christian biblical interpretation. The risen Jesus, first to the two disciples of Emmaus, then also to the rest, in two passages with marked parallelism (Luke 24:25-27; 24:44-46), spells out how the Scriptures concerning him should be interpreted, and remembers to have already done so in life, but the disciples did not come to understand. Therefore, the function of Jesus is practically akin to that of the Teacher of Righteousness: to find the code of interpretation and decrypt texts that appear turned in other directions²⁰⁰.

In Acts 3:24 Peter speaks as per the guidelines of the *Pesher Habakkuk*, applying to the last times the prophecies: *All the prophets who spoke after Samuel have announced what has happened in these days. And all the prophets, as many as have spoken, from Samuel and those after him, also predicted these days.*

A little further on we come across a practical application of this principle, where the first two verses of Psalm 2 are quoted: *Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and his*

¹⁹⁹ John J. Collins, "Prophecies and Fulfillment in the Qumran Scrolls", in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, September 1987, p. 276.

²⁰⁰ The canons of Christian biblical interpretation - modeled on the Essene one - are clearly expressed in the Gospel: *And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old"* (Matt 13:52). Cf Wayne G. Rollins, *The Gospels: Portraits of Christ*, Eugene 2013², pp. 57-60.

anointed. The explanation given in Acts 4:27 is in perfect Qumranic style: *For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed*. Here the historical references are thoroughly explicit and not expressed in code. The fact is, however, that the context of the psalm does not point to the future Messiah, but to the "anointed", consecrated king, to whom God, further on, in verses 8-9 promises: *Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel*. A warmonger and imperialist text that might find its most appropriate Sitz im Leben in the environment of the Hasmonean kings²⁰¹.

Take Acts 1:20-22: *For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it'; and 'Let another take his position of overseer'. So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us - one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection*.

The first quotation, hinting at the suicide of Judas, in Peter's mouth gives the impression of being an inexorable command of God against a traitor (in the singular). On the contrary, in the biblical text it concludes a triplet of curses that a pious Israelite hurls against enemies (in the plural) who unjustly persecute him. The second verse is quoted by Peter as if it were an invitation from God to replace an unworthy and traitorous disciple (Judas) with a worthy and faithful one (who will be, by drawing lots, Matthias). In the context of the psalm things are really different. That verse is part of a long series of curses (vv. 6-19) that *wicked and deceitful mouths* (v. 2) throw against the righteous who invoke YHWH: *They may curse, but you bless* (v. 28).

Evidently the Old Testament was seen as a repository of sacred sentences from which the most suitable one was drawn with great ease, even modifying it when necessary, without any regard for the original intention of the author²⁰². To quote Scripture in this way was

²⁰¹ See David J. A. Clines, "Psalm 2 and the Moabite Liberation Front", in M. Daniel Carroll R., David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, eds., *The Bible in Human Society. Essays in Honor of John Rogerson*, Sheffield 1995, p. 168, n. 33.

²⁰² Similarly, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics aspires to understand the text from what it tells us in our present situation, beyond the author's intentions. Meaning is a conquest of the interpreter (Daniella Iannotta, ed., *Paul Ricoeur in dialogo. Etica, giustizia, convinzione*, Torino 2008, p. 42). Thus, by relegating to a preliminary role the biblical exegesis based on the critical-historical method (David E. Klemm, "Philosophy and Kerygma", in David M. Kaplan, ed., *Reading Ricoeur*, Albany, NY, 2008, p. 49), the final interpretation is entrusted to the reader's indisputable creative flair.

seen as an utterly lawful, indeed crackerjack, art, as well as an effective expedient to break through minds and hearts²⁰³. It was enough that the chosen clause, already charged with sacredness, well suited the new situation, even if it was, as in this passage of the Acts, a curse a far cry from evangelical spirit.

In preaching to the Jews, the apostles thought it appropriate to show that the new doctrine was not so innovative, since it was already prefigured in the Scriptures of yore²⁰⁴. The Essene priests, wont to imaginative interpretation, were converted in numbers (Acts 6:7)²⁰⁵. Specularly Justin Martyr sought consonances with the pagans: "What we say of Jesus, your myths say of the sons of Zeus". On the other hand, Paul in his speech at the Areopagus of Athens had taken his cue from the altar dedicated to the unknown god and from the quotations of the Greek poets Epimenides and Aratus, not from the stories of Moses. When you want to convince someone, the most obvious tactic is to emphasize the already existing points of contact.

If we consider his Childhood Gospel, Matthew proposes such a series of quotations that some people are convinced that precisely from those biblical texts he created his fairy tale.

²⁰³ The author of the Letter to the Hebrews, fully aware that, in order to grasp the authentic message of Scripture, it is necessary to overleap its literal meaning, does not hesitate to apply to Jesus Old Testament passages that concern man in general (Psalm 8), the distressed believer (Psalms 22 and 40), a royal bridegroom (Psalm 45), and the enthronement of a monarch (Psalm 110, the text of the Hebrew Bible most frequently quoted in the New Testament, always in the light of a creative interpretation). Ronald R. Cox frankly admits: "I know of no Old Testament teacher willing to approve our adoption of the New Testament approach to the Psalms with its sovereign disregard for the form, setting and literary structure of the Psalter... From the strong similarities that emerge from the comparison of exegesis, concerning the Psalms, of the New Testament and that of the Qumran manuscripts, it appears that the New Testament is a product of its time and its prophetic approach to the Psalms is not divinely endorsed" ("The New Testament Preaches the Psalms: Problems and Possibilities", in Dave Bland and David Fleer, eds., *Performing the Psalms*, Danvers 2005, pp. 88, 89). On this theme and on the "human" and "incarnate" dimension of the Old Testament see Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids 2015². One significant quote: "A completely inculturated Bible, as well as a completely inculturated Jesus: this is precisely what God has given to his Church" (p. X).

²⁰⁴ Let us keep in mind that "the authors of the New Testament refer to the Septuagint and not to the Hebrew Bible" (Niels Peter Lemche, *The Old Testament...*, cit., p. 273). For the Greek version of the LXX I point out James K. Aitken, ed., *T & T Clark Companion to the Septuagint*, London-New York 2015.

²⁰⁵ In particular, the Letter to the Hebrews reveals a significant congruency with Qumranic exegesis and conceptions. See Charles B. Puskas, *Hebrews, the General Letters and Revelation: An Introduction*, Eugene, 2016, pp. 23-25.

In reality the opposite is true. In order to give the facts he narrates a halo of sacredness, he cannot help but insert them into the Scriptures and see in them the fulfillment of prophecies²⁰⁶. Here lies his biased slant and not in the invention of facts that, as we'll see, have nothing so special. In order to create the myth of accomplished oracles, he might only cite a biblical prediction or foreshadowing²⁰⁷. That it is an ideological maneuver may be seen from the way prophecies are forced into the Procrustean bed of facts.

a) The genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:1-17) is pure ideology. There is nothing historical in it, since it responds to a purely theological demand: three series of 14 generations that lead not only to David, but even to Abraham. The fact is that Joseph thought himself to be a descendant of David. It was, however, necessary to prove it, what Matthew does (in keeping with the loose criteria of the time) by forging a series of ancestors, mostly taken from the historical books of the Bible. It was believed that the Messiah was to be born from the lineage of David. And so, in the hope of generating him, the Jewish world was swarming with genealogies²⁰⁸ starting from David, a thing, indeed, not difficult, due to the fact that there was statistically a very high probability for each Jew to have had him as a progenitor, if the faithful accepted as true - and it is indisputable that they regarded it as certain as a gun - the news reported in 1 Kings 11:3 according to which Solomon alone, one of the many sons of David, would have had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Bearing in mind the high birth rate, on the basis of a simple calculation after a thousand years the throng of David's heirs would have far exceeded the number of all the Jews put together, including those of the diaspora²⁰⁹.

Moreover, in descendants of Solomon (and consequently of David) one would also come across in Ethiopia, whose kings, with their legitimate or natural great-grandchildren,

²⁰⁶ A perfectly successful operation, if Blaise Pascal could say: "The prophecies are the most solid proof of Jesus Christ" (*Pensées*, ed. Brunschvicg 706). Precisely because it comes from a fervent believer, this apodictic judgment represents, in the light of biblical criticism, the most solid proof that faith in Jesus does not need such props.

²⁰⁷ Altogether, Matthew presents 59 Old Testament quotations (Mark 31, Luke 26, John 16).

²⁰⁸ 1 Tim 1:4 and Titus 3:9 deprecate the Jewish custom to draw up unlikely genealogies.

²⁰⁹ Mathematician Robert B. Waltz calculated that already in 215 BC the entire population of Judea should have been of Davidic origin (*The Bible in History: A Chronological and Biological Guide to the Hebrew and Greek Testaments*, ebook 2013, p. 107).

claimed the honor of flowing from David's line²¹⁰. 'Son of David' Joseph was called by the angel. Whether actual or self-proclaimed, it was something else entirely. What matters is to understand that for him it was not absurd that the Messiah was born into his family and in this sense he was led to interpret the extraordinary pregnancy of Mary. As a descendant of David, Jesus should automatically be a descendant of Abraham too, but this logical inference does not satisfy Matthew, who bothers to draw the line from David to Abraham, to highlight the idea that the Messiah Jesus rightfully belongs to the people of Israel²¹¹.

b) *Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel (1:23)*. This prophecy is taken from Isaiah 7:14, which in the Hebrew text means the birth not from a virgin, but only from a young woman²¹². In the LXX version the Greek word *parthénos* (meaning both virgin and young woman) already before Matthew had given rise to the erroneous interpretation, which cannot be justified by the ambiguity of the Greek word, because the context excludes a physical miraculous event. Among the Essenes,

²¹⁰ The Ethiopian tradition that fables about a son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is devoid of any historical or biblical basis. See Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, Nashville, Tn, 1995 pp. 162, 163; Alessandro Bausi, "La leggenda della Regina di Saba nella tradizione etiopica", in Fabio Battiato, Dorota Hartman and Joseph Stabile, eds., *La Regina di Saba. Un mito fra Oriente e Occidente*, Napoli 2016, pp. 91-162.

²¹¹ "The main function of Matthew's genealogy is to link Jesus with the founding Jewish myth of the common ancestry, dating back to that glorious ancestor who was Abraham. For most of the Jews of I century this ancestry must have been a physical reality, not a myth" (Philip F. Esler, "Rival Group Identities in the Matthean Gospel: Evidence from Matthew 1-2 and 23", in J. Gordon McConville and Lloyd K. Pietersen, eds., *Conception, Reception, and the Spirit. Essays in Honour of Andrew T. Lincoln*, Cambridge, 2016, p. 26).

²¹² In the young woman of Isa 7:14 David Ould sees Sion (cf. Isa 37:22 *She despises you, she scorns you, virgin daughter Zion; she tosses her head behind your back, daughter Jerusalem.*), while the son, called Immanuel ('God with us'), would be none other than 'the rest of Israel', the small community gathering around the prophet (*See, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion, 8:18 - the name Shear Jashub ['a rest will return'] of a son of Isaiah is enlightening*). Although it initially meant the Yahwist missionaries of the Persian period, the group of elect (in contrast to the descendants of Jacob, from whom God hid his face, 8:17) must ultimately be identified, in my opinion, with the Essene Yahad, the final editor of the prophetic text (see below). Note that the Immanuel of 8:8 indicates a collective, not an individual (see Timothy D. Finlay, *The Birth Report Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, Tübingen 2005, p. 172 - The author reasons that Immanuel is also a son of Isaiah with a symbolic name, pp. 178, 179). In 66:7 Sion generates in a portentous way, but on a spiritual level: *Before she was in labor she gave birth; before her pain came upon her she delivered a son*. For Sebastian R. Smolarz (*Covenant and the Metaphor of Divine Marriage in Biblical Thought: A Study with Special Reference to the Book of Revelation*, Eugene 2011, p. 298) both 7:14 and 66:7 allude to the birth or appearance of a faithful remnant.

instead, circulated the idea, of Zoroastrian origin, that the Savior should be born of a virgin²¹³. Supported by this conviction, some Essene girls made vows of virginity.

c) *And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel* (2:6). Also in this case the quotation is out of context, for Micah 5:2 is talking about the leader of the so-called *returnees* and not about the future Messiah. It's not Matthew's fault. That was then the current interpretation, so much so that he attributes it to Herod's learned counselors.

d) *Out of Egypt I have called my son* (2:15). Here it is Matthew who forces the connection. Hosea 11:1 with 'son' means the people of Israel, but Matthew wants to imply an innovation: the new Israel is Jesus. By adducing the Old Testament, he twists its meaning throughout.

e) *A voice was heard in Ramah* (Matt 2:18 - Jer 31:15). Matthew, following an ancient gloss, intends Ramah as Bethlehem. In any case, Jeremiah imagines that Rachel is weeping not for her murdered children, but for her distant descendants led into exile. Here too we are out of context, as well as out of place.

f) *He will be called a Nazorean* (2:23) The Old Testament ignores Nazareth and its inhabitants. Matthew perhaps plays with the similarity between Nazareth and the Hebrew word *nezer* in Isa 11:1 *A bud will be born from the root of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots*. By *branch* he meant the Messiah. Some say, with Julius Africanus, that the name Nazareth comes from *nezer*, but the question is open. This too is a *sui generis* prophecy, a simple juxtaposition of names, a play on words, to convince readers not to slight Nazareth,

²¹³ The expectation of a Savior was widespread in antiquity. According to James H. Breasted, *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, New York 1912, p. 212, the *Admonitions of Ipuwer* anticipated Jewish messianism by a millennium and a half: some wise Egyptians adhered to a vision of social justice and idealism and awaited a sovereign who would bring about the renewal of mankind. The *Prophecy of Neferti*, composed in the first centuries of the second millennium BC, foretells the advent of a saving king. The probable character of prophecy *ex eventu* did certainly not prevent it from raising messianic hopes over the centuries. An Ephesus inscription of 49/48 BC (*Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum* 2957) depicts Caesar as "a visibly appeared god and a universal savior [Sōtēr] of human life". With Augustus' birthday (23 September) in Asia Minor the year began. "His birth was for the world the beginning of the Evangelion [the happy announcement of the renewal]": thus the inscription of Priene (9 BC – in Friedrich Wilhelm Karl Dittenberger, ed., *Orientalis Graecae Inscriptiones Selectae*, 2 vols., Leipzig 1903-5, no. 458) in which the emperor is also given the title Sōtēr.

a negligible village (John 1:46: *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*²¹⁴), since its name already betrayed a link with the Messiah.

Matthew might have simply confessed: I have faith in Jesus, in him I recognize the Messiah. For the Jews it was not enough, you had to produce historical and scriptural proofs²¹⁵. To obtain them, the evangelist does not hang back from tapping lavishly into the available creative resources²¹⁶.

In the eyes of his contemporaries, these daring exegesis seemed mind-blowing²¹⁷. In reality, it was the only way in which a new doctrine could come forward, both in account of the narrow cultural horizon and the death threats addressed to the false prophets who taught new doctrines (see below). That is why the Qumranites expressed themselves in code, so that they could be understood only by the initiates²¹⁸. The risk of not dying a natural death was not only theoretical in an unquestionably blinkered and intolerant

²¹⁴ In Acts 24:5 the term *nazōraíos* indicates the follower of Jesus, the Christian.

²¹⁵ In order to show that the prophecies have been fulfilled in Jesus, Matthew comes to understand the sacred text in a literal sense, even where the use of the expedient of parallelism is evident to us. For the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, while Mark speaks only of a colt (11:2-7), Matthew makes Jesus ride a donkey and her colt (21:2-7), out of a mistaken fidelity to the prophetic text of Zechariah: *Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey* (9:9). As for the price of Judas' treachery, while Mark (14:10-11) and Luke (22:3-5) speak generically of "money", Matthew (26:15) specifies that it was agreed upon for thirty silver coins (shekels), only to show the coincidence with a prophecy freely taken from Zech 11:12-13 and Jer 18:2-3, 19:1-2, 32:6-15: *Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price"* (Matthew 27:9). See Keith Fullerton Nickle, *The Synoptic Gospels: An Introduction*, Louisville, Ky, 2001, p. 110.

²¹⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders (*The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, Wilmington, Del, 1999², p. 102+) speaks, in this regard, of theological or spiritual imagination, a peculiar form of constructive imagination, which consists in our inherent capacity to build our world. See on the topic J. Gordon McConville, "Figures in Isaiah 7:14", in J. Gordon McConville and Lloyd K. Pietersen, eds., *Conception, Reception, and the Spirit*, *cit.*, pp. 15-18.

²¹⁷ Cf Robert J. Miller, *Helping Jesus Fulfill Prophecy*, Eugene, 2016. The author of this work with a telling title proceeds to a meticulous analysis of the rich patrimony of 'creative' exegetical devices, which, although used by Christian authors, cannot be traced back to their inventiveness: "The Christians of the first century intended the fulfillment of prophecies within a properly Jewish paradigm. What is important to note here is that little or nothing strictly Christian can be found in the New Testament's use of scriptural prophecies - except that they are considered fulfilled in Jesus" (p. 105).

²¹⁸ See Matthew A. Collins, *The Use of Sobriquets in the Qumran Dead Sea Scrolls*, London-New York 2009.

society. Religious dissent and social protest itself could not, therefore, be uttered in the open, but only in a veiled and camouflaged manner, always under the broad mantle of tradition. Consequently, the Scriptures had to offer a supporting evidence for the most different doctrines, a task which, thank the stars, they performed in a startlingly sterling way. On the other hand, the preachers of the new verb possessed a flabbergasting ingenuity in bending the letter of the sacred texts to their own requirements²¹⁹.

Sometimes, sadly, prophecies were double-edged and could be pulled where one chose. When in Acts 3:22 Peter quotes Moses saying *The Lord your God will raise up for you from your own people a prophet like me. You must listen to whatever he tells you* and applies the prophecy to Jesus, he refers to Deuteronomy (18:15), which in verse 18 continues: *I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command*. Perfect, in point. Too bad immediately thereafter the sacred text specifies at v. 20: *But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak - that prophet shall die*. In controversy with Peter, the Jews might have readily quoted this verse to justify Jesus' crucifixion. I think it's high time to cut short these two thousand year old preposterous wrangles.

A further example of creative Old Testament exegesis concerns the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. Jews mostly believe that he represents Israel itself as a collective, on the basis of 49: 3: [The Lord] *said to me: "You are my servant, Israel."* A few verses later (6) we read: *I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth*. Luke in the Canticum of Simeon (2:32) relates this promise to Jesus, calling him light to enlighten the pagan nations. In Acts 13:46-48 Luke again introduces Paul and Barnabas who, up against the protests of the Jews in Antioch in Pisidia, intend to apply to themselves what they interpret no longer as a promise (as in the biblical text), but as an order to dedicate their mission to the Gentiles, abandoning to their fate the wayward Jews, who must have wondered how Paul and Barnabas could have the effrontery to apply the words of Isaiah to themselves.

The explanation is simple. In Christian circles that one was judged a messianic prophecy, and therefore bearing upon Jesus. Every apostle, indeed every Christian, is an *alter*

²¹⁹ Commenting on John 5:39-40 and 2 Cor 3:12-16, Lidija Novakovic concludes: "Only he who already confesses Jesus as the Messiah is capable of a true understanding of the Scriptures, because only he recognizes that the Scriptures speak of Christ. Adequate understanding is only possible from the perspective of faith" (*Raised from the Dead According to Scripture: The Role of Israel's Scripture in the Early Christian Interpretations of Jesus' Resurrection*, London-New York 2012, p. 217). If faith turns into a discriminating criterion, we might as well ban any hermeneutical discussion with those who do not believe.

Christus: he identifies with him, feels elevated to his dignity, involved in his own mission. What seems to the Jews an ungodly interpretation of Isaiah proclaims, on the contrary, in Christianity the exaltation of the believer to the level of the Messiah himself. Once again, the original intent of Isaiah (or rather of the self-styled Isaiah) to the Christian exegete did not matter so much: that text was only the peg on which to hang a new concept. Once again, new wine was being tapped from old wineskins. Paul was so convinced that he had been invested with the mission of bringing the Gospel "to the whole world" that he planned an apostolic journey to Spain (Rom 15:23), then thought to be at the far ends of the earth, as in its extreme southeast the ancients set one of the pillars of Hercules (Calpe).

Little in keeping with what has now been said, in the same Letter (10:18), to the question: *But I ask, have they [the Jews] not heard [the messengers of the Gospel]?* Paul had just replied with a quote from Psalm 19:5: *Indeed they have; for "their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world"*. This is a perfect example of creative interpretation, as the messengers of the psalm are the heavens, not the apostles²²⁰.

²²⁰ For other examples of Pauline creative interpretation see Fredrick Carlson Holmgren, *The Old Testament and the Significance of Jesus: Embracing Change - Maintaining Christian Identity*, Grand Rapids 1999, pp. 30-37. In 1 Cor 10:4 ([Our fathers in the wilderness] *drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ*) the prefiguration is found not in the Tanakh, but in an orally transmitted legend.

The Jesus of the Wise Faith

Faith created the Gospels, and they are meant to convey faith²²¹. The evangelists did not want to describe an objective past; they had access to the past only as part of the present and subsumed within it. Each Gospel is different because it is born of the way in which the experience of Jesus was lived in a Christian community and inserted inextricably into the fabric of the present.

There is no way to ascertain the *pure* history of Jesus. History is never a recording of events, but a reconstruction. In Gadamer's view, there is no objective past. Consequently, any historical reconstruction of Jesus presupposes subjective elements and cultural conditioning. Each one reconstructs him in his own image. The only Jesus we can find in the Gospels is either the Jesus who generated faith or the Jesus who was generated by faith, anyhow the real Jesus who is alive and acts in us through the Spirit, after having been on earth: the Jesus of religious experience. In the words of Alun Munslow²²², there is no point in looking for the bare facts, since the truth transcends the event, being precisely the meaning of the event. It is the historian's task to create meaning through the narrative supported by a theory, for the disjointed facts are meaningless and the sense is shaped by the narrative into which the facts are poured. The proof is offered by the devotees of the historical Jesus, each of whom in the end presents his own Jesus, different from the others. The reconstructed historical Jesus is also an interpretation.

The Gospels and the other writings of the New Testament can give us but the Christ of faith. Each painting bears the signature of its author and reflects his way of seeing. Even if we had the tapes of Jesus' sermons, it would be useless, owing to the fact that the apostles might appeal to secret doctrines, revealed only to them, far from the crowd. The formation

²²¹ I just point out Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*, New York 1996; Sandra M. Schneiders, *The revelatory Text...*, cit.; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Grand Rapids 2008; James D. G. Dunn, *New Testament Theology: An Introduction*, Nashville, Tn, 2009; Dale C. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History*, Grand Rapids 2010; Michael F. Bird, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus*, Grand Rapids 2014.

²²² Among his works: *Deconstructing History*, London-New York 2006²; *Narrative and History*, Basingstoke 2007; *The Future of History*, Basingstoke 2010; ed., *Authoring the Past: Writing and Rethinking History*, London-New York 2013.

of a conviction with regard to a person with whom one is in contact does not only take place through recordable speeches, but also through the sharing of informal moments, sibylline hints, allusions, jokes, gestures, aspects that require of necessity, no less than speeches, an interpretation. "How could one personally follow Jesus of Nazareth, or any other spiritual master or sage, and relate his teaching in a cold, detached, matter-of-fact style?... In the case of Jesus, we would expect to see his teaching interpreted from the beginning in the light of his followers' attempts to understand and unveil perceived eternal significances latent or implicit in even the simplest of their master's statements"²²³.

Whatever the source on a historical character, the presentation it offers is inevitably conditioned by a strong subjective charge. With any character, whether contemporary or distant in time, each of us measures himself critically, takes a position for or against, considers it a cue to clarify himself and further develop his own vision of the world. Also in this case the unquestionable but often disregarded truth summed up in the scholastic adage *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur* [Whatever is received, is received in accordance with the characteristics of the receiver]²²⁴ is valid. Just to get it clear: those who go in search of objective historical truth are, in my opinion, not unlike the ones who firmly believe that water has its own natural form and do not surrender to the evidence that it adapts instead to the shape of the container. Hayden White concludes from this that every historical work is largely literature²²⁵. Others have called historiography a guesswork. Perfect objectivity and balance do not exist in history. We arbitrarily cut out what serves our purpose, because history is a magic mirror: instead of seeing things, we see ourselves. The idea we have of the past is the engine of our actions²²⁶.

Add to this that history in antiquity was mostly didactic and moralistic, aiming at educating future generations rather than faithfully reconstructing the past. This conception is revived by Paul: *For whatever was written in former days was written for our*

²²³ Samuel Zinner, *The Gospel of Thomas: In the Light of Early Jewish, Christian and Islamic Esoteric Trajectories*, London 2011, p. 44.

²²⁴ Reminiscence of my philosophy studies at Alma Mater Gregoriana.

²²⁵ "Afterword", in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, Berkeley, Ca, 1999, pp. 315-324.

²²⁶ In *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*, Chicago-London 1999, p. 209, Bruce Lincoln acknowledges that the so-called 'scientific reconstructions' of the past are nothing more than myths with the tinsel of footnotes. Of course, my own reconstruction does not escape the rule.

instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Rom 15:4).

It would be very wretched our faith's destiny, if it had to wait for the consent of the well-read people about Jesus, a consent that there will never be for at least two reasons: a) new documents and attestations may come out again in the future and then the most logical choice would be an *epochē* [suspension of judgement] lasting practically until the end of time, since historical research can never be finished. b) waiting for the scholars - quarrelsome by nature - to come to an agreement means putting off everything to the doomsday. In any case, with these endlessly prolonged waits, there is no room left for faith.

The historical Jesus is but a pipe dream and in any case his - entirely hypothetical - perfect knowledge would not close the game once and for all, given that one might have very different results: one might still rate him - by choice - an apocalyptic prophet, a charismatic leader, a cynical philosopher, a social agitator, a charlatan, a magician, an exalted man, an alleged Messiah, a self-styled God incarnate, a bore, a megalomaniac, a hypocrite, a demoniac, an enemy of life, a gleeful frequenter of prostitutes and publicans, a failed zealot, a creep of the Romans and much more. In reality, like and more than any other man, Jesus possessed a personality consisting of many facets and it is up to the historian to establish their individual relevance within his synthesis, which accordingly can only be unique and unrepeatable.

Oral tradition. In oral tradition, the same story is narrated in various ways, with different emphases and different details, while teachings are reformulated. The differences in the proclamation of the Christian message were an integral part of it. The oral tradition about Jesus was multiple and fluid. It, alongside the faith of the disciples, had begun when Jesus was still alive. There is no original of this oral tradition: from the very beginning there were multiple offshoots, as each disciple perceived the Master in his own way and thus transmitted him. Notice that oral repetition always entails novelties deriving from the experience of the narrator. Moreover, each one reconstructs the past in step with the model of the hoped-for future. In the Churches the discourse was calibrated on the expectations and problems of the audience.

Jesus often preached and later presented again the themes of his mission privately to his disciples. They not only listened to, but also preached, taking up and repeating (certainly not literally) Jesus' message. After Easter, with the descent of the Holy Spirit, they fully understood its meaning, which until then had remained partly enigmatic, and this new

interpretation, linked to the story of Christ's life, passion, death and resurrection, was the content of their sermons within the Christian communities that were being formed²²⁷.

At the beginning the transmission was only oral, but soon the need was felt to prepare vade mecum for the new preachers (often itinerant) and for the new followers who had not known Jesus. It is generally accepted that the first written texts were collections of logia [sayings] of Jesus, but it is not excluded that there were also written stories (always in Aramaic) about miracles and Passion, themes that were certainly not left out within the communities.

Today the importance of oral tradition has been put in the foreground after the studies of James D. G. Dunn²²⁸. Most scholars agree that it is the very foundation of the Gospels. Each evangelist was in contact with the oral tradition extant in his community, without thereby excluding an at least partial knowledge of the traditions of other groups of believers. So it is not necessarily the case that a subsequent evangelist should have before him the written text of Mark. It was enough that he knew the peculiar traditions that flowed into it. The contamination of traditions was made possible precisely by itinerant preachers.

If you take into account the high rate of illiteracy, more than a people of the book, the Jews were a people of reciting and memorization. The Gospels themselves were recited in church and learned by heart. This was the common way of teaching. There is, however, one phenomenon to note to which only recently due attention has been paid. It was possible, and perhaps even common, that preachers attributed personal reflections and

²²⁷ "The salient features of the founding Christian experience furnish a remarkably complete archetypal inventory: 1) an originating faith in the pending arrival of a supernatural deliverer; 2) expectations of a cosmic cataclysm that will yield a new heaven and a new earth; 3) belief in a compensatory and vengeful reversal of existing social hierarchies and injustices; 4) an upsurge and release of anticipatory joy and ecstasies that are collectively expressed in ritual gatherings to expedite the advent of the end-time; 5) a radical reconstitution of personal identities and communal bonds on the basis of divine election and attending spiritual transformation; 6) the subordination of established status distinctions to the higher claims of membership within the community of the saved; 7) the prominence of an egalitarian ethos of mutual sharing and support; and 8) a constituency recruited predominantly from the ranks of the variously disprivileged, the alienated, and the politically powerless" (Joseph M. Bryant, "The Sociology of Early Christianity: From History to Theory, and Back Again", in Bryan S. Turner, ed., *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, Oxford 2010 pp. 329, 330.

²²⁸ I refer mainly to *The Oral Gospel Tradition*, Grand Rapids 2013.

comments to Jesus. This might happen without scandal, because they thought they were speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and therefore new pithy aphorisms or wider comments were attributed not to them, but to the Spirit of Jesus and therefore to Jesus himself. In other words, the Church held herself to be the spokesperson of Jesus even when she did not repeat the *ipsissima verba* [the authentic words of Jesus], since it was in any case the same Spirit that Jesus had promised and sent to speak through her. The preaching therefore did not consist in simply repeating without comment the words that, in any case, one remembered having heard pronounced by Jesus, but in transmitting the true doctrine of Jesus that was present indifferently both in the *ipsissima verba* and in comments and flashes of which the apostles felt themselves indebted to the dictates of the Spirit. For them, there was no difference in authority between Jesus and the Spirit.²²⁹ Exactly by reason of the doctrine of the revelatory Spirit they would sneer at the obsessive concern of Crossan and his companions (the partners of the Jesus Seminar) to isolate the precise words of the Master.

The Jesus whom the disciples proclaimed was not only the Jesus they had known on the streets of Palestine, but also, and I dare say principally, the Jesus whom the Spirit communicated to them, broadening their understanding and interpretation of what they had experienced. Truth is that, even when the Master sent them to preach the kingdom of God two by two (before, therefore, Easter), the Jesus they preached was already the Jesus of personal faith, not the objective Jesus (which is inoperable), but a Jesus filtered through their Jewish culture and personal expectations, a Jesus already interpreted, as claimed by Samuel Zinner. Going to separate in the Gospel the historical Jesus from the Christ of faith is like flogging a dead horse, as it is a sign of arrant incomprehension to make the apostles responsible for preaching the Christ of faith.

Oral transmission certainly preserved the core of Jesus' teachings, but it enriched it, commented on it, paraphrased it, adapted it to the varying circumstances of community life. All this was bound to flow into the written works for which the same applies. The Gospel of John would no less be the message of Jesus if the hypothesis, put forward by some, that no speech contained in it may be attributed with certainty to the historical Jesus, was proved true. John proposes the figure of the Master with keen and sharp

²²⁹ Let us also admit, with inventory benefit, that scholars have succeeded in pinpointing the authentic sayings. In any case, these would not be the complete repertory of Jesus' words, but only a restricted selection made by the tradents in a certain partial and tendentious way, on the basis of personal motivations inherent in their theological vision, therefore already within the dimension of faith. In Christian terms, it was the Spirit who suggested what to omit and what to pass on.

insights that he himself reckoned (with the Church) as the work of the Spirit and, due to this, no less reliable than the *ipsissima verba*.

The Synoptic Gospels. Today few people doubt that in I century Palestine there was an individual called Jesus, a religious preacher executed under Pontius Pilate²³⁰. The writings of the New Testament give a coherent view of this character, even if each author naturally stresses this or that aspect.

The unbelievers enjoy highlighting divergences between one sacred author and another. When these works were written, the Church was in her infancy and it is no wonder that each writer grasped and underlined certain aspects that he considered most important. This is also true for the manifold oral traditions. The cultural background, expectations, idiosyncrasies and vicissitudes of the various communities also converged to the same end, as we will see in particular for the Gospel of Thomas.

Papias mentions a lost Gospel of Matthew in Aramaic, later translated into Greek. Among scholars prevails today the idea that before the canonical Gospels, in the decade between 40 and 50 AD, writings in Aramaic containing only logia or even short narratives about Jesus were circulating.

An indirect proof was attained by some experts who have endeavored to retranslate problematic passages of the Gospels from Greek into Aramaic. This way came to light quite a few errors made in the translation from Aramaic into Greek, mostly in the presence of ambiguous terms that have been misinterpreted, thus giving rise to inconsistencies and inaccuracies. I offer a few examples from José Miguel García²³¹. Matt 1:18-19: *His mother Mary, having been taken as bride by Joseph, the morning they went to live together conceived by the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her husband, who was just, but felt so lacking in justice that he felt unworthy to have a relationship with her, decided to abandon her silently.* On the base of this reconstruction, Mary became pregnant when she was already living with Joseph, so strangers would have found nothing to pour scorn on. Joseph's wonder was born from the fact that they had not consummated the marriage, having devoted themselves to

²³⁰ The most irreducible adversary of the historical existence of Jesus is Earl Doherty, in whose opinion the story of Christ for Paul is to be set not on earth, but in the celestial spheres (*Jesus: Neither God Nor Man - The Case for a Mythical Jesus*, Ottawa 2009).

²³¹ *Vida, Passion y Resurrección de Jesús según los Evangelios arameos*. The work is inserted in the series *Studia Semitica Novi Testamenti* of Ediciones Encuentro, Madrid.

virginity²³². It was an Essene custom that survived for centuries in Christianity²³³, if St John Chrysostom still railed against the monks who lived with virgins for the declared purpose of protecting their virtue. The reason that prompted Joseph was not the fear of scandal (non-existent, as said) or the suspicion of betrayal by his bride, whose integrity he did not doubt, but the feeling of inadequacy in the face of a miraculous fact. It is not the prophecy of Isaiah that creates the fact of the virginal birth, but it is Mary's anomalous conception that induces Matthew to seek the endorsement of Scripture, wrenching the prophetic text.

Luke was charged with an egregious inaccuracy when in 2:1-2 he had the census celebrated at the time Quirinus was governor of Syria, i.e., from 6 to 7 AD. The numbers just do not add up, since at that time Herod was already dead and therefore Jesus must also have been born about ten years ago. The Aramaic text reads instead: *In those days came a decree of Caesar Augustus to make a census of all the cities. This is the first census, which was made before Quirinus was governor of Syria.*

The ambiguity of the Aramaic *waw*, a particle that is generally translated as "and", but can also mean "that is", clarifies how the expression "Jesus' brothers" stands for "Jesus' disciples". It is wrong to render *As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council* (Mark 15:1), inasmuch as the council or synedrion was composed precisely of the enumerated categories. On the contrary, it must be taken to mean: *that is to say, the whole synedrion*. Likewise in John 2:12, instead of reading *his mother, his brethren, and his disciples*, one must understand *his mother and his brethren, that is, his disciples*. The equivalence of brothers and disciples is evident in John 20:17, 18: *Jesus said to her, "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'". Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples.*

Mark's Gospel, the shortest of the four, is regarded as the first to have been composed, although even today there are still those who support Matthew's priority. Matthew and

²³² "A young woman who decided to remain a virgin couldn't live alone. The fact of being a bride gave her the legal condition that would allow her to fulfill her will" (Jean Daniélou, *I Vangeli dell'infanzia*, Brescia 1968, p. 21).

²³³ Paul would allude to it in 1 Cor 9:5, according to the interpretation of the Catholic theologian Ray Ryland (*Drawn from Shadows Into Truth: A Memoir*, Steubenville 2013, p. 222).

Luke would have drawn from Mark, as well as from a common source (Q = Quelle, source in German) unknown to Mark and consisting of logia²³⁴.

Since olden times, compared to the 'mystical and theological' Gospel of John, the synoptics have been considered more sticking to historical facts and therefore more reliable. In reality, even in the synoptics, speeches and events are inserted into a theological plot. Each author writes an ideological work and is well aware of it. This also applies to Mark, apparently so bare and linear, but, on closer inspection, full of pathos and not untaught of rhetorical technique²³⁵. Like Paul, he expresses his deep passion and from the beginning hastens to declare that his is the Gospel of Jesus, the Son of God²³⁶. Martin Kähler (1835-1912) was the first to see in the Gospels not a biography of Jesus, but sources for the announcement of faith of the Christian community, for the *kērygma*.

The Childhood Gospels appear only in Matthew and Luke and, although coincident in many details, they present many discrepancies. Mark and John omit the account of those years, not because they were not acquainted with traditions in this regard, but because they thought reporting them not necessary for the exposition of their proclamation of faith. The Childhood Gospels respond to the need to figure out how the incarnation of God could take place. The authors used the more or less certain data they held to propose their theological vision, by eliminating, adding, revamping: in a word, by interpreting. There was no need to invent facts, given that about an important man like Jesus the first to be told were certainly the stories (difficult to verify) about his birth and the events that immediately followed. These stories, different in details, circulated in every Christian community. Mary, at least in the circle closest to her, had to make some confidences about that period, even with all the caution typical of a Jewess, since they concerned her intimate

²³⁴ "Q and the Dead Sea Scrolls both reflect the eschatological expectations of marginalized Jewish communities living in various villages and towns in Palestine, which disappeared around 70 AD... Their authors felt they were prophets and interpreted the [Tanakh] prophecies as referring to contemporary events... They believed their communities to be animated by the Holy Spirit and seem to have performed exorcisms" (Simon J. Joseph, *Jesus, Q, and the Dead Sea Scrolls: A Judaic Approach to Q*, Tübingen 2012, pp. 28,32).

²³⁵ See Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer: Imitations of Greek Epic in Mark and Luke-Acts*, Lanham, Md, 2015.

²³⁶ Some say *Son of God* is a posterior addition. Even if that were true, however, it reflects the author's thinking. By Mark, Jesus is often given this title to which a divine character will be explicitly associated in John 10:33-36. See Herbert W. Bateman IV, "Defining the Titles 'Christ' and 'Son of God' in Mark's Narrative Presentation of Jesus", in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 50.3 - 2007, pp. 537-559.

life. After her death, these confidences were transmitted by the repositories, who in any case had not been eyewitnesses. In passing from mouth to mouth, the facts were embellished with details due to the tradents. You only have to read some apocryphal gospels to understand how much unleashed was fantasy.

Luke does not report the adoration of the Magi and the flight to Egypt either because he deems them uncertain or because he does not rate them imperative for the proclamation of faith. Matthew proposes both, as he sees them as true and linkable to prophetic quotations of the Old Testament.

The birth of the Baptist. I reconstruct it in this way. The priest Zechariah was racked by the idea of dying without offspring. A son: this was his most ardent desire, conscious or not, or, if you like, his regret; in any case, his worry. The Essenes of Qumran rigidly opposed the priests of the Temple of Jerusalem, but other Essenes did not²³⁷ and among these were also priests of lower rank, such as Zechariah. In the exercise of his priestly ministry in the divine abode, in an atmosphere made mystical and frightening by the *Shekinah* [the presence of God], he unconsciously plays his last card, expressing, albeit hazily, his desire, asking for grace. Sparked off by faith, the promise of YHWH (who had solved sundry desperate cases) appears to him, according to his cultural background, in the message brought by an angel. The vision, to be configured in an ASC (alternate state of consciousness) set off by the atmosphere of the place and the intimate psychological turmoil, unsettles him to such an extent that he remains mute²³⁸.

It was quite normal for an elderly childless Jew, a priest moreover, nourished by the examples of Isaac, Samuel and Samson, to hope for the prodigious realization of his fatherhood dream. It is not to be ruled out that the discouragement following his failures had led him to thin out or to interrupt his attempts with natural methods altogether. The new hope, or rather the certainty that arose in his heart, although in the midst of an understandable upheaval, led him to approach Elizabeth again, and without anything miraculous (such cases are found in all times and cultures) he became a father.

God's intervention is in the inner voice (heard in a scenery of dramatic majesty) that makes him go from despondency to daring. Notice that the angel describes the unborn child to

²³⁷ Joan E. Taylor, "The Classical Sources on the Essenes and the Scrolls Communities", in Timothy H. Lim and John J. Collins, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Oxford 2010, p. 181.

²³⁸ A typical case of emotional shock mutism, triggered by vision as in Daniel 10:15. Another violent emotion following the child's birth will make him recover the speech.

the father not only as a gift from God, but as a man of God, a saint sent with the precise mission of making the sinners repent. This too is by no means an invention of the evangelist, due to the fact that, precisely on the basis of the biblical examples already given, the son born of elderly parents was seen kindred to Isaac, Samuel and Samson also by virtue of a particular mission that God entrusted to him for the benefit of the chosen people. Therefore, at John's birth, the canticle of Zechariah reflects perfectly logical and consistent ideas, if the cultural environment is taken into account.

Revelation or non revelation, Zechariah in this unexpected son could not fail to see a prophet of the Most High. A conviction that, however, in the priest could not remain at the level of a pious desire, but was converted day by day into an educational process aimed at the formation of the man of God: while being raised and reared, the child was resolutely instilled with the idea of a religious mission, which, in line with the expectations of the Jewish people, consisted in preparing the way for the coming, considered in the offing, of the Savior. John - even if from elderly parents - was born in natural way. The Savior, instead, was to be born of a virgin. All of this had been disclosed to John by his father, so much so that when he was asked about it, he flatly denied that he was the Christ (John 1:21).

For Zechariah, John's task was contained in the text of Isaiah 40:3, so dear to the Essenes. Zechariah (like Mary and Joseph) was imbued with Essene culture and it is likely that John's stay in the wilderness (where he fed on honey and locusts²³⁹) is an indication of his sojourn in an isolated Essene community (not necessarily Qumran²⁴⁰), inside of which he was able to clear up even more the topics already set by the fatherly education²⁴¹. God

²³⁹ Energetic as well as luscious, by the accounts of gourmets. Luckily, the Dead Sea Scrolls provide us with valuable culinary instructions on the subject (*Damascus Document* XII 11-15).

²⁴⁰ As maintained by Alison Schofield (*From Qumran to the Yahad: A New Paradigm of Textual Development for 'The Community Rule'*, Leiden 2009), perhaps another community operated in Bethabara, where the Baptist was bred up. For the scholar, the Yahad was a consortium of local communities among which should also be included Ein Feshkha, Ein El-Ghuweir, Jericho, Jerusalem. Some of the Dead Sea Scrolls come from centers other than Qumran (John J. Collins, *Beyond the Qumran Community: The Sectarian Movement of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Grand Rapids 2010, p. 69).

²⁴¹ In support of what has been said, I quote the words of Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI: "Not only John the Baptist, but possibly Jesus and his family as well, were close to the Qumran community... It is a reasonable hypothesis that the Baptist lived for some time in this community and received part of his religious formation from it" (*Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, New York 2007, p. 14).

acted through his parents and the Yahad. When, within the latter (*in the wilderness*), he became fully aware of his mission, he went out to preach: *During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins* (Luke 3:2-3).

Mary's virginity. Let's try to understand the facts starting from the perception that the protagonists, Joseph and Mary, had of them. According to a custom not uncommon among the Essenes and later transmitted to Christians (it is the phenomenon of the *agapetae*), a girl who wanted to consecrate her virginity to God without being exposed to mockery and violence had to find protection in a male, much more mature than her and seriously intent on guaranteeing her observance of the vow. From the beginning of her living with Joseph, Mary becomes pregnant. In his devotion, Joseph is not struck by the suspicion of infidelity, because he knows his bride too well. When Mary reveals the novelty to him, Joseph (in line with the beliefs that the Essenes had got from Mazdeism²⁴²) infers that in his family the miracle of a virgin birth is about to occur, which can only concern the Savior²⁴³. Faced with the task of being his father, the man feels inadequate and would like to escape, at the cost of breaking the covenant with Mary, but divine inspiration encourages him to persist: *While he was thinking about these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said to him: "Joseph, son of David, do not abandon Mary, your wife, moved by sacred fear because of what is he who was begotten in her by the Holy Spirit"* (Matt 1:20, in the Aramaic text²⁴⁴).

Joseph stays with Mary. In the following months they have a load of time to question themselves about the event and the betokening signs. Mary remembers that it was divine inspiration or the authoritative suggestion of a wise Essene (transfigured, in compliance with the current cultural canons, into an angel in her eyes) that made her renounce marriage and initiated her in the risky and difficult choice of virginity in the which she

²⁴² For the influence on Judaism of Iranian doctrines regarding the virginal birth of the Messiah I refer to Andrew J. Welburn, *From a Virgin Womb: The Apocalypse of Adam and the Virgin Birth*, Leiden 2008.

²⁴³ Following the Roman conquest (63 BC), there had been a sudden surge in messianic expectations in Palestine (John J. Collins, "Jesus, Messianism and the Dead Sea Scrolls", in James H. Charlesworth, Hermann Lichtenberger and Gerbern S. Oegema, eds., *Qumran-Messianism*, Tübingen 1998, p. 106).

²⁴⁴ The previous Aramaic text of Matthew 1:18-20, whose translation I have taken from the cited work of José Miguel García, has been reconstructed by Mariano Herranz Marco in *La virginidad perpetua de María*, Madrid 2002, pp. 41, 42, and 51-69.

saw the premise for the fulfillment of a miracle, the birth of the Messiah from a virgin. One may conjecture that the more or less conscious hope of an exceptional motherhood pushed young women to embrace virginity. By the same token, the mature man who protected the virgin blurredly aspired to become, though feeling unworthy, a putative father of the Son of the Most High. This, to read the Gospel tradition well, is the way in which the facts were lived by the protagonists, a way entirely congruent with their customs and mindset.

A malevolent objector might hypothesize behind the Gospel version a conscious violation of the vow of chastity by the two virgins or by Mary alone. A more subtle disputant will insinuate that Mary was raped by a Roman soldier and, as sometimes happens, removed root and branch that nightmarish event²⁴⁵, searching later in her religious paraphernalia a theological explanation of the fruit of violence. The story of the soldier Panthera or Pandera²⁴⁶ (that is found in Celsus²⁴⁷ and rabbinic writings²⁴⁸, but must have been propagated much earlier²⁴⁹) is based on a possible, very possible eventuality. We are at a crucial crossroads. Which of the two accounts deserves to be believed? The supernatural version or the pedestrian one? There is no possibility of mediation, since neither may be proven and we must argue endlessly. One believes what one wants to believe. Joseph may be labeled as a pious privileged man or, alternatively, as a gullible husband, always ready to swear on the virtue of his wife. It depends on us, on the project we have about ourselves; not only on what we are (background, prejudices, etc.), but, and primarily, on what we want to be. To believe in God always means to elaborate an immensely ambitious project about oneself and to aim tenaciously at its realization²⁵⁰.

²⁴⁵ The removal is configured in the context of post-traumatic stress disorder.

²⁴⁶ Archer Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera from an epigraph discovered in 1859 in Bingerbrück, Germany, was identified by someone as the Pandera of the Talmud.

²⁴⁷ Origen, *Against Celsus* 1:28 32.

²⁴⁸ b. Šabb. 104b - b. Sanh. 67a.

²⁴⁹ A hint is perhaps found in John 8:41 (*We are not illegitimate children*).

²⁵⁰ "The mission of Jesus' crucified spouse on earth is almost over. Jesus will give her the most enchanting, the most loving death. What glory for Portugal and for the whole world! What a feast and triumph in Heaven! - There was never, nor will there ever again be a victim sacrificed in this form... You are the new redeemer, who will be remembered as long as the world exists... Your life teaches more than the priests and doctors of the Church; your martyrdom converts more souls than thousands, millions of priests" (Alexandrina de Balazar, *Diary* 3 May 1942; 1 December 1944; 22 October 1948). St Thérèse of Lisieux also thought big: in oblation love pushed to the extreme she felt she could realize her multiform vocation as a

The Magnificat. Luke does not claim that it was Mary who composed it. He just says she recited it. It was in all probability a hymn of thanksgiving that Essene women raised to God when they got pregnant, when God fulfilled their desire for motherhood. That it was an Essene hymn is evident from the emphasis on God's preference for the poor and humble²⁵¹.

The birth of Jesus. In point of fact, it is probable that some shepherds received news of this needful birth and went to see the baby, perhaps even offering some small gift. For Jesus it was not the well-to-do who moved, but the poor. They were given the announcement through ordinary people who warned them of the fact. Only this must have been said by Mary. The facts were transcribed by the receptors according to the visionary rules of Jewish culture (angels, music, songs, light), because, within their cultural horizon, God could not fail to manifest himself in this way. Mary's original narrative must have been, roughly speaking, as follows: "When I gave birth in Bethlehem, the first to visit me and the child were poor shepherds, cheerful and likable, who learned of my misfortune and were surprised at the beauty of Jesus". When this certain fact is interpreted, then one beholds a set of accretions: a) If the child was visited by poor shepherds, it was not by chance. It was God himself who wanted to show his fondness for the poor (Mary and Joseph also belonged to the category). b) For this to happen, God had to communicate the event to the shepherds. c) As attested to in the Scriptures, when God has to send a message, he uses an angel; therefore, this did happen with the shepherds. d) But God manifests himself in the light, so the shepherds also saw a light. e) If God agrees to announce the birth of a child, it means that something extraordinary matured: it might not be just an ordinary child, but the one who is to become the Savior long awaited by the poor. Poor men were chosen, as

Carmelite, bride, mother, warrior, priest, apostle, prophet, doctor of the Church, martyr (*Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St Thérèse of Lisieux. Manuscript B*, 8 September 1896, trans. John Clarke, Washington 1996, pp. 190-200). On this theme I refer to Chip R. Ingram, *Holy Ambition: Turning God-Shaped Dreams Into Reality*, Chicago 2010².

²⁵¹ The consonances with Anna's canticle (1 Sam 2:1-10), Psalm 113 (whose archaizing patina, rather than concealing, reveals its late date - see Lawrence A. Hoffman and David Arnow, *My People's Passover Haggadah: Traditional Texts, Modern Commentaries*, Woodstock, Vt, 2008, Vol. II, p. 101) and sapiential literature (e.g., Sir 10:14 *The Lord overthrows the thrones of rulers, and enthrones the lowly in their place.*) are striking. The religious value given to social opposition originates from Enochian circles: "The Epistle of Enoch, the Testaments of the twelve Patriarchs and the Parables of Enoch identify the righteous with the poor and sinners with the wealthy... Radical opposition divides the poor from the rich in this world" (Gabriele Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis, cit.*, p. 181). See also George W. E. Nickelsburg, "First and Second Enoch: A Cry against Oppression and the Promise of Deliverance", in Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison Jr. and John Dominic Crossan, eds., *The Historical Jesus in Context*, Princeton 2006, pp. 87-109.

the child concerned them directly and to the highest degree. f) Consequently, the angel, having to inform the shepherds of this momentous fact, what else could say but *To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord?* (Luke 2:11)? g) For such a paramount event one angel was too little. It was not a personal event, as so many times in the Bible. It was the decisive turning point in history, and if people were apathetic and unaware, heaven was in celebration. This meant that the shepherds had to understand the exceptionality of the case visually and aurally [auditively]. The most fitting way was the appearance of many heavenly spirits announcing in song the glory of God and the coming of peace for the poor²⁵² and therefore for the shepherds themselves. In fact, the men who enjoy the favor of God (*ánthrōpoi eudokía/eudokías*) are mainly the poor, the *ebionim*. Why the coming of peace? But on the grounds that Isaiah had called the Messiah *Prince of Peace* (9:5).

As we see, the sequence of passages obeys a rigid logic, within the anthropological vision of the pious Jews. Each time we say, "It was no accident that...", we enter the realm of interpretation. Here we start from a historical fact, but to record it would be too little, it would mean nothing. Many other cases could have been noticed, a train of events, one more irrelevant than the other, that happened in Bethlehem in those days. If a fact is isolated, it means that it is worth investigating, inasmuch as one senses the possibility that it conceals a profound meaning. Everyone develops his own interpretation in keeping with his conceptual schemes, his cultural background, his own expectations. When the historian (conditioned, in this case, by the prior acceptance of the divinity of Jesus) asks himself the question "Why did poor shepherds visit the child?", he has already the answer in his pocket, or at least he intuits it. And it certainly comes as no surprise that the reconstruction of the facts is that of Luke. In any case, let us bear in mind that every historian is ideologized and chooses some facts and not others, since he knows that precisely those ones let themselves be included, once they have been properly interpreted, into his ideological reconstruction of events.

The story of the Magi. There's nothing unbelievable about the Magi. To start with, the Magi (not kings, but Zoroastrian priests) did not live only in Persia. Since the time of the Achaemenids they had also emigrated to areas just north of Palestine and therefore one did not have to cope with a long journey to get to Jerusalem. At the appearance of the

²⁵² With the consequent end of social conflicts spawned by injustice: *His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore* (Isa 9:7).

star²⁵³ some of them set off towards Judea, due to the fact that the star recalled this land²⁵⁴. In fact, each people, on the authority of Daniel (10:13, 20 - cf. Deut 32:8, already discussed), was assigned a patron angel²⁵⁵, but the angels were identified, basically, with the heavenly bodies²⁵⁶. The Magi also were expectantly awaiting the Savior, the Saoshyant, and thus they turned to King Herod and, through him, to the learned men of Jerusalem to know where his birth was predicted. It is historically acceptable that they perceived the Jewish religion as an offshoot of Zoroastrianism.

I am convinced that Herod, in addition to his notorious cruelty²⁵⁷, possessed also a baleful intelligence that did not allow him to commit the slaughter of the innocent in the gruesome and subtly parodistic manner in which we are used to seeing it portrayed. Stories were made about 14,000 massacred children, including a son of Herod himself, put out to nurse and evidently not recognized by the blood-drunk soldiers. On the contrary, in a village like Bethlehem the children more or less the same age as Jesus were certainly very few, and Herod must have started by getting rid of them by devious means, such as kidnapping and poison. When the Gospel tells that Joseph was warned in a dream by an angel, it only means that Joseph had a flash: he suddenly understood that the death or disappearance, in rapid succession, of two or three children were not accidental and that

²⁵³ As for the real size of the celestial phenomenon, there is little point in consulting astronomers. I have no qualms about the Magi getting the wrong end of the stick. What matters is not what came to pass, but what appeared to be.

²⁵⁴ In this metaphorical sense the star led the Magi. They arrived in Jerusalem and then in Bethlehem in the wake of a cultural preconception and not with their gaze fixed on a mobile trace of light. Certainly, the shift from figurative to the more easily understandable and representable literal sense had taken place well before Matthew wrote his story (2:9, 10). Cf Dwight R. Hutchison, *A Sign Over Bethlehem: An Explanation of the Magi and the Messiah's Star*, Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux 2015; George H. van Kooten and Peter Barthel, eds., *The Star of Bethlehem and the Magi: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Experts on the Ancient Near East, the Greco-Roman World, and Modern Astronomy*, Leiden 2015.

²⁵⁵ See Daniel I. Block, *The Gods of the Nations: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology*, Eugene 2013², esp. pp. 25-33.

²⁵⁶ "The stars are already identified with the angels in biblical verses such as Job 38:7, and, implicitly, in 1 Enoch 86:1, 3 and 88:1. This identification is explicit in other texts from the Second Temple period" (Jonathan Ben-Dov, *Head of All Years: Astronomy and Calendars at Qumran in Their Ancient Context*, Leiden 2008, p. 27). The correlation between heavenly bodies and 'children of God' is maintained and documented on pages 29-30 and in footnote 32 of Daniel I. Block's abovementioned work.

²⁵⁷ In a Greek pun, Augustus mockingly pointed out that a pig [hys] should feel safer than a son [hyiòs] of this king.

the next to suffer this fate might be Jesus. So he wasted no time in leaving, just as, suspecting the king, the Magi themselves, who, not being foolish, had caught his disturbance and were not deceived by his mellifluous words, had cut bait and run some time before, taking another path. The reason for their hasty departure became clear to Joseph when he intuitively connected the two things. He figured out that Herod was a threat to the child, as he already had been to the Magi. What was only a well-founded suspicion, which asudden cropped up out of the anguish wrought by those mournful events and their recurrence in thought, may have been seen by Joseph as the content of a message brought to him by an angel, according to the conception of those times and his imagination that depended on it²⁵⁸.

It is to be remembered that journeys from Palestine to Egypt along the coast were then very common. The unknown was not entirely unknown: in Egypt there was a large Jewish colony that could serve as a point of support.

This reconstruction helps us overcome multifarious difficulties of the professional objectors who have pointed out how Flavius Josephus ignores the slaughter of the innocent, a heinous crime that, if it had happened in the manner long imagined, let itself be carried as an emblem of Herod's cruelty. It went unnoticed instead. There were only a few suspicions, rumors. Luke's story reworks indirect confidences of Joseph and Mary on the way they lived and interpreted those events.

Skeptics turn up their noses at the finding of Jesus in the Temple, downgrading it to a mere fable. Jesus listened to the doctors of the Law, discussed with them, gave intelligent answers. Twelve-year-olds who showed an early interest in what later marked their lives

²⁵⁸ Those who believe in God and maintain a continuous dialogue with him perceive his voice as a warning against doing something (as Socrates said of his *daimónion*) or as an advice, an invitation to act in a certain way, as a sudden and convincing illumination. The message is unquestionable, but the form in which it is conveyed depends on the imagination of the individual believer. Immediately after the Second World War, numerous tales of Catholic and Orthodox veterans were made known who asserted they had been warned of an impending mortal danger thanks to the dream apparition of the patron saint who - just in time - ordered them to move. Protestant veterans, who had lived a similar experience, claimed to have also received a warning of divine origin, with the expected variation that it was not a saint who told them what to do. The essential thing is that God is speaking. Form differs *ad modum recipientis*. Some will be surprised that apparitions of Jewish saints in critical wartime circumstances are also attested to in present-day Israel. See Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning*, Bloomington, In, 2009, p. 415+.

are certainly not lacking in history. Flavius Josephus boasts of having been, at the age of 14, a consultant to the priests²⁵⁹.

Luke offers us a far-reaching and irreplaceable theological teaching when, at the conclusion of his Childhood Gospel, he tells us that *Jesus increased in wisdom and in years* (2:52). To the physical growth corresponded an intellectual growth, an ever deeper awareness of the world and of the way of getting through life²⁶⁰, thanks to the continuous relationship with God in prayer and meditation, as is shown by the answer given to the parents in the Temple: *Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?* (2:49). His mission became clearer and clearer to him, and the family environment, the Essene community of which he was a part or which he knew indirectly, the study of Scripture, the most varied encounters, played a role. Everything stimulated his reflection and converged towards a point that gradually became plain and distinct on the horizon: to spend himself for the salvation of the world. In Jesus, knowledge of reality and awareness of the divine nature developed by degrees²⁶¹.

²⁵⁹ *Autobiography* II 9. Regarding the personality of the historian, I would like to point out Claude Cohen-Matlofsky, "Flavius Josephus, the Man and His Ambitions: A Prosopographic Study", in *The Polish Journal of Biblical Research*, 15.1-2 - 2016, pp. 99-117. For an overview: Honora Howell Chapman and Zuleika Rodgers, eds., *A Companion to Josephus*, Chichester, SXW, 2016.

²⁶⁰ To use Stoic terminology, Luke describes the adolescent Jesus not as a *sophós* [wise], but as a *prokóptōn* [proficient, advancing].

²⁶¹ "Christ [as man] did not possess the beatific vision of God's essence, nor, consequently, the knowledge of all things in the divine essence, precisely because Christ's humanity was preglorified, *in via*... My argument is based on the broader Scriptural witness to Christ's weakness and intellectual limitations, his growth and development, his participation in the life of a creature, and so on, so that a perpetual rapture [in contemplation of the divine essence] would be non-human and even self-destructive on the level of salvation" (R. Michael Allen, *The Christ's Faith: A Dogmatic Account*, London-New York 2009, pp. 66, 67). In the opinion of the Belgian Jesuit Jean Galot, for more than twenty years professor of Christology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and author of prayers pervaded by an engaging mystical afflatus, to think that Jesus possessed the perfection of knowledge, that is omniscience, would lead - in a re-edition of the Monophysite heresy - to the denial of his humanity, subject instead to certain natural intellectual limitations, even with regard to his own self-awareness, historically and culturally conditioned ("Le Christ terrestre et la vision", in *Gregorianum*, 67 - 1986, pp. 429-450. See also *Who is Christ? A Theology of the Incarnation*, Rome 1980). Similar concepts were expressed by Sulpician father Raymond Edward Brown (*Jesus, God and Man: Modern Biblical Reflections*, Milwaukee 1967) and Hans Urs von Balthasar (*Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. III, San Francisco 1992, p. 191+ - cf Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell*, Grand Rapids 2007, pp. 158-160). It is not to be forgotten that even a Father and Doctor of the Church like Cyril of Alexandria included the

In an asymmetrical relationship, if the Logos had full knowledge of the human consciousness of Jesus, the reverse did not happen: the human consciousness of Jesus only progressively and always limitedly, until the turning point of his glorification, acquired the cognitive perfection and self-awareness of the Logos, which in him functioned as an infinite unconscious unclosing itself over time. "The Logos, the divine nature of Jesus, revealed wisdom to his human nature in harmony with physical development"²⁶². "What did Jesus know? He knew, initially, what a village boy learnt, who listened to the Rabbis, and made the best of his opportunities. But of this knowledge, scanty as we should think it, he made a divinely perfect use. It became in his head the alphabet of ideas through which the spirit within him spelt out the truth of what he was, and what he had to do. It was not saved from factual errors in matters irrelevant. He was not prevented from supposing that Moses wrote the whole Pentateuch, or that the world had begun five thousand years ago. But he saw in detail day by day with an unerring eye how to be a true Son to his Father, and a true savior of his people. He walked in factual darkness by spiritual light. Where knowledge was not available, love and candor steered him through. He never judged wrong in the evidence he had; he discerned between good and evil, and marked us out the path of life. He started, like the rest of us, from nowhere - from a germ in the womb. He found the whole truth, through death and resurrection"²⁶³.

As a man, he shared the intellectual limitations proper to humanity and in particular to his cultural environment. This 'ignorance' of Jesus included Jewish religious conceptions within which the first inculturation of Christian truth took place with the adaptation to the traditional ideas of a particular people, since in his *kénōsis* the Logos was in consonance with the limitations inherent in the culture where he preferred to incarnate himself. A fundamental aspect, so far disregarded, of the unsounded divine *kénōsis* is the unavoidable

ignorance of Jesus in the *kénōsis* (Patrologia Graeca LXXV 369 - See Elizabeth Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology*, New York 1990, p. 46). This is the voluntary exinanition or self-limitation of the Logos, his spontaneous imprisonment in the cultural cage of I century Palestine. *He emptied himself* (Phil 2:7): from the Son of the divine Father to the son of his time. "If we take the Incarnation seriously, Jesus is the son of his people and his time" (Torleif Elgvin, "The Scrolls and the Jewish Gospel", in *Mishkan*, 44 - 2005, p. 4).

²⁶² Telesphora Pavlou, *Saggio di Cristologia neo-ortodossa*, Roma 1995, p. 142. The quoted passage reports the thought of the Greek theologian Panayotis Trempeles (1886-1977).

²⁶³ Austin Farrer, *The Brink of Mystery*, Eugene 2012², pp. 20, 21. See also Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, Grand Rapids, 2008, p. 253+; Andrew Ter Ern Loke, *A Kryptic Model of the Incarnation*, Farnham, SRY, 2014; and two volumes of David W. Brown: *Divine Humanity: Kenosis Explored and Defended*, London 2011; *God in a Single Vision: Integrating Philosophy and Theology*, London-New York 2016.

need for the Logos, determined to humanize himself, to embody his message *ad modum recipientis* in a structurally inadequate particular human culture. With an expression echoing Hegel, one might indicate as "cunning of the Logos" the divine predisposition of a cultural tradition - realized mainly by leveraging multifarious frustrations - that let itself be understood also by the man Jesus and the Apostles, in line with criteria linked to the times, as a natural preparation for the coming of God among us. The Christian conception did not appear *ex abrupto*, almost as if it were an ideological *Deus ex machina* portentously intruded into the affairs of mankind, but came to light, in a supernally predetermined natural way, from a complex evolution, whose stages, conditioned by the historical circumstances, bear the mark of fragility and contingency. Jesus's conviction of being the Messiah and divine sprang up primarily from the personal relationship with the Father, but it got hold of documentary support in the Tanakh, which was creatively interpreted²⁶⁴.

The Baptism of Jesus (an event passed over in silence by John, who speaks only of the Baptist's testimony). The synoptics report a voice that was heard, without specifying by whom (it is supposed by many people), and, more or less clearly, they suggest that it was Jesus who saw the Spirit descend, while in John it is the Baptist who testifies that he saw him descend on Jesus. Absorbed in prayer, Jesus sees a dove above him and regards it, along the lines of a symbolism accepted at the time, but obscure for us²⁶⁵, as a sign of the Holy Spirit. The dove is also seen by onlookers and there are those who, like the Baptist, interpret it in the same way²⁶⁶.

²⁶⁴ From this we can infer a principle of general validity: the 'truth' of the sacred scriptures of any religion resides not so much in the historical and scientific reliability of their theoretical framework as in the effectiveness of their emotional and moral grasp on the experience of God based on openness to infinity. They are but fruitful instruments for setting up and implementing the personal project of perfecting one's own humanity. As such, they necessarily involve the interpretative intervention of those who *ad modum recipientis*, that is, in character with individual needs, expectations and limitations, draw from them. After half a millennium, Luther's principle 'Sola Scriptura' is in its last legs.

²⁶⁵ Cf Isaiah 11:2 *The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him*. In Qumran the expression of Isaiah is further clarified: *On the Messiah will rest the Holy Spirit* (4Q287 3, 13). The symbolism of the dove is certainly in connection with Gen 1:2 *The Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters* and Gen 8:11 *The dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf*. I think that the flutter of the dove in flight might symbolize the slight noise of the breath of the Spirit (in Pentecost it is instead a thunderous roar of wind, in proportion to the number of receptors). In 1 Kings 19:12 God is manifested in the gentle whisper of the breeze.

²⁶⁶ John F. MacArthur, taking up previous exegetical insights (cf Charles Milo Connick, *Jesus: The Man, the Mission, and the Message*, Englewood Cliffs 1974, p. 150), interprets the *like a dove* of Mark 1:10 not as if it were

I think it is probable that the course of events was as follows. As Jesus comes out of the water, the heavens open, that is, a protracted flash of light is produced and a globe of light descends on him with the graceful lightness of a dove (a case of globular lightning, which can also occur in clear skies). This is followed by a thunder or the roar of the exploded globe. The rest is an interpretation, in compliance with the canons of the time, of a *sēméion* (sign, portent) that might not be accidental.

Thunder is accounted as the divine voice of assent (this function may be traced already in Homer, *Odyssey* XX 103)²⁶⁷. Since in the Jordan, according to the expectations of those present, the best candidate to receive the Spirit was precisely the Son of God, that roar might have no other meaning: "*This is my beloved Son*".

Of a splendor speak the Gospel of the Ebionites (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.13.7: *Immediately a great light shone in that place*) and Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 88 3: *A fire was lit in the Jordan*). The codices Vercellensis and Sangermanensis to Matthew's account add respectively *Lumen ingens circumfulsit de aqua* and *Lumen magnum fulgebat de aqua*²⁶⁸. In the Eastern liturgy, on the initiative of St Gregory of Nazianzus²⁶⁹, the commemoration of Jesus' Baptism is styled "the feast of lights"²⁷⁰.

"in the appearance of a dove", but in a more nuanced way: "Mark simply meant that the Spirit descended upon Jesus in a certain visible form with the same delicate gentleness as a dove that rests slightly on the perch" (*New Testament Commentary*, Vol. V, Panorama City 2015, *ad locum*).

²⁶⁷ The thunder appears on another occasion (John 12:28-29): *Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again". The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him"*. The interpretation of thunder was common practice at Qumran (*Brontologion*, 4Q318). "From the perspective of the peoples of the ancient Middle East, the thunder was the manifestation of God's voice" (David N. Freedman, Allen C. Myers and Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, cit., p. 1306). In Sinai, *Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder* (Exod 19:19). In Revelation: *He gave a great shout, like a lion roaring. And when he shouted, the seven thunders sounded. And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down"* (10: 3-4).

²⁶⁸ James H. Charlesworth, "Tatian's Dependence Upon Apocryphal Traditions", in *The Heythrop Journal* 15.1 - 1974, p. 14.

²⁶⁹ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*, Grand Rapids, 2009 p. 592.

²⁷⁰ On the neglected theme of light in the baptism of Jesus see Gabriele Winkler, "Die Licht-Erscheinung bei der Taufe Jesu und der Ursprung des Epiphaniestes. Eine Untersuchung griechischer, syrischer, armenischer und lateinischer Quellen", in *Oriens Christianus*, 78 - 1994, pp. 177-229.

The expression of Mark 1:10 *Jesus saw the heavens torn apart* recalls Ezekiel 1:1, 4 *As I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God... As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber.* The descent on Jesus of the Spirit in the form of fire was appropriate for him who, in the words of the Baptist, would baptize in the Holy Spirit and fire (*en Pnéumati hagíō kái pyrí*, Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16). The mention of fire, absent in Mark 1:8, comes from Q²⁷¹, a source closer to the facts. It is to be remembered, by the way, that the connection between Pneuma and fire was a cornerstone of Stoic doctrine²⁷².

An experience similar to that of Jesus in the Jordan would have been lived, according to Dio Chrysostom (ca. 40 - 115 AD), by Zarathustra while meditating on the summit of a mountain: "Zoroaster, caught up in his passion for wisdom and justice, left his companions and retired to a mountain. It caught fire because of an impetuous flame that descended from heaven and burned there unceasingly... Zoroaster came out unharmed from the flame... and made sacrifices to testify that God had come down to that place" (*Orations* 36 40). Martin L. West²⁷³ reasons that Dio's account is influenced by Stoic

²⁷¹ Daniel Frayer-Griggs, *Saved Through Fire: The Fiery Ordeal in New Testament Eschatology*, Eugene, 2016, p. 138.

²⁷² "The influence of Stoicism on Judaism would have inevitably led to frequent and fascinating transformations in the Jewish conception of the spirit" (John R. Levison, *Filled with the Spirit*, Grand Rapids, 2009, p. 137). In Seneca (ca. 4 BC - 65 AD) we read stunning expressions: "God is near you, with you, within you... A divine spirit dwells within us" (*Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* 41 1-2). For the influence of Stoic theories on the New Testament I refer to Troels Engberg-Pedersen, "A Stoic Understanding of Pneuma in Paul", in Troels Engberg-Pedersen and Henrik Tronier, eds., *Philosophy at the Roots of Christianity*, København 2007, pp. 101-123 (in the same volume there are other interesting contributions); Gitte Buch-Hansen, *"It is the Spirit That Gives Life": A Stoic Understanding of Pneuma in John's Gospel*, Berlin 2010; Tuomas Rasimus, Troels Engberg-Pedersen and Ismo Dunderberg, eds., *Stoicism in Early Christianity*, Grand Rapids 2010; Teun Tieleman, "The Spirit of Stoicism", in Jörg Frey and John R. Levison, eds., *The Holy Spirit..., cit.*, pp. 39-62. Troels Engberg-Pedersen in *John and Philosophy: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel*, Oxford 2017, proposes a Stoic reading of the Fourth Gospel, centered on the identity of Logos and Pneuma. An enlightening quote: "Jesus was fully a human being... On the other side, he was also identified as 'the Son of God' by John the Baptist when he, Jesus, received the Spirit (or Pneuma) from God. From then on, as *Jesus Christ*, Jesus was also the (bearer of the) Logos (God's plan for the world), which had been with God from the beginning, but which was fixed in Jesus precisely when he received the *pneuma*" (p. 30). I agree, as long as "receiving" is meant as "becoming aware".

²⁷³ "The Classical World", in Michael Stausberg and Yuhon Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, Malden, Ma, 20015, p. 447.

conceptions and the biblical passage of the burning bush (Exod 3:2). The latter, however, proves that the *Shekinah*²⁷⁴ materializes in fire.

Ultimately, what really matters in Baptism is the fact that at that moment, while absorbed in prayer, Jesus intuits in the glow and the thunder the plain signs of the mission entrusted to him by the Father. At that precise point of time he becomes fully aware that he is God's beloved Son²⁷⁵, the chosen one sent to redeem the world through preaching and Passion²⁷⁶.

In the Transfiguration the apostles saw, next to Jesus, Moses and Elijah, two figures who today are looked on as legendary. It is well known that vision is interpreted in harmony with background and expectations²⁷⁷. The apostles recognized the two, for the reason that they were culturally hardwired to see just them. Mystical vision has a strong component of subjective interpretation: in other words, it is the product of a faith that already exists or at least of a latent expectation²⁷⁸.

²⁷⁴ The term is found in rabbinical writings, but the concept of the manifestation of God and His Spirit to men is undoubtedly biblical.

²⁷⁵ Naturally within the I century Jewish mindset, not in the light of later Christological disputes.

²⁷⁶ The addition *Today I have begotten you* to the voice from above, present in the ancient codices of Matthew and Luke and in the Gospel of the Ebionites (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.13.7), alludes to the achieved self-awareness of Jesus, who, at the sight of the unusual phenomenon, is convinced that he himself is the recipient of the words of Psalm 2:7 *You are my Son. Today I have begotten you*. My thesis, far removed from adoptionism, does not deny the pre-existence of the Logos, but emphasizes the awareness of the divine filiation, which occurred on that day in the man Jesus. In general, the events that in the eyes of a I century Jew stood out in a scenario well in view, the stage of imposing 'objective' interactions between heaven and earth, today, in a process of internalization, must be considered in their subjective or psychological truth, with God who comes into contact with man (even with the man Jesus) in the sanctuary of conscience.

²⁷⁷ "The society, country, or culture of origin influences the way in which the visionary interprets an experience. In their ecstatic trance experience of Jesus' Transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36), the disciples identified the two men talking with him as Moses and Elijah, not Zeus and Apollo" (John J. Pilch, *Visions and Healing in the Acts of the Apostles: How the Early Believers Experienced God*, Collegeville 2004, p. 3).

²⁷⁸ See Felicitas Goodman, *Maya Apocalypse: Seventeen Years with the Women of a Yucatan Village*, Bloomington, In, 2001, p. 9. According to Bruce J. Malina ("The Transfiguration of Jesus: An Experience of Alternate Reality", in Philip F. Esler, ed., *Modelling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in its Context*, London-New York 1995, p. 61; "Assessing the Historicity of Jesus' Walking on the Sea: Insights from Cross-Cultural Social Psychology", in Bruce D. Chilton and Craig A. Evans, eds., *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus*, Leiden 2002 p. 366), the perception that the three disciples had of Jesus transfigured "seems similar to the current ASC experience of a person's 'aura'".

As for Jesus' prophecies about the end of Jerusalem, some consider them *ex eventu*. But let us ponder on one point. In order to guess what would happen to Jerusalem, given the situation of endemic revolt, there was no need for one to be a particularly inspired prophet. It was enough to know the impatience spreading in Palestine to sense that sooner or later the Romans would react with devastating brutality, consistent with a well-known practice. Those who contemplated the splendor of Herod's Temple, whose construction had already taken decades and which would be completed only in 64 AD, could not help but grieve, foreboding its imminent ruin.

Jesus gazed at Jerusalem from afar and his eyes filled with tears. You may bet he wasn't the only one. Rabbinic literature²⁷⁹ has left us with the memory of Rabbi Zadok, who in 30 AD (notice the date) began an ineffectual forty-year fast, feeding only at night, just to avert the demolition of the Temple, an eventuality that was patently written in the stars.

Humanity of Jesus. Besides being born and dying, Jesus is hungry (Matt 4:2) and thirsty (John 19:28); he feels tired (John 4:6) and exhausted (Luke 23:26); he is tempted by the devil (Mark 1:12-13 - Matt 4:1-11 - Luke 4:1-13)²⁸⁰; he feels our own emotions, so much so that he cries several times: on Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), on Lazarus (John 11:35); he loses his temper in the face of his Father's house turned into a market (John 2:15); he marvels at the faith of the centurion (Matt 8:10); he broadens the perspective of his mission, letting himself be convinced, near Tyre, by a pagan woman (Mark 7:24-30 - Matt 15:21-28)²⁸¹; he

²⁷⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 56a.

²⁸⁰ In order for temptations to make sense and not to result in a dull play with a predictable happy ending, the man Jesus had to ignore that it was constitutionally impossible for him to fall into sin (Paul Copan, *That's Just Your Interpretation: Responding to Skeptics Who Challenge Your Faith*, Grand Rapids, 2001, p. 140).

²⁸¹ "Although this appeared to be contrary to God's command attested to by tradition, Jesus changed his mind. Because this woman's desperate need could not wait any longer, he changed the divine plan, enlarging the Lord's table to include the Canaanite woman of vigorous and tenacious faith... Her faith was proof of God's will to include the Gentiles in the congregation of believers, and it was through her testimony that Jesus' capacity for understanding expanded. From that moment on his ministry was no longer the same" (Helen Bruch Pearson, *Do What You Have the Power to Do: Studies of Six New Testament Women*, Eugene 2015², p. 83). Sundry scholars have poked fun at Mark's purportedly vague and incorrect geographical notions when he brought Jesus back to Galilee from Tyre via Sidon and the Decapolis (Mark 7:31). In reality this tortuous itinerary through pagan districts reveals a change of perspective, confirmed by the healing of the deaf-mute in the territory of the Decapolis (Mark 7:32-37). See Kelly R. Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark: 'Even the Dogs Under the Table Eat the Children's Crumbs'*, London-New York 2007, p. 57+.

ignores the precise date of the end (Mark 13:32; cf Acts 1:7); he prays to the Father²⁸² (Mark 1:35-39; 6:45, 46 - Matt 6:9-13 - Luke 3:21; 6:12, 13; 9:28, 29; 11:1-4; 22:32 - John 17:1-26); he offers prayers and supplications accompanied by high cries and tears (Heb 5:7); he places his trust in God (Heb 2:13); in Gethsemane he endures horror and anguish (Mark 14:33 - Luke 22:44); on the cross he feels abandoned to himself (Mark 15:34 - Matt 27:46), but entrusts his spirit to the Father (Luke 23:46)²⁸³.

Many critics argue that Jesus did not foresee the mission to the Gentiles (i.e., the evangelization of the heathen), as he believed the end was close at hand. Jesus in Matthew begins preaching in Galilee. The evangelist freely quotes Isa 8:23-9:1, where Galilee is said to be inhabited by pagan people. Even if it is admitted that there was a majority²⁸⁴ of Jews in I century AD, it might be defined in any case a multicultural region and, although perhaps not fully intentionally, Jesus' message reached the local Gentiles to some extent²⁸⁵. The target of Jesus' saving message, as we have just seen, had spread from the original mission to the Jews²⁸⁶ long before Paul appeared on the scene²⁸⁷.

The preaching and death of Jesus was the prerequisite for the salvation of the Gentiles, fulfilling the scriptural eschatological hopes. If we refer back to the Messianic passages²⁸⁸, it is plain that Israel's future salvation will coincide with the salvation of the pagan nations, who will recognize YHWH as their God and turn to Jerusalem and the Jewish

²⁸² Jesus' prayer was often solitary and intensified in moments of crisis and decision.

²⁸³ On the humanity of Jesus see Patrick Henry Reardon, *The Jesus We Missed: The Surprising Truth about the Humanity of Christ*, Nashville, Tn, 2012; Bruce A. Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections on the Humanity of Christ*, Wheaton, Il, 2013; Victor Copan, *Changing your Mind: The Bible, the Brain, and Spiritual Growth*, Eugene, 2016, pp. 39-47. Finally, a text with a provocative title: Ken Evers-Hood, *The Irrational Jesus: Leading the Fully Human Church*, Eugene 2016, esp. pp. 41-50.

²⁸⁴ See Mark A. Chancey, *The Myth of a Gentile Galilee*, Cambridge 2004.

²⁸⁵ In Mark 5:1-20 the story of the Gerasene demoniac, set in the Decapolis, is rich in theological implications: "When Jesus entrusts the healed demoniac with the task of telling in his country what God has done for him, he sends him to the Decapolis, a pagan territory, and thus validates the preaching of the Gospel to the non-Jews" (David L. Bartlett, *Fact and Faith: Coming to Grips with Miracles in the New Testament*, Eugene 2007², p. 43). Jesus visited the Decapolis many a time.

²⁸⁶ *Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.... I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel* (Matthew 10:5, 6; 15:24).

²⁸⁷ See Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission*, London 2008.

²⁸⁸ The Messiah will rule the pagan nations: Psalm 2: 4-9 - Psalm 110: 5, 6 - Isa 45: 21-23 - Dan 7: 9-27.

Messiah for guidance. The whole world will worship YHWH. The salvation of the Gentiles should not be seen as a mere appendage of Israel's salvation, but as an integral part of it. In conformity with the Christian proposal, against the warlike proclamations of the prophets, there was no need for a military defeat of the Kittim and associated peoples to achieve it. The kingdom of Jesus is a domain of grace and truth, not a political-military one²⁸⁹.

When Paul began to preach, the mission to the Gentiles was already underway. The problem was on terms. Around 35 AD the Hellenistic Christians preached to the Gentiles in Antioch. Peter proclaimed the Gospel among Samaritans and Gentiles. Christianity reached Rome before Paul (the 40s). There were many missions to the Gentiles, with different ideas and proposals.

The self-proclamation of the Messiah. The most important Gospel episode in this regard took place in the synagogue of Nazareth, when Jesus took the scroll of Isaiah and read: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor* (Isa 61:1- 2, but also 35:5 e 58:6). Jesus announces to the stumped audience: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing* (Luke 4:16-30 - cf Mark 6:1-6 and Matt 13: 53-58).

From imminent kingdom to immanent kingdom. April D. DeConick with this witty play on words formulates the suspicion that some Christian currents, faced with the failure of expectations, performed a perfect about-turn. Jesus would have only preached the imminence of God's kingdom, connected to the end of the world. When a few generations had passed to no avail, those Christians would have come up with the idea that the kingdom, without thunder and lightning and other apocalyptic scenarios, had already been established in the hearts and minds of the believers (immanent kingdom).

Jesus instead taught both things. The saying that not even the Son knows the hour of the end of time is thought to be authentic, precisely on the basis of the principle of embarrassment, as Jesus confesses an 'ignorance' of which neither he nor the disciples could be proud. That of the end of time was a refrain that the Essenes had been repeating for decades, and the return of the prophecy was proof of it, on the authority of the creatively interpreted prediction of Joel 2:28-32: *Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all*

²⁸⁹ On this subject I would like to point out a volume by Simon J. Joseph that accentuates the non-violent character of the revolution furthered and fostered by Jesus: *The Nonviolent Messiah: Jesus, Q, and the Enochic Tradition*, Minneapolis 2014.

flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, Lord is upon me, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.

The end of time was looming. The Baptist, Jesus and Paul shared this belief. As the crisis deepened, the apocalypse seemed closer, but the date could not be fixed exactly. For Jesus, though close, it was still placed after his death, since he himself had to appear in the clouds of heaven. Let's say that it was expected for the near future, but in a fairly nebulous way²⁹⁰. Rather, it was to be regarded as a sword of Damocles hanging over the head of mankind, and capable, with the terror that it aroused, of pushing to repentance. As for the precise time, Jesus does not hesitate to admit that only the Father knows it (an idea also present in Zechariah 14:7, Psalms of Solomon 17:21, 2 Baruch 21:8) and that it is therefore hidden from him.

Paul in 1 Thess first thinks that the end will come while he is still alive (4:17), but in 5:1-3 clearly confesses that he isn't able to indicate the date²⁹¹. What matters is that the Christian is always awake and ready (*So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober, 5:6*)²⁹².

As for the immanent kingdom, there is no doubt that Jesus himself taught it, without waiting for the next disciples to do so after the failure of the prophecies about the end²⁹³: *The kingdom of God has come to you* (Matt 12:28 - Luke 11:20) - *the kingdom of God is among you* (Luke 17:21). The kingdom of God he preached made no sense if it was to be established only after the doomsday. It consisted instead in the creation of a community of

²⁹⁰ Armed with patience, the Qumranites were bracing for a long wait: *The final period will be prolonged and will go beyond what the prophets have said, because the mysteries of God are surprising* (1QpHab 7.7f).

²⁹¹ *Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security", then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!*

²⁹² The refrain of the imminence of the end aimed tactically at shaking the conscience.

²⁹³ See Douglas W. Kennard, *Messiah Jesus: Christology in His Day and Ours*, New York 2008, p. 216.

the elect, which later had to be presented pure and upright to the Rhadamanthine judgment. To build this Yahad, Jesus ground away. This could not be a short-term prospect, if the final verdict was not to come across as an almost general condemnation, a whacking, humongous and inhuman massacre worthy of a Moloch and not of a merciful God as announced by Christ. He strove to change society before the judgment came and the task could not be a matter of a few years. There is an interval between the life of Jesus and the end of the world. It is represented in Matt 28:19, 20 by the mission to the Gentiles. Eschatologists were also the Teacher of Righteousness and the Baptist. Yet they created movements bound to last²⁹⁴.

Passages that demonstrate the expansion of the concept of the suffering righteous (even if the idea of atonement is not explicit) may be found in the *Martyrdom of Isaiah*²⁹⁵, a work with heavy Christian interpolations (even Jesus, the twelve apostles and the resurrection are adduced). The oldest original parts are 1:1-3:12 and 5:1-16 and I will make exclusive reference to them. Although no traces of the work have been discovered in Qumran, the critics see the Essene mark in the accentuated dualism between the Holy Spirit and the spirit of evil, in the names of the latter (Satan, Sammael, Beliar, Mekembekus or Matanbukus), in the criticism against the false prophets and the ruling class of Jerusalem, as well as in the intrusive allusion to the retreat of Isaiah to the wilderness²⁹⁶.

It is not hard to see in the *Martyrdom of Isaiah* the persecution suffered by the Teacher of Righteousness and his community.

*And Belkira*²⁹⁷ accused Isaiah and the prophets who were with him, saying: "Isaiah and the prophets who are with him prophesy against Jerusalem and against the cities of Judah that they will be laid waste and also against Benjamin that it will go into captivity, and also against you, o lord king,

²⁹⁴ An interpretation advocated by Nicholas Thomas Wright (*Christian Origins and the Question of God*, Vol. II: *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Minneapolis 1996, p. 320+) coincides the threat of imminent judgment with the prophecy of the approaching destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. It would therefore not be a universal cataclysm, but the easily foreseeable catastrophe of the Jewish world.

²⁹⁵ I abide by the text edited and translated by Michael A. Knibb, in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. II, Peabody, Ma, 2011, pp. 143-176.

²⁹⁶ See Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth*, Princeton 1987, pp. 208-210. Isaiah would seek refuge in the desert in a futile attempt to elude King Manasseh's persecution. In Qumran with this name a group of enemies of the Essene community were labeled, probably the Sadducees, linked to the Hasmonean kings.

²⁹⁷ In some manuscripts, Malkira.

that you will go bound with hooks and iron chains. But they prophesy lies against Israel and Judah. And Isaiah himself has said: 'I see more than Moses the prophet'. But Moses said: 'There is no man who can see the Lord and live'. But Isaiah has said: 'I have seen the Lord and behold I am alive'. Know, therefore, o king, that they are false prophets. And he called Jerusalem Sodom, and the princes of Judah and Jerusalem he has declared to be the people of Gomorrah"²⁹⁸. And he brought many accusations against Isaiah and the prophets before Manasseh. But Beliar dwelt in the heart of Manasseh and in the heart of the princes of Judah and Benjamin and of the eunuchs and of the king's counselors. And the words of Belkira pleased him very much, and he sent and seized Isaiah... And Manasseh sawed him asunder with a wood-saw. And when Isaiah was being sawed in half, his accuser, Belkira, stood up, and all the false prophets stood by, laughing and joyful because of Isaiah. And Belkira, through Mekembekus, stood before Isaiah, laughing and deriding; And Belkira said to Isaiah: "Say: 'I have lied in everything I have spoken; the ways of Manasseh are good and right, and also the ways of Belkira and those who are with him are good'". And he said this to him when he began to be sawed in half... And Isaiah was in a vision of the Lord, but his eyes were open, and he saw them. And to the prophets who were with him he said before he had been sawed in half: 'Go to the district of Tyre and Sidon, because for me alone the Lord has mixed the cup'. And when Isaiah was being sawed in half, he did not cry out, or weep, but his mouth spoke to the Holy Spirit until he was sawed in two [From chapters 3 and 5].

This work, perhaps mentioned in Heb 11:37 ("*they were sawn in two*"), was certainly known to Jesus. In my opinion, an echo may also be caught in the Gospels, which emphasize the parallelism between Isaiah and Jesus: the prophecy of his own death; the prediction of the ruin of Jerusalem; the alleged superiority over Moses for having seen God without dying²⁹⁹ and therefore the proclamation of his divine nature; the tree connected to the execution; the mockery of priests; the cup to drink; dying in prayer; the concern for his companions³⁰⁰.

²⁹⁸ In Jer 23:14 the prophets and the inhabitants of Jerusalem are compared with Sodom and Gomorrah.

²⁹⁹ *But, he said, you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live* (Exod 33:20).

³⁰⁰ Bart J. Koet, "Isaiah in Luke-Acts", in Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken, eds., *Isaiah in the New Testament: The New Testament and the Scriptures of Israel*, London-New York 2005, p. 98, wonders: "Might it be that Isaiah and his death were one of the models for Luke's portrayal of Jesus' life?". On the contrary, I surmise that Jesus consciously wanted to inspire his own life to the models known to him in the *Martyrdom of Isaiah* and in the *Songs of the Suffering Servant*, just as he purposefully made choices that would accredit him in the eyes of the Jews as the fulfiller of messianic prophecies (for example, entering Jerusalem triumphantly on a colt, according to the prediction of Zechariah 9:9 - cf. John Schultz, *The Gospel of John*, Lula, Ga, 2013, p. 115). Mordecai Schreiber asserts: "Jesus himself modeled his life after the life of Jeremiah..."

Like Isaiah (6:8-10), Jesus felt himself to be sent by God to a people stubborn in their disbelief from which he expected a violent end, like that of the son killed by the workers of the vineyard (Mark 12:6). To accomplish the prophetic mission entrusted to him, he was ready to give his life. For the Jewish establishment the prophecy had long since ended and the new prophets might only be impostors deserving to be executed on the authority of the aforementioned precept of Deuteronomy. The persecutions to which the Teacher of Righteousness had been subjected constituted a precedent. Jesus therefore was bracing for the worst³⁰¹, since he was convinced, in accordance with a tradition of which the *Martyrdom of Isaiah* was undoubtedly an integral part, that all the prophets had to die a violent death³⁰² and that it was impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem³⁰³.

In 5:4-9 Belkira acts as if he were Satan in human form and tempts Isaiah as Satan will tempt Jesus. Isaiah's death, his steadfastness, is a victory over Satan and this plays a role in redeeming the world. The martyrdom of Jesus is the abyss of *kénōsis* and therefore the climax of the triumph of the losers over the *hýbris* [overconfidence, foolish pride] of the victors. It is a new world that begins, a new way of seeing and living, the exaltation - with deeds and words - of values that are antithetical to those of the rulers of the world, the demonic beings who hold the cosmos under their heel (the *kosmokrátōres* of Eph 6:12³⁰⁴). The resurrection is the visualization of the victory of *kénōsis* over the diabolical *hýbris*, a victory that is implemented in the spread of a new conviction, of new means offered by the Church to defeat Satan and above all thanks to the transmission of the Holy Spirit - the engine of grace -, which took place precisely in the act of Jesus' death: *parédōke to Pnéuma*. The salvation of the world is the Holy Spirit, his transmission in and through the Church.

using Isaiah chapter 53 as his guide" ("The Real Suffering Servant", in *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 37.1 - 2009, p. 43).

³⁰¹ Luke 12:50: *I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!* See Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, Grand Rapids 2009, p. 301.

³⁰² The end of the Baptist only confirmed this belief.

³⁰³ Luke 13:33. See Friedrich Avemarie and Jan Willem van Henten, *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity*, London 2005, p. 93.

³⁰⁴ See Clinton E. Arnold, *Powers of Darkness: Principalities and Powers in Paul's Letters*, Downers Grove 2009², p. 53+.

In my opinion, this is the most insightful interpretation of redemption. The terms that Paul uses are those of the cultures (Hellenistic and Jewish) to which he belonged. Those were the means then available. Now perhaps we are more mature to leave behind those categories (of the 'wrath of God' type) that are not false, but insufficient, given that they are linked to a certain stage of development of the human spirit, and to try to offer an updated version that can touch the heart and mind of contemporary man. At the very instant in which Jesus transmits his Spirit to us - with grace - we become new creatures, victorious over the devil and his recurring manifestations.

Leviticus 17:11: *For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement.* The firstborn was killed by the Canaanites to propitiate Moloch. In the episode of Abraham and Isaac, the young man is spared and in his place a ram is sacrificed, which prefigures the scapegoat. This ancient concept, with some transformations, is the basis of substitutionary atonement [vicarious expiation]. The offering of the life of the unconscious firstborn saved the people. It was later replaced by the voluntary sacrifice of the martyr. But facing martyrdom, both for Isaiah and for Jesus, means revolutionizing the world, making it pass from subjection to Satan (ignorance, bestiality³⁰⁵, pleasures - in a word, petty selfishness) to the ethics of sacrifice, which is the source of redemption for others.

Rather than laying stress on the sin of Adam and the wrath of the Father, on the condemnation of the world at large, on the God on the one hand avenger and on the other so good as to offer his Son as atonement, it may be said that Jesus (like Isaiah) undergoes martyrdom to overwhelm Satan, the figure of blind egotism, and thus saves the world. He spreads with his death a new current that with that announcement (which is the invitation to aim higher, even at the cost of giving, following his example, life) saves humans, frees them from the clutches of wickedness. If the doctrine of Jesus moved the apostles, the example of his death dragged them to imitation, to become, in turn, redeemers of the world, introducing, into that system of communicating vessels that is mankind, the blood of martyrdom, the thrust upwards, towards the complete humanization of man.

The martyrdom of the prophet is seen in the *Martyrdom of Isaiah* as the supreme moment in which two opposing powers face each other: Satan in the guise of Belkira and the Holy Ghost who talks to Isaiah, comforting him in his trial. There a cosmic struggle takes place. The Holy Spirit is the divine power (unleashed by the death of Christ) that gives us the

³⁰⁵ "The immense sea of blood that gushes from your heart is the place where sinners are immersed. It is in the blood of your pain that they are purified" (Alexandrina, *Diary* 8 December 1944).

impulse to divinization, which is the meridian of the same process of humanization, consisting in acquiring intelligent love. In Satan I see the spirit of brutal greed, of ingenuity used as a noose to strangle oneself, of the conscious and unconscious forces that keep us in the trenches of unhappy bestiality, of enjoying the misfortunes of others, of psychological isolation, of disorder, of greed, of ambition, of hate, of pleasure as an anesthetic antithetical to vision. Isaiah inflicts a partial defeat on demonic powers. Only with Jesus the defeat is total, because in him God manifests himself and remains to support us in our personal struggle through the Holy Spirit who animates his Church and therefore each one of us.

The meaning of original sin must be reinterpreted in this light. It is the narrow natural selfishness over which the awareness of unity with God, and thus divinization, must triumph. With his sacrifice Jesus saves me, but not without my knowing it. He saves me, whereas with faith (and any other gift of the Spirit) he offers me a chance. It is up to me to seize it. Grace acts in profusion through the Church, inasmuch as it is precisely the Church that proposes imitation of and fusion with Christ, the elevation to the divine, in the ways most appropriate to each Christian. It is necessary to deepen our understanding of the concrete ways of charismatic action, which are profoundly psychological and certainly mysterious, but which take place in the meanders of our soul through the heft of words, examples, readings³⁰⁶, trials of suffering, encounters: in all of this is present the salvific plan of God that in the death of Jesus on the cross and in the resurrection had its Big Bang, the universal explosion of which we still feel the effects. Not killing for the faith³⁰⁷, but dying for faith; not talk and pomp, but sacrifice that saves us and others, for on the shoulders of the believer weighs not only the guilt for which he is directly accountable, but also the evil of the whole world, which demands atonement, and so in every personal sacrifice is reflected and reverberated that one of the cross.

³⁰⁶ The action of grace is not comparable to the dragging of a corpse. Rather, it is an impulse towards the conscious and convinced formulation of a new life project that can find rational justification and emotional underpinning in the tendentious interpretation of the sacred texts. These, anyway, only offer the supporting evidence to a drift already underway. Jesus (as a man) and the apostles discovered new meanings in the Hebrew Scriptures, on the grounds that, since they were already bearers of a more radical existential project, they could only read them with new eyes. Heedless of the authors' intent, in them they sought and found themselves, the justification of personal aspirations dictated by the Spirit. The case, already mentioned, of Paul and Barnabas, who in Acts 13:46-48 interpret Isa 49:6 (*I will give you as a light to the nations*) in a way functional for the planning of their mission in the world, is emblematic in this regard.

³⁰⁷ The Crusades were seen as *Gesta Dei per Francos* on the basis of the aforementioned Old Testament passages inciting religious violence.

Isaiah, a fundamental text for Essenes and Christians. The more the research advances, the more we understand the centrality of Isaiah for the origin of Christianity³⁰⁸, the heir, also in this aspect, to the Essene movement. It is enough to take into account the large number of copies of the prophecy found among the Dead Sea Scrolls to understand the consideration in which it was held by those faithful who identified both the Teacher of Righteousness and Israel (the "true" Israel, that is, the persecuted Yahad and therefore each of its members³⁰⁹) in the Suffering Servant - perhaps a creation of theirs³¹⁰. From the

³⁰⁸ John F. A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity*, Cambridge 1996. Since ancient times, Christians reckoned Isaiah to be more evangelist than prophet.

³⁰⁹ "The boundaries between the individual and the community appear fluid; the exemplary individual embodies the community and this in turn can be represented by an ideal individual figure" (Martin Hengel with Daniel P. Bailey, "The Effective History of Isaiah 53 in the Pre-Christian Period", in Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, eds., *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Period*, Grand Rapids 2004, p. 145). It should also be noted that, in the light of the interpretation presented in these pages, the Essene Yahad, the "true" Israel, "my servant Israel" (49:3), could, without contradiction, assume the task of bringing back to God Israel (49:5), that is, the totality, in a purely national sense, of that people. The Israel of 49:3 is to be meant as a subset of the Israel of 49:5 (cf. Andrew E. Steinmann, Michael Eschelbach, Curtis Giese and Paul Puffe, *Called to Be God's People: An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Eugene 2006, p. 522). On the atoning value of suffering for the Qumranites see Nicholas T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, Vol. II: Jesus and the Victory of God, Minneapolis 1996, pp. 581, 582.

³¹⁰ The *Songs of the Suffering Servant* (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12) create four caesuras in the text of the already pseudepigraphic Second Isaiah and constitute an evident insertion that interrupts the thread of discourse. They describe the vocation and mission of the Servant (first two hymns) and the sufferings he suffered (last two). Therefore, we may hold them as a prophecy only in the sense that the man, who historically existed and was already dead at the time of the composition of the songs, acted, in the literary transfiguration, as a foretelling and model for a future character who would choose to be inspired by him. The only predictions - in the last song - concern the prize reserved for the Servant, who will be compensated for the sacrifice and will see his community, the Yahad, perpetuate (*he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days*, 53:10). A further confirmation of the pseudepigraphy: under the name of Isaiah hides itself the Essene community that produced the four hymns, the same community that in the *Martyrdom of Isaiah* will be projected into the final imaginary vicissitudes of the prophet. The Essene signature is, in my opinion, to be found in Isa 53:9 *They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich*. The equalizing between rich and criminals, accounted for by parallelism, leads back to the heirs of the Enochian tradition who called themselves "the Poor" and considered the rich and powerful cursed by God (cf. Catherine M. Murphy, *Wealth in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Qumran Community*, Leiden 2002, p. 45; David A. Fiensy, *Jesus the Galilean: Soundings in a First Century Life*, Piscataway 2007, p. 113). Even an anagram pitched in: "[In Hebrew], the consonants of 'wicked man' and 'rich man', are the same, though their order is reversed... The assonance suggests "an association between *wicked* and *rich*" (Goldingay and Payne)" (David J. MacLeod, *The Suffering Servant of the Lord: A Prophecy of Jesus Christ*, Eugene 2019², p. 108, n. 75). The exaltation, typical of apocalyptic literature, of the poor, meek and oppressed (*The People of God*, Is 3:15), disseminated in

persecution and death of the Servant of YHWH conjured up by the prophet the Essenes passed to the paradigmatic persecution and death lived by the prophet. The variation is realized in the *Martyrdom of Isaiah*, in which we no longer have to deal with the literary character of the Suffering Servant, but it is the prophet himself who is presented as the one who has incarnated in his life and death the destiny prefigured for any pious believer³¹¹.

Jesus' resurrection. The concept of resurrection - spread in Yehud by the Zoroastrian conquerors - offered the righteous man a definitive justice, which would otherwise have been denied to him. The passage 26:19 of Isaiah (*Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead.*) is perhaps the first scriptural reference to resurrection. This doctrine - though challenged by the Sadducees - caught on in Jewish consciousness in various versions. The biblical predictions of the resurrection of the Messiah fall within the creative interpretation³¹².

Psalm 16:10, 11 quoted by Peter in Acts (2:27-28) (*For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. You have made known to me the ways of*

numerous chapters, proves that the Essene manipulation of the prophetic text goes far beyond the *Songs of the Suffering Servant*. On the other hand, it is untenable that the doctrine of vicarious atonement, so vividly expressed by the most important of the prophets, after having been silenced by the later authors of the Tanakh, as if by magic resurfaces in 2 Maccabees, an apocryphal text of the II century BC, not by chance the same period in which the Teacher of Righteousness lived. In my opinion, the book of Isaiah in its nodal points may be regarded as the self-representation, in a cryptic form, of the Yahad. To find the original core of the prophetic text is today judged by scholars a virtually impossible task, as it lies buried under an avalanche of expositive additions (Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, New York 2000, p. 90), having been repeatedly integrated and reinterpreted for centuries in the framework of new historical developments (Richard L. Schultz, "How Many Isaiahs Were There and What Does It Matter?", in Vincent E. Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics*, Downers Grove 2004 p. 165).

³¹¹ In Acts 8:34, concerning the pains of the Suffering Servant, the eunuch asks Philip: *About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?* "This would indicate that Luke knew the interpretation that the prophet Isaiah, identified with the Servant, would be a model for Jesus" (Bart J. Koet, "Isaiah in Luke-Acts", *cit.*, p. 98).

³¹² See Lidija Novakovic, *Raised from the Dead...*, *cit.* Of the same author: *Resurrection: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London-New York 2016.

life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence) does not certainly point only to the Messiah, but generally to all hassidim³¹³.

Misleading is the reference to Hosea 6:1-2, where the people, falsely repentant, says: "Come, let us return to the Lord; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. This is the hope of the people, but from the context it seems clear that God is unwilling to support it. Correctly, we have to see here the standpoint of sinners, not the promise of God³¹⁴.

When Matthew 12:40 creatively interprets the expulsion of Jonah, after three days, from the belly of the cetacean as a prefiguration of Jesus' resurrection, he makes a personal addition to an older logion, as it is shown by the comparative analysis of the synoptics³¹⁵.

Jesus, however, had often predicted his resurrection (Mark 8:31, 9:31; 10:33)³¹⁶. In Mark 6:16 one wondered whether the Baptist had risen from the dead. Jesus' enemies also knew that he had promised to rise (Matt 27:62-64). Jesus' forecasts are authentic, as the disciples were flummoxed by the announcement (Mark 9:32). Only after the tomb was found empty did the seed of faith deposited in their hearts by Jesus' words mature into the conviction that the Master had risen.

From their faith is born ours. The risen Christ was and is present through the Spirit in the community of the faithful. This is the fundamental experience for us believers. Jesus' death

³¹³ In his speech in Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:16-41), Paul, apart from Psalm 16:10, appeals to two passages (*You are my Son. Today I have begotten you*, Psalm 2:7 - *I will give you the holy promises made to David*, Isa 55:3) from which it is hard to extract a hint at Jesus' resurrection without the talisman of creative interpretation.

³¹⁴ It must be said that neither the New Testament nor the early Fathers of the Church explicitly link the passage from Hosea with the resurrection of Jesus. The first to do so is Tertullian in *Adversus Marcionem* IV 43 1 and *Adversus Iudaeos* XIII 23 (W. Edward Glenny, *Hosea: A Commentary based on Hosea in the Codex Vaticanus*, Leiden 2013, p. 111).

³¹⁵ See Raymond E. Brown, "How Much Did Jesus Know? - A Survey of the Biblical Evidence", in Craig A. Evans, ed., *The Historical Jesus: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies*. Vol. III: *Jesus' Mission, Death, and Resurrection*, London-New York 2004, p. 55.

³¹⁶ Even if there were no scriptural attestations, it would be logical to assume them, because Jesus, convinced of being a sharer in the divine nature, could not in the least think that the beloved Father would not save him from the corruption of the tomb. Moreover, identifying himself with the Suffering Servant, he read Isa 53:10 (*he shall prolong his days*) and 11 (*he shall see light*) as prophecies of his own resurrection. See John D. Barry, *The Resurrected Servant in Isaiah*, Colorado Springs 2010.

was not the last page of the book for the disciples. After two millennia, we keep on leafing through the book of his life, or better writing it, under the guidance of the Spirit.

Man shapes reality, or rather the perception of reality, in line with his personal cultural assumptions. These act as an informing, shaping filter. It is a fact that the basic elements remain firm, indeed very firm. In the Resurrection sticks out as certain the empty tomb with the strips of linen lying inside. The rest is divine interpretative communication emerging from the depths of consciousness, an inner voice, a lightning intuition, the opening of a new horizon, enthusiasm that translates into vision³¹⁷, into alternate state of consciousness³¹⁸, a state that is not illusory but revealing.

John. The Gospel of John³¹⁹ by skeptics is considered the less valid in terms of history and therefore the less reliable. On the contrary, there are many temporal markers³²⁰ and its chronological reconstruction of the Last Supper and death is more precise. Spiritualization

³¹⁷ Faith generates vision, and not contrariwise. *Blessed are those who believe without seeing* (John 20:29). The believer will 'see' precisely by virtue of faith. *God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses* (Acts 10:40-41). The risen Jesus did not appear to the unbelievers, given that in their stubbornness they would have devised pretexts of every sort to blot out the value of the evidence: anyhow, they would not have seen him. The apparitions of the risen Jesus are projections of faith, for the pure in heart will see God (Matthew 5:8). But purity of heart is already a consequence of faith, as is deduced from Acts 15:9, where it is plainly stated that God purifies hearts with faith (see Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts of the Apostles Through the Centuries*, Chichester, SXW, 2017, p. 163). Biblical visions lend themselves to multiple explanations. Concerning Matthew 27:52-53 (*The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many*), I point out the trailblazing interpretation of Kenneth L. Waters ("Matthew 27:52-53 as Apocalyptic Apostrophe: Temporal-Spatial Collapse in the Gospel of Matthew", in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 122.3 - 2003, pp. 489-515) who, rather than a historical account, holds it to be an apocalyptic insert.

³¹⁸ I do prefer 'alternate'/'alternative' to 'altered'. I use, however, 'alternate'/'alternative' in antithesis not to a 'normal' phantom state, but to other possible states.

³¹⁹ On the Fourth Gospel I point out Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, London 2002; Colin G. Kruse, *The Gospel According to John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Grand Rapids 2004; Dwight M. Smith, *The Fourth Gospel in Four Dimensions*, Columbia, SC, 2008; Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel*, Grand Rapids 2008; James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus as Mirrored in John: The Genius in the New Testament*, London-New York 2019; James H. Charlesworth and Jolyon G. R. Pruszinski, eds., *Jesus Research: The Gospel of John in Historical Inquiry*, London-New York 2019.

³²⁰ For example, *This temple has been under construction for forty-six years* (2:20). We are in 27 AD, the beginning of Jesus' mission.

does not imply the repudiation of historicity³²¹. John has his own geography. Bethany beyond the Jordan, Aenon near Salim, Sychar, Gerizim, are names unknown to the other Gospels. The description of the probatic pool with its five arcades has been substantiated by excavations.

That of John immediately appears as a Gospel different from the synoptics. Only eight disciples are mentioned in it and the term apostle (so dear to Paul, who proudly claimed the title) is never used. Baptism, temptations in the desert, exorcisms, parables, the Transfiguration, the confession of Peter *You are the Messiah*, the institution of the Eucharist, the agony in Gethsemane, the cry of Jesus on the cross *My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?* are lacking in the Fourth Gospel. On the other hand, the wedding at Cana, the episodes of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, the resurrection of Lazarus and the washing of feet are exclusive to John, who moves the expulsion of the merchants from the Temple to the beginning of Jesus' mission. This takes place more in Judea than in Galilee. Jesus visits Jerusalem four times (only once in the synoptics). But the similarities are many, even if the different tone of the exposition is undeniable. John wanted to make a selection of the infinite things that could be said and authored a book in order to arouse or strengthen faith (20:30-31; 21:25). Jesus makes long speeches within which, however, it is possible to identify dozens of logia.

It is the Spirit that allows John to remember and live again in a true, insightful, enlightening way the experience with Christ, so much so that he makes Jesus speak in his own personal style. In fact, in his discourse with Nicodemus, strangely enough, Jesus speaks of himself in the third person. It means that John puts in his mouth what he thinks of him. Even the last six verses of chapter 3, assigned to the Baptist, are rather extensions of the author. Scholars of Jesus Seminar have come to the conclusion that in all of his Gospel there is not a single phrase historically spoken by Jesus. Even so, it does not mean, however, that his reconstruction is false.

He draws on an oral tradition belonging to the beloved Disciple, presented as a witness and author (indirectly) of the same Gospel. The Christ he gives us is that of the post-Easter faith, an interpretation dictated by love.

He, more than facts, wants to give their meaning. For him the memory of the disciples is a mixture of witness, remembrance, faith and Scripture. The Spirit is the living presence of

³²¹ See the three volumes by Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just and Tom Thatcher, eds., *Jesus, John, and History*, SBL Press, Atlanta, which appeared in 2007, 2009 and 2015.

Christ in the community and it is by virtue of him that God's revelation in Christ is available to all. John is not projected into the eschatological future. The eschatology is already accomplished, eternal life is already here; eternity is now, immersed in history: *the hour is coming, and is now here* (4:23). The Church is love, the place of God's manifestation.

Mutual indwelling is not pantheistic absorption or ecstatic condition, but communion with God, fruitful of works. I quote the basic texts of mystical interpenetration in Paul and John: *you in God*: Col 3:3; John 17:21; *you in Christ* 2 Cor 5:17; John 15:4-5; *you in the Spirit* Rom 8:9; John 4:23-24 - *God in you* Phil 2:13; John 14:23; *Christ in you* Col 1:27; John 14:18-20; *the Spirit in you* 1 Cor 3:16; John 14:16-17. The Christian visionary receives divine glory by suffering like Jesus on the cross, in order to be a witness (proclaimer). John's mysticism - to be inserted in the framework of Jewish mysticism³²² - is communitarian, not personal: achieved in common worship. For this reason his Gospel is esoteric, symbolic, allusive. Often the truth is better conveyed by symbols, myths or narratives. The symbol in John is a sensitive reality thanks to which the reader is personally involved in the transforming experience of a transcendent mystery³²³. John's spirituality is contemplative, centered not on institutions, but on life and union with God, beyond rituals, titles and formulas. The theme of Jesus as the Lamb of God is encountered only in 1:29, 36 (words of the Baptist). For the rest, Jesus is rather the good Shepherd than the sacrificial Lamb. More than the Pauline theology of atonement, we find that of revelation, anticipated by Matthew 11:27: *No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him*³²⁴.

The Acts of the Apostles. It is generally accepted that the author of the Acts is the same author of Luke's Gospel and that the two works should be held as a whole. The history of the early Church and her two main characters, Peter and Paul, is seen in the light of the continuous intervention of the Holy Spirit who enlightens and enlivens the community of

³²² Jey J. Kanagaraj, *'Mysticism' in the Gospel of John: An Inquiry into Its Background*, Sheffield 1998. Yet John, in controversy with the Jewish visionary ascensions, sees in Jesus the earthly *kavod*, the manifestation of God's glory in history (April D. DeConick, "John Rivals Thomas: From Community Conflict to Gospel Narrative", in Robert T. Fortna and Tom Thatcher, eds., *Jesus in the Johannine Tradition*, Louisville, Ky, 2001, p. 311). For the relationship between John and Qumran I point out Mary L. Coloe and Tom Thatcher, eds., *John, Qumran, and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Sixty Years of Discovery and Debate*, Atlanta 2011.

³²³ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, New York 1999, p. 66.

³²⁴ Matthew here means Jesus as Wisdom personified. See Jon C. Laansma, *'I Will Give You Rest': The Rest Motif in the New Testament with Special Reference to Mt 11 and Heb 3-4*, Eugene 2015², pp. 1-9.

believers and in particular its leaders. Someone defined the Acts as the epic of the Holy Spirit.

According to Ernst von Dobschütz³²⁵, Pentecost must coincide with the last apparition of the risen Jesus and the Ascension. A single fact would be divided by Luke - for the convenience of the reader's understanding - into three distinct moments, which, however, are logically interrelated: if Jesus appears for the last time, it means that immediately thereafter he is no longer here, but reigns seated in the glory of the Father. On the other hand, if Jesus has disappeared, that is not why he left us alone, since his promise to continue to be among us through his Spirit cannot fail to be fulfilled³²⁶.

In the Ascension, the disciples saw Jesus rising to heaven until he was hidden by a cloud. Luke transposes visually, according to the canons of the time³²⁷, a simple truth: since he was no longer seen, Jesus had certainly ascended to the Father and someone from the entourage comforted the apostles by reminding them that one day he would return. In fact, the explanation given by the two men in white robes (two angels, or perhaps more prosaically two Essenes³²⁸, given that, on the testimony of Flavius Josephus³²⁹, they wore white) "*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been*

³²⁵ *Ostern und Pfingsten. Eine Studie zu 1. Korinther 15*, Leipzig 1903.

³²⁶ Quite a few theologians maintain that in the experience of the believer no distinction may be made between the exalted Christ and the Holy Spirit. Cf Ralph Del Colle, "The Triune God", in Colin E. Gunton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, Cambridge 2004, p. 125.

³²⁷ See Hans-Josef Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity: The World of the Acts of the Apostles*, Edinburgh 2000, p. 6; Shelly Matthews, "Elijah, Ezekiel, and Romulus: Luke's Flesh and Bones (Luke 24:39) in Light of Ancient Narratives of Ascent, Resurrection, and Apotheosis", in George J. Brooke and Ariel Feldman, eds., *On Prophets, Warriors, and Kings: Former Prophets through the Eyes of Their Interpreters*, Berlin 2016, pp. 161-182. "Luke appeared to have composed his ascension story in antithetical parallel to the apotheoses of emperors" (Peter Lampe, "Caesar, Moses and Jesus as 'God', 'godlike' or 'God's Son': Constructions of Divinity in Paganism, Philo and Christianity in the Greco-Roman World", in Francois Tolmie and Rian Venter, *Making Sense of Jesus: Experiences, Interpretations and Identities*, Bloemfontein 2017, p. 23).

³²⁸ Most scholars allow that Jesus had Essene friends and disciples.

³²⁹ *The Jewish War* II 123; II 137. "The wearing of white clothes may have been part of an *imitatio vitae angelicae*" (Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, "The White Dress of the Essenes", in Florentino García Martínez and Gerard P. Luttikhuis, eds., *Jerusalem, Alexandria, Rome: Studies in Ancient Cultural Interaction in Honour of A. Hilhorst*, Leiden 2003, p. 312).

taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven (Acts 1:11) recalls Jesus' promise to return on the clouds of heaven as a righteous judge.

At Pentecost the Spirit of Jesus poured into the Church might only be perceived and expressed biblically as wind and fire³³⁰, symbols of an exciting and life-giving force that surmounts ethnic boundaries (the Apostles' discourse is translated into every language). The transmission of the Spirit by Jesus - without wind or fire - is already attested to before Pentecost: on the cross (*Parédōke to pneuma*, he handed over his spirit, NABRE/MOUNCE John 19:30), in the Upper Room on Easter Sunday (*He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit"*, John 20:22)³³¹. At Pentecost did not occur the first outpouring of the Spirit, but the first collective awareness, in a vibe of fervent mysticism, of his indwelling power.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira evokes Essene communism. In this episode of gruesome cruelty³³² a message is hidden that has its counterpart in Matthew 12:31: *People will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.* Luke (not coincidentally him) means that you absolutely must not lie to the Holy Spirit.

Thunderstruck on the road to Damascus. Besides some allusions in the Pauline Letters (Gal 1:11-17 - Rom 7:7-25 - Phil 3:3-17 - 1 Tim 1:12-17), we have three accounts of Saul's

³³⁰ For a naturalistic explanation see Marek Szczerbiński, "Thunderstorm Electricity as the Probable Origin of the Pentecost Kerygma", in *Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny*, 66.4 - 2013, pp. 317-319. The experience of Pentecost should be set in the Greco-Roman literary context. See Heidrun Gunkel, Rainer Hirsch-Luipold and John R. Levison, "Plutarch and Pentecost: An Exploration in Interdisciplinary Collaboration", in Jörg Frey and John R. Levison, eds., *The Holy Spirit...*, cit., pp. 63-94.

³³¹ For John J. Pilch, professor of Sacred Scripture at Georgetown University in Washington, the oldest Catholic university in the United States, the disciples would have lived collective experiences of ecstatic trance at Ascension and Pentecost (*Visions and Healing*, cit., pp. 18-27). The apparitions of the risen Jesus would also be perceived by the disciples in an alternate state of consciousness, without being reduced to hallucinations (John J. Pilch, *Flights of the Soul: Visions, Heavenly Journeys, and Peak Experiences in the Biblical World*, Grand Rapids 2011, p. 10, 11, 120). Preparatory elements for such experiences include isolation or withdrawal from society, fasting, sexual abstinence, sleep deprivation, prayer and meditation (pp. 53, 54). On visions and voices I point out Tanya Marie Luhrmann, Howard Nusbaum and Ronald Thisted, "The Absorption Hypothesis: Learning to Hear God in Evangelical Christianity", in *American Anthropologist*, 112.1 - 2010, pp. 66-78; Tanya Marie Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*, New York 2012.

³³² James D. G. Dunn considers it "one of the most unnerving episodes in the whole of the New Testament" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, Peterborough 1996, p. 62). A fresh bid to unravel the enigma is in my paper *The Expulsion Curse*, 2019, academia.edu.

conversion in Acts (9:1-9; 22:6-11; 26:12-18) with some variations. I try to give a psychological explanation of the event. Paul, a proud enemy of the Christians, a fanatical Pharisee, witnessed the martyrdom of Stephen, something repugnant even for the tastes of the time, on the grounds that it was a) the stoning b) of a young man c) who died praying for the murderers. Paul not only witnessed, but somehow took part in it, since he approved the sentence and kept the cloaks of the witnesses (Acts 7:58-8:1)³³³. Such an event made the doubt that he had long harbored in his soul more harrowing. Precisely to drive it back, to prove primarily to himself the firmness of his convictions, he took the initiative to ask the high priest for permission to arrest the Christians of Damascus.

Almost at the end of the march, which lasted for hours under a scorching sun, around noon (Acts 22:6), when he was utterly knackered, the inner wrangle between the two conflicting feelings (hatred and admiration) reached its climax. He saw a glow, that is, he was dazzled by the sun, and fell to the ground, while the conflict was resolved in favor of the new faith through the resounding of a thunderous inner voice: *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?... I am Jesus of Nazareth* (9:4-5). The text points out (9:7): *The men who were traveling with him heard the voice but saw no one*³³⁴. Notice that not even Paul had seen anyone. Luke on v. 3 had merely observed: *Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him*. The supposed voice of Jesus that his companions heard was actually the counterfeit voice of Paul, which reproduced the interior locution (a kind of voice of conscience). Paul, in a brief dialogue with himself, this time with his natural voice, answered *Who are you, Lord?*, thus covering both roles³³⁵. This reconstruction is based on precedents that highlight the psychosomatic aspects of inner conflicts. When these are brought to excess, the subject impersonates both interlocutors³³⁶.

³³³ The overwhelming sense of guilt that arose in Paul's soul following the misdeed can account for the pervasive centrality assumed in his preaching by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus and the rejection of religious violence sanctioned in the Mosaic Law. For the latter aspect see Derek Flood, *Healing the Gospel: A Radical Vision for Grace, Justice, and the Cross*, Eugene 2012, pp. 9-16.

³³⁴ The reverse in 22:9: *Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me*. However, some in this case translate the verb *akouō* not as "to hear", but as "to perceive distinctly so as to understand".

³³⁵ "In alternative states of consciousness the subject sometimes changes his voice and it is possible that [in the Transfiguration] the Father spoke through Jesus or one of the three disciples" (Bruce J. Malina, "The Transfiguration...", *cit.*, p. 60).

³³⁶ I quote Jung's psychoanalytical explanation: "Saul had long been a Christian without realizing it, and this explains his fanatical hatred for Christians, because fanaticism is always rooted in those who have to stifle a

God speaks to us in conscience. Sometimes the conflict takes place without being too conspicuous; sometimes, as in Paul's case, it can take spectacular forms. Even the fact that he remained blind for three days is easily explainable without having to resort to miracles. To Ananias some Christians told the news of conversion. He was reluctant to go to Paul, he was afraid. What is reported in the Acts is the dialogue between his fears and the inner voice of divine origin that reassures him. All very simple, provided that the visions and dialogues with God are placed inside the conscience.

To understand the equivalence between angel and inner voice (the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) it is enlightening to notice that in two different episodes of the Acts³³⁷ we meet first an angel and then the Holy Spirit, as if they performed the same function, to communicate to the believer what to do. The perceived presence of the angel may depend on a cultural conditioning that works like this: if there is the message, the messenger (which is the meaning of the Greek word *ángelos* and the Hebrew *malakh*) cannot be missing. In a more internalized cultural mindset, the vision of the angel is not indispensable, since the believer recognizes beyond all doubt the origin of the voice that warns him in his innermost self: God speaks to him without intermediaries.

The Letters of Paul. The Pauline Letters are a very precious document, because they constitute the first authoritative proof of the existence of Jesus and the Church; the first Christian writings, only few decades after the crucifixion.

Even the spurious letters reflect Paul's mentality and are therefore the work of authors who referred to his doctrine and teachings. Pseudepigraphists knew how to take their good precautions. 2 Thess 3:17: *I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.* A suspicious excess of caution. Like in Revelation

secret doubt. That is why converts are always the worst fanatic. The vision of Christ on the road to Damascus only marks the moment when the Christian complex unconscious burst into Paul's ego. The fact that Christ appeared to him objectively, in the form of a vision, is explained by the fact that Saul's Christianity was an unconscious complex that appeared to him in projection, as if it were foreign to him. He could not see himself as a Christian and therefore, out of pure resistance to Christ, he became blind and could only be healed by a Christian. We know that psychogenic blindness is always an unconscious refusal to see, which in Saul's case corresponds to his fanatical refusal of Christianity" (Carl G. Jung, "The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche", in *The Collected Works*, # I-XX, London-New York 2014, pp. 3263, 3264).

³³⁷ Philip and the eunuch, 8:26, 29 - Peter and Cornelius, 10:3, 19.

22:18-19, where there is a threat of severe punishment for anyone who dares to add or remove anything. Precisely what the enigmatic final editor of the book had done³³⁸.

The thesis is well known that Christianity is an invention of the Christian community, in contrast to the true Jesus, an unsuccessful anti-Roman zealot, a loser, a defeated. After the drama of the cross the first Christians would have created a diametrically opposed Jesus, detached from the world, preacher of love, willing to die to atone for the sins of men. Paul is considered by many to be the originator of Christianity, almost as if he had introduced unprecedented innovations. On the contrary, it may be shown that all the innovations attributed to him were well present in the Jewish world - already itself imbued with Hellenism and other influences - even before Jesus³³⁹.

As has been well said, Christianity brings nothing new, except the figure of Jesus, in whom it embodies the idea, also in the air, of the manifestation of God. There was at one point in history a man who became convinced that he was the angel of God, the Son of God, with the mission to preach the new kingdom and to sacrifice himself. Each of the elements of Jesus' doctrine finds its antecedent either in the Tanakh or the Pseudepigrapha or the Essenes or even in Hellenistic and Iranian doctrines that had already pervaded Palestine. The Teacher of Righteousness, placing himself above the angels and Moses (see below), implicitly boasted at least a participation in the divine being. Jesus led to a sublime synthesis factors that pre-existed disjointed. Here lies the uniqueness and not in each individual element. The only novelty consists in claiming for himself a divine authority stemming from the special relationship of communion with God³⁴⁰.

³³⁸ The formula is taken from Deut 4:2 and 13:1. The original source is the Covenant of Succession (672 BC) of the Assyrian sovereign Esarhaddon (Bernard M. Levinson, "The Neo-Assyrian Origins of the Canon Formula in Deuteronomy 13:1", in Deborah A. Green and Laura S. Lieber, eds., *Scriptural Exegesis: The Shapes of Culture and the Religious Imagination. Essays in Honor of Michael Fishbane*, Oxford 2009, pp. 25-45).

³³⁹ I point out on this subject Gabriele Boccaccini, Carlos A. Segovia and Cameron J. Doody, eds., *Paul the Jew: Rereading the Apostle as a Figure of Second Temple Judaism*, Minneapolis 2016. For a wider picture see two books by Paula Fredriksen: *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle*, New Haven 2017; *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation*, New Haven 2018.

³⁴⁰ "Christian faith does not depend on uniqueness. Questions of parallels are historical questions, not faith questions... Christians used the already existing title of messiah to interpret the significance of Jesus and in the process modified the concept according to what was proclaimed about Jesus... Although Christianity had points of contact with Stoicism, the mysteries, the Qumran community and so on, the total worldview was often quite different, or the context in which the items were placed was different. Originality may be found

Consequently, Paul's doctrines are nothing new³⁴¹. Precedents may be easily spotted of Christ's atoning death, of the openness to the Gentiles, of the refusal of circumcision. Before the revolt of the Maccabees, due to the scarcity of sources, we are not able to document the obligation of circumcision for the converts³⁴². But even in the Jewish Bible this practice did not seem so imperative. Circumcision of the heart was seen as more relevant (Deut 10:16; 30:6 - Jer 4:4; 9:2-25). Against Hasmonean theory and practice, in the Dead Sea Scrolls the circumcision of the Gentiles was judged negligible, as not even through it would a foreigner ever become a Jew. Paradoxically, the result would be a universalistic vision not unlike Paul's³⁴³. In Adiabene, the merchant Ananias, who converted the future King Izates to Judaism in the first decades of the I century AD, did not deem circumcision compulsory for the new converts. It was enough the devout adherence to the ethical principles of Judaism³⁴⁴.

The Pauline idea of redemption and atoning death is already present in Jewish culture³⁴⁵. Eleazar prays: *Consider my blood a sacrifice for their purification and take my life in exchange for theirs* (4 Macc 6:26-29 - around the beginning of the Christian era). More explicitly: *They became a substitute, dying for the sins of the nation, and through the blood of these divine men and their propitiatory death divine providence saved Israel* (4 Macc 17:20-22)³⁴⁶.

in the way things are put together and not in the invention of a completely new idea or practice. So far as we can tell, Christianity certainly represented a new combination for its time" (Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Grand Rapids 2003³, p. 3).

³⁴¹ For example, it is surprising that passages, terms and expressions of the First Letter to the Thessalonians of the 'Pharisee' Paul let themselves be understood in the light of the Dead Sea Scrolls. See Claude Coulot, "La première épître de Paul aux Thessaloniens à la lumière des manuscrits de la mer Morte", in Jean-Sébastien Rey, ed., *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Pauline Literature*, Leiden 2014, pp. 123-142.

³⁴² Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Who was a Jew? Rabbinic and Halakhic Perspectives on the Jewish-Christian Schism*, Jersey City 1985, p. 25.

³⁴³ This is the thesis of Daniel R. Schwartz ("Ends Meet: Qumran and Paul on Circumcision", in Jean-Sébastien Rey, ed., *The Dead Sea Scrolls..., cit.*, pp. 295-307, esp. p. 303).

³⁴⁴ Nina E. Livesey, *Circumcision..., cit.*, pp. 35-40.

³⁴⁵ See Martin Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament*, Eugene 2007; Jarvis J. Williams, *Maccabean Martyr Traditions in Paul's Theology of the Atonement*, Eugene 2010.

³⁴⁶ See also 2 Maccabees 6 and 7 (Pierre J. Jordaan, "Ritual, Rage and Revenge in 2 Maccabees 6 and 7", in *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies*, 68-1 - 2012, Art. #1271. As for Qumran, 4Q540-541 (Apocryphon of Levi) alludes to the persecution and sufferings of a priest whose sacrifice will be expiatory. In addition, at

Against the prevailing current of Judaism, Paul (like Jesus) believed that the prophecy was not dead; on the contrary, he thought himself to be living proof of it. This concept is already well attested to in Qumran.

The rejection, attributed to Paul, of the Law, as opposed to grace, is only an overstatement, inasmuch as it does not concern the Law as a whole, but only the norms which the Judaizers most cared about: the purity of food, circumcision and other arbitrary ethnic-religious markers already condemned by others. For example, when in Luke 3:8 we read that God can raise children to Abraham even from stones, the Baptist also implicitly meant that circumcision was not necessary to enter the New Covenant. Paul, as has been shown³⁴⁷, does not reject the *halakhot*, the rules of Jewish behavior. This may be inferred from the First Letter to the Corinthians, where he strictly adheres to them. Therefore, faith, with attached justification, does not exclude works in general, but only those distinctive features thus treasured by mainstream Jews, whereas for him the faithful has to follow, even in an austere way, ethics, for example in the field of marriage, and to demonstrate through concrete action that he possesses the gifts of the Spirit of Jesus. So the alleged Lutheran interpretation condensed in the *Pecca fortiter, crede fortius*, is only a parody of the true thought of Paul, who was, if ever, a rigorist³⁴⁸.

A question that needs to be studied in depth is the supposed lack of hints at the life and teachings of Jesus. For Paul acknowledgedly the central doctrine was that of salvation, but it is simply weird and grotesque to think that he held forth for hours on end in Christian communities on the saving death of Christ and his resurrection, without mentioning his doctrine and his life before the Passion.

the beginning of Col. 8 of the *Community Rule* we read: "In the council of the community twelve men and three priests will sit, perfectly versed in the questions of the Law. Their works should be truth, righteousness, justice, loving kindness and humility. They shall preserve the faith in the land with steadfastness and meekness and atone for the sins [of all] through the practice of justice and suffering the pains of affliction". Let us bear in mind, in the classical world, the sacrifice of Codrus and the *devotio* of Publius Decius Mus (George S. Goodspeed, "Atonement in Non-Christian Religions - IV: Atonement by Substitution", in *The Biblical World*, 17, 4 April 1901, Chicago).

³⁴⁷ "Paul's letters contain an ethical code that is at least as demanding as those that are found in other forms of early Judaism" (Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, Oxford 2016, p. 6).

³⁴⁸ *What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!* (Rom 6:15).

Revelation. Written by many hands, made up of multiple compositional layers, this work has become the fundamental text of apocalypticism³⁴⁹. Every honest reader cannot but class it as a violent and ruthless invective, which bespeaks its Essene precedents in the *War Scroll* and the *Temple Scroll*. In it prevails an attitude of abandonment to the most malevolent fantasies, which might well have been the case with a Jew upset by the destruction of the Temple and in search of revenge³⁵⁰. It is a book that conjures up the vindictive God of the Old Testament³⁵¹, while ignoring the sweetness and mercy preached by Jesus. Not coincidentally its inclusion in the canon was long opposed, especially in the Eastern Churches and among the reformers³⁵².

There are evident different sources, repetitions and a certain illogicalness of construction. For some experts (Charles C. Torrey, Robert B. Y. Scott) his barbaric Greek³⁵³ serves to translate anyhow an Aramaic original³⁵⁴. Even the dense network of allusions to the Old Testament - between 250 (Charles) and 700 (Staehlin) - denotes that it was a book written by Jews for Jews. Today, the reader is stuck in ciphered language, in the secret code of the Qumranic type.

³⁴⁹ By the final editor the identity of John is affirmed three times in the first chapter (1:1, 4, 9) and twice in the last two (21:2; 22:8).

³⁵⁰ "The Apocalypse is a work clearly Jewish" (Loren L. Johns, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Apocalypse of John", in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Vol. III: *The Scrolls and Christian Origins*, Waco, Tx, 2006, p. 259).

³⁵¹ *Because they shed the blood of saints and prophets, you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve! 16: 6 - Render to her as she herself has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed. 18: 6.*

³⁵² See Eugenia Scarvelis Constantinou, *Guiding to a Blessed End: Andrew of Caesarea and His Apocalypse Commentary in the Ancient Church*, Washington 2013, pp. 14-46; Larry V. Crutchfield, "Revelation in the New Testament Canon", in Mal Couch, ed., *A Bible Handbook to Revelation*, Grand Rapids 2001, pp. 22-35.

³⁵³ The appreciation is due to saint Dionysius of Alexandria († 264/265).

³⁵⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is of different opinion: "John, even possessing Greek very well, prefers to write the whole book in a Hebraizing idiom that gives the sentence a hieratic and traditional character". (*Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, Minneapolis 1991, p. 29). On the topic I refer to Laurențiu Florentin Moț, *Morphological and Syntactical Irregularities in the Book of Revelation: A Greek Hypothesis*, Leiden 2015.

The initial author had considered the end looming³⁵⁵. But the Jewish war, the long-awaited cosmic battle, had resulted in defeat. Then everything moved into the future, after a thousand years, in the wake of 1 Enoch 91-104. Revelation resumes the Essene theories about the end of the corrupt world, which will be replaced by an incorruptible one. Satan is imprisoned and tortured eternally, because he refuses to repent. The evil city, Rome, indicated in Qumranic code as Babylon³⁵⁶, also collapses by reason of its obstinacy. Following Iranian apocalypticism, the struggle ends with the triumph of good. The seven torches (4:5), symbol of the seven spirits of God (3:1)³⁵⁷, and the seven angels (8:2) summon up the Amesha Spenta of Mazdeism. The Christian editor adds the lamb (Jesus) to which divine honors are rendered. Jesus will return at the end of time in the likeness of the archangel Michael (see Daniel) to lead the heavenly hosts. In the white horse of 19:11 some see the army of the Parthians, the enemies of Rome in whom Jews trusted³⁵⁸. In 10:4 we read the interpretation of thunder, which recalls the Qumranic *Brontologion*. The concept of the second death is Essene: after the first death the wicked suffer a further death, being incinerated in the lake of fire and sulfur, inherited from Mazdeism (19:20; 20:15).

The prophecies of the end of time and the terror that preceded it have as their motivation the sufferings of God's people³⁵⁹ that deserve fierce revenge. Against Empire, here we find

³⁵⁵ The passage 11:1-2 with the reference to the Temple shows that the initial core of the work is prior to 70 AD.

³⁵⁶ See the beginning of the *Pesher Habakkuk*, already examined. Babylon also stands for Rome in 1 Pet (5:13), 4 Ezra, the Revelation of Baruch and the Fifth Sibylline Oracle.

³⁵⁷ Mentioned also in 1:4, 4:5 and 5:6, in the wake of Zechariah 4:2, 10b (*I see a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it; there are seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it... These seven are the eyes of the Lord, which range through the whole earth*), Tobit 12:15 (*I am Raphael, one of the seven angels who stand ready and enter before the glory of the Lord*) and 1 Enoch 90:21 (*the seven white ones*), the seven spirits symbolize God's activity in the world (Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Revelation*, Collegeville 2008², p. 46).

³⁵⁸ See David Andrew Thomas, *Revelation 19 in Historical and Mythological Context*, New York 2008, pp. 16, 111-145.

³⁵⁹ Rome is presented as a prostitute drunk with the blood of God's holy people and the blood of those who died for faith in Jesus (17:6). Here the mention of the Christian martyrs sounds as a late addition by the final editor (in the first century the persecutions were in fact sporadic and local), whereas previously the reference was only to the Jews (the holy people of God), bludgeoned with unprecedented violence at the time of the first revolt (*the monster opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.* 13: 6-7).

the opposite of the irenicism present in the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles³⁶⁰. Babylon, that is to say, Rome, is seen as the cesspit of vice and vileness, worthy of being crushed with its ruling class and its merchants³⁶¹. Of it, a web of corruption and monstrosity, nothing is saved.

The fundamental message that can be drawn from the last book of the New Testament is that one must always be ready for the end and that worldly values pass, but Christ with his Church will triumph: a message present, with soberer theatricality, also in the Gospels. But there is a distorted use of Revelation if the reader claims to apply those prophecies to his own time³⁶².

An interpretation, dating back to Charles-François Dupuis³⁶³, sees in the various visions of John reference to the constellations and, in general, to the then dominant cosmological theories³⁶⁴. Thus, the four beings (later taken for the four evangelists) would be the constellations of Taurus, Aquila, Leo and Aquarius; the crown of twelve stars, the zodiac³⁶⁵. The moon underfoot means that the constellation Virgo dominates a lunar

³⁶⁰ See Steve Walton, "The State They Were in: Luke's View of the Roman Empire", in Peter Oakes, ed., *Rome in the Bible and the Early Church*, Grand Rapids 2002, pp. 1-41. For an overview of the relationship between the New Testament and Roman Empire I refer to Adam Winn, ed., *An Introduction to Empire in the New Testament*, Atlanta 2016. Revelation's stance strikes in particular with 1 Pet 2:17: *Honor the emperor*.

³⁶¹ An attitude well present in the Jewish literature of the time. In the Fourth Sibylline Oracle the eruption of Vesuvius (79 AD) is interpreted as divine punishment for the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. In the Fifth Oracle the return of Nero is foreshadowed, who, hungry for vengeance, at the head of an army of Parthians moves against Rome. The same prophecy is outlined in Rev 17:16, 17 (Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Eugene 2001, p. 175). For the legend of *Nero redux* or *Nero redivivus* see Marco Frenschkowski, "Nero Redivivus as a Subject of Early Christian Arcane Teaching", in Michael Labahn and Outi Lehtipuu, eds., *People under Power: Early Jewish and Christian Responses to the Roman Empire*, Amsterdam 2015, pp. 229-248.

³⁶² Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code*, Nashville, Tn, 2007, pp. XV-XVII, reports that Hal Lindsey in his *Apocalypse Code*, published in 1997, argues that in the locusts of chapter 9 you should see Apache, Cobra and Comanche attack helicopters. For a broader overview see Richard Kyle, *Apocalyptic Fever: End-Time Prophecies in Modern America*, 2012 Eugene.

³⁶³ *Origine de tous les Cultes, ou la Religion Universelle*, chapitre XII, Paris 1795.

³⁶⁴ Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, Minneapolis 2000.

³⁶⁵ In Gen 37:9 the stars symbolize the Patriarchs (Joseph and his brethren).

month. The dragon is the constellation of Hydra, which extends for four zodiacal signs (*His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven 12:4*).

The Gospel of Thomas. When Jesus was alive and even more so after his death, there were diverse ways in which his message was received and interpreted, that is, a multiple Christianity, related to the peculiar sensitivities of the receptors³⁶⁶. For example, the community that gathered around the Gospel of Thomas was interested in self-knowledge, because it was pushed in this direction by its cultural background. For others, since Jesus, like his apostles, was circumcised, circumcision was a critical aspect. Some followers favored the preference given by Jesus to the poor and drew from it reasons for a social revolt. Finally, others saw his messianicity realized rather in the war against the execrated Kittim³⁶⁷.

The Kernel [original core] of the Gospel of Thomas, according to DeConick³⁶⁸, dates back to 30-50 AD and is prior to Q. It would be the oldest testimony of the word of Jesus. It makes no sense to say that it is a Gnostic Gospel, since this expression is used in an improper and vague sense to mean different positions united by the rejection of the material world. Nothing Gnostic, just a prelude to the spirituality of the Orthodox Church (think in particular of Isaac of Nineveh³⁶⁹). The Kernel, written in Jerusalem, was

³⁶⁶ See Ron Cameron, "Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of the *Gospel of Thomas* and Christian Origins", in Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller, eds., *Redescribing Christian Origins*, Atlanta 2004, pp. 89-108. In support of the polygenetic hypothesis we might invoke Mark 9:38 (*Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us*). "Multiple avenues for entrance into the empire of God existed in the earliest period of the development and expansion of the divine empire inaugurated by Jesus. These multiple ways speak of multiple movements among the followers of Jesus" (Richard Valantasis, *The New Q: A Fresh Translation with Commentary*, New York-London 2005, p. 7). For a thorough review of religious orientations (Gnosticism, esotericism, mysticism) parallel to 'Orthodox' Christianity and historically shunted to the sidelines I refer to April D. DeConick, ed., *Secret Religion*, London 2016. The book is part of the *Religion* series, within the *MacMillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks*.

³⁶⁷ Something similar happened, in due proportion, with the message of St Francis of Assisi, inherited in an astonishing variety of motifs by rival or at least competing religious communities and even atheists and revolutionaries.

³⁶⁸ Of the theses presented here I am mainly indebted to April D. DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation: With a Commentary and New English Translation of the Complete Gospel*, London 2006. A more recent work: Samuel Zinner, *The Gospel of Thomas...*, *cit.*

³⁶⁹ On the relationship between the Gospel of Thomas and Orthodox spirituality see April D. DeConick, "Mysticism in the Gospel of Thomas", in Jörg Frey, Enno Edzard Popkes and Jens Schröter, eds., *Das Thomasevangelium. Entstehung, Rezeption, Theologie*, Berlin 2008, pp. 206-221.

composed of five speeches of Jesus with parallels in Q. Soon from Jerusalem this core was brought to Syria and there were made additions linked to new circumstances, first off to the overturning of the absence of the eschatological event into its implementation, when, as claimed by the mentioned scholar, the immediate possibility to recover the primordial divine image was realized (logion 84): from the imminent kingdom to the immanent kingdom, to the eschatology already realized (logion 51).

Jesus is presented as he imparts the doctrine to his closest disciples in the form of enigmatic sayings. It is not a matter of discourses for the masses, but of knowledge reserved for the few, owing to the fact that it relates to esoteric mysteries³⁷⁰. This Gospel reflects another way of understanding Christianity. It lacks the centrality of the resurrection of the Savior, the eschatological apocalypticism, the violent end of the world. One saves oneself thanks to personal effort, not to the merits of Christ's cross. When asked whether it is divine in nature, Jesus sidesteps (as, then again, he does in John 12:16 and Luke 18:34), but the title 'Living' is reserved for him and the Father. Surprisingly, the Gospel of Thomas proposes a primordial Christian form of divinization. The believer, becoming a twin of Jesus (the Aramaic name or nickname Thomas means twin, geminus, *dídymos*), participates in his nature (soteriology of gemination). Since Jesus is presented as a divine figure, the Thomasine gemination is to be understood as a deification³⁷¹.

The basic message (addressed to the individual, not to the community³⁷²) is as follows: *Search your inner self*. The experience of God not only takes place inside the ego fully aware

³⁷⁰ David B. Capes, Rodney Reeves and E. Randolph Richards, *Rediscovering Jesus: An Introduction to Biblical, Religious and Cultural Perspectives on Christ*, p. 164. The esoteric aspect may be identified from the beginning: *These are the secret sayings that Jesus the Living One pronounced and that Didymus Judas Thomas wrote. He said: "Whoever discovers the interpretation of these words will not taste death"* (Prologue and Logion 1). On the other hand, a mystery revelation is also mentioned by Paul in 1 Cor 2:6-13. Before Christianity, we come across doctrines reserved for the initiates in Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. See Julius Allsop, *The Esoteric Codex: Old Testament Apocrypha*, Raleigh, 2015. About Qumran: Samuel Isaac Thomas, *The 'Mysteries' of Qumran: Mystery, Secrecy, and Esotericism in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Leiden 2009.

³⁷¹ Logion 108: *Jesus said: Whoever drinks from my mouth will be like me and I will be like him. And what is hidden will be revealed to him*. See David M. Litwa, "'I Will Become Him': Homology and Deification in the Gospel of Thomas", in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 133.2 - 2015, pp. 427-447. Once again the Gospel of Thomas precedes Orthodox theology, in a trait that is certainly not marginal.

³⁷² In this Gospel, the community aspect is left in the shade (William E. Arnal, "Blessed Are the Solitary: Textual Practices and the Mirage of a *Thomas* Community", in Caroline Johnson Hodge, Saul M. Olyan, Daniel Ullucci and Emma Wasserman, eds., *The One Who Sows Bountifully. Essays in Honor of Stanley K. Stowers*, Providence, RI, 2013, p. 272).

of itself (that is, its origin, destination and deepest identity - logion 3), but also includes a heavenly ascension with the vision of the divine throne (logion 15) passing through the celestial spheres (logion 50)³⁷³.

The disciple who has known himself and Jesus no longer needs a teacher (logia 3 and 13): thus the function of the leaders of the Christian communities is drastically reduced³⁷⁴. One can experience God after having won the battle against inner demons, desires and the body and having acquired impassibility (*apátheia*). Jesus crucified symbolizes the man who crucifies his passions, fasting from the world (logion 27), that is, opposing worldly pleasures³⁷⁵. The victory over sexual instinct leads to proto-Adamic purity.

Like other texts linked to Middle Platonism³⁷⁶ and Philo (Acts of Thomas, Book of Thomas, Odes of Solomon, Oratio ad Graecos of Tatian and perhaps the Gospel of Philip), the Gospel of Thomas reflects - in its final version - the environment of Edessa (in Osroene, beyond the Euphrates), an autonomous caravan city, a multicultural center where Christians, not persecuted by the authorities, lived peacefully with the Jews. That is why, in the absence of the experience of martyrdom, to the atoning death of Jesus little attention was paid³⁷⁷. It should be added that, in contrast to the typical exegesis of the canonical

³⁷³ For the interpretation of logia 15 and 50 see April D. DeConick, *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and its Growth*, London-New York 2006, pp. 137, 173.

³⁷⁴ See Richard Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas*, London-New York 2009², pp. 43-44, 55-58. "The synoptic tradition culminates in the central hierarchical role of the apostles, attested to by the Acts. The Church thus becomes more dependent on the succession of the Apostles and their teaching than on any charismatic guidance or revelation. The Gospel of Thomas, on the contrary, proclaims a direct relationship with Jesus the Living One: every believer must concentrate on the word of Jesus living in the Gospel to find eternal life" (Richard Valantasis, Douglas K. Blyle and Dennis C. Haugh, *The Gospels and Christian Life in History and Practice*, Lanham, Md, 2009, p. 247).

³⁷⁵ This is the meaning of the expression *observe the Sabbath as Sabbath*, present in the same logion in parallel with *fasting from the world*. See Antti Marjanen, "Thomas and Jewish Religious Practices", in Risto Uro, ed., *Thomas at the Crossroads: Essays on the Gospel of Thomas*, Edinburgh 1998, pp. 175-178.

³⁷⁶ For this particular aspect I point out Seth A. Clark, *Know Yourself and You Will Be Known: The Gospel of Thomas and Middle Platonism*, Claremont, Ca, 2014; Ivan Miroshnikov, *The Gospel of Thomas and Plato: A Study of the Impact of Platonism on the 'Fifth Gospel'*, Helsinki 2016.

³⁷⁷ Cf Isaac of Nineveh: "God became incarnate not to redeem us from sins, or for any other reason, but solely in order that the world might become aware of the love that God has for his creation". Note that the Qur'ān rejects the concept of vicarious atonement made by Christ on the cross. The Gospel of Thomas is counted among the sources of Islam (Emran Iqbal El-Badawi, *The Qur'ān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions*, London-New York 2014, p. 48), which, as stated by Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Volker Popp (*Der frühe Islam: eine historisch-*

writings of the New Testament, the Thomasine community was not prone to delving into the Scriptures in order to link Jesus to the Jewish tradition³⁷⁸. In Edessa, as a result, a *sui generis* Christianity developed, adapted to the environment.

kritische Rekonstruktion anhand zeitgenössischer Quellen, Berlin 2007), began as a variant of Christianity, so that in Muhammad a title of Christ ('the chosen'; according to others, 'the worthy of praise, the blessed') should be spotted.

³⁷⁸ Milton Moreland, "The Twenty-Four Prophets of Israel Are Dead: *Gospel of Thomas* 52 as a Critique of Early Christian Hermeneutics", in Jón Ma. Ásgeirsson, April D. De Conick and Risto Uro, eds., *Thomasine Traditions in Antiquity: The Social and Cultural World of the Gospel of Thomas*, Leiden 2006, p. 88. A further rejection of Judaism may be seen in logion 53: *The disciples asked him: "Is circumcision useful or not?"*. He replied, *"If it were useful, the father would beget the children of the mother already circumcised. But true circumcision in the spirit is useful"*. Only apparently does logion 12 contradict logia 52 and 53: *The disciples asked Jesus, "When you leave us, who will be our guide?"*. He answered, *"Whatever your provenance, go to James the Just, for whom heaven and earth were created"*. "Contrary to the view of some scholars [including DeConick], James cannot be seen in this saying as a positive figure of leader. He finds himself in the same category as Peter and Matthew who represent communities marked by an inadequate view of Jesus and his message. As a leader traditionally associated with the Church of Jerusalem, James symbolizes the Judaeo-Christian community and those who follow the prescriptions of the Law. Since Jewish practices and beliefs are harshly criticized in logia 6, 14, 27, 39, 52, 89, 102, this characterization of James cannot be positive. He must be considered in connection with the Demiurge, the creator of the material world, responsible for Jewish Law" (André Gagné, "The *Gospel According to Thomas* and the New Testament", in Jean-Michel Roessli and Tobias Nicklas, eds., *Christian Apocrypha: Receptions of the New Testament in Ancient Christian Apocrypha*, Göttingen 2014, pp. 36-37). Again as Demiurge is by Gagné interpreted the 'God' of logion 100. April D. DeConick, understandably, in the *Gospel of Thomas* does not perceive any allusion to this Gnostic figure.

Divinization

The Father and I are one. The pivotal moment is that of Baptism, when Jesus attains the full awareness of being one with the Father, of being animated by the Spirit. Some scholars present Jesus' assertion of his own divinity as anti-historical and totally contrary to the beliefs of Judaism, therefore an invention of Paul and John. Truth is that Pharisees and Sadducees rated it a blasphemy, but other Jewish currents were of different opinion³⁷⁹.

The "polytheistic" passages of the Jewish Bible were already a breach. On the other hand, in Gen 1:26-28 man is seen as divine because in him is realized the presence or manifestation of God, which other passages of the Tanakh identify in the people of Israel and, particularly, in the high priest³⁸⁰. From John 10:33-35 we learn that the sentence of Psalm 82:6 *You are gods*³⁸¹ is to be interpreted as concerning all of those who welcome the word of God³⁸². Indeed, in Judaism, even before Jesus, an extension of the concept of

³⁷⁹ On the subject, I'd like to point out Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, *Jesus Monotheism*. Vol. I: *Christological Origins: The Emerging Consensus and Beyond*, Eugene 2015. The work will be developed in four volumes.

³⁸⁰ See Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, "Jesus' Divine Self-Consciousness: a Proposal", *British New Testament Conference*, Manchester 2014, pp. 1-6.

³⁸¹ The recipients of the title, who are also reminded of the impending fate of death (*nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince*, v. 7), are the minor gods of the divine council: "Psalm 82 presents a minor deity of the divine council in revolt against his brothers, the sons of El. He kills them, as if they were simply human, and inherits the peoples entrusted to them [cf. Deuteronomy 32:8-9]... The psalm records the myth in which YHWH ascends from lesser god of the pantheon to the one God of the cosmos" (Kurt L. Noll, *Canaan and Israel*, cit., pp. 255, 256). I speculate that the oldest layer of Psalm 82 consists of verses 1, 2, 6, 7 and 8. Later, in the Essene environment (11Q13 or 11QMelchizedek) the minor gods in question were discrowned and transformed into rebellious angels or demons (*Belial and the spirits of his ilk* - cf. Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation*, cit., p. 213). In the same cultural context, in unjust judges and rulers it was not long before one saw diabolical incarnations (in a passage from the *Martyrdom of Isaiah* we read: "Beliar [= Belial] dwelt in the heart of Manasseh and in the heart of the twelve princes of Judah and Benjamin and the eunuchs and counselors of the king"). It was then that verses 3, 4 and 5 were added, where the claim, typical of the Enochian tradition, of the rights of the weak, orphans, destitute, oppressed and defenseless, stands out. In the Gospel of John there is a further creative interpretation, involving the expansion of the category being awarded the divine title.

³⁸² The quoted passage of John is recognized in Patristic times as one of the scriptural pillars on which the Christian doctrine of divinization rests: "By the Spirit every saint is made divine, as God Himself declared: I said that you are gods" (Saint Basil, *Against Eunomius* V [PG XXIX 772]) - "Man can become God and son of God. We read: I have said that you are gods" (St John Chrysostom, *Homily 32 on the Acts of the Apostles*) - "Do

divinity is attested to³⁸³. In the Tanakh there was talk of an angel of YHWH who was none other than God himself in his visible manifestation. Performing a divine function, Moses was held to be a sharer in divinity: *The Lord said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh"* (Exod 7:1). In the words of Sir 45:2, *God made him equal in glory to the holy ones*. At Qumran (4Q374 fr 2, col 2) one went further: *YHWH [on Sinai] made him like a god*³⁸⁴. In the pre-Christian Pseudo-Orpheus (from verse 31) he is described as a god on the heavenly throne³⁸⁵. Even by Artapanus he was given divine status³⁸⁶, while Philo considered him the inspirer of mystical Judaism, a sort of incarnation of God, a man who became God, a substitute for God: in him the abyss between mortal and immortal had been crossed. Philo, alongside the Qumranites, endorsed the concept of a divinized Moses: "He went up the mountain and saw God, becoming like him" (*Moses* 1 28 158)³⁸⁷. In the *Exagoge of Ezekiel* the prophet is also portrayed on the divine throne³⁸⁸.

you love God? What will I say? That you will be God? I dare not say it, but let us listen to the Scripture that says: I have said that you are gods" (St Augustine, *In Epistolam Ioannis ad Parthos* 2 14). For a wider picture I refer to Panayotis Nellas, *Voi siete dèi. Antropologia dei Padri della Chiesa*, trans. Antonio Fyrigos, Rome 1993; Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Oxford 2006. As we have seen, the doctrine of divinization is already found in the Gospel of Thomas.

³⁸³ In Qumran there is a revival of the theme of the divine assembly. See Jonathan Ben-Dov, "The Resurrection of the Divine Assembly and the Divine Title El in the Dead Sea Scrolls", in Andrea Ercolani and Manuela Giordano, eds., *Submerged Literature in Ancient Greek Culture. Vol. III: Beyond Greece: The Comparative Perspective*, Berlin-Boston 2016, pp. 9-31. The author states: "To the community of Qumran, verse 32:8 of Deuteronomy [concerning the entrustment of each people to a minor god] was particularly dear, precisely because it embodied the notion of a multiplicity of divine beings, perfectly functional for their demonology and, in general, their theology" (p. 20).

³⁸⁴ In the Dead Sea Scrolls (11Q13) a divine status is also granted to Melchizedek. See Peter Flint, "Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls", in Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison Jr. and John Dominic Crossan, eds., *The Historical Jesus...*, *cit.*, pp. 122, 123. In turn, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews (7:3) will deem Melchizedek the perfect prefiguration of Jesus Christ: *Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever*.

³⁸⁵ But someone interprets otherwise. See John Lierman, *The New Testament Moses: Christian Perceptions of Moses*, Tübingen 2004, pp. 229-246.

³⁸⁶ John G. M. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora from Alexander to Trajan*, Edinburgh 1996, p. 129. The divine status should of course be understood in a mitigated sense (see John J. Collins, "Artapanus", *cit.*, p. 894, n. 37).

³⁸⁷ Erwin R. Goodenough, *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism*, New Haven 1935, pp. 197-229. This thesis was taken up by Wayne Meeks in the article "Moses as God and King", in Jacob Neusner, ed., *Religions in Antiquity. Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough*, Leiden 1968, pp. 354-371. A

Philo calls the Logos angel, archangel, son or firstborn of God, governor and administrator of all, *theós, déuterós theós* (second god). His idea of the Logos, however, varies from one work to another. Obviously, he is always ready to reaffirm the uniqueness of God, but sometimes one hastens to deny precisely what one would like to say. The term 'second god', whatever the author's intention, opened up a chink into which readers with other motivations and less tied to the rigid monotheistic vision could penetrate in search of a deeper and more articulated knowledge of the divine³⁸⁹.

Among the Essenes the leap had already been made. The Teacher of Righteousness in the *Self-Glorification Hymn* claims to be superior to the angels³⁹⁰, what unequivocally means

fundamental text on messianic expectations, especially outside the Tanakh, and the precedents of divinization: Andrew Chester, *Messiah and Exaltation: Jewish Messianic and Visionary Traditions and New Testament Christology*, Tübingen 2007.

³⁸⁸ According to Timo Eskola, *Messiah and the Throne: Jewish Merkabah Mysticism and Early Christian Exaltation Discourse*, Tübingen 2001, pp. 217-250, Merkabah mysticism is of central importance in understanding the Christology of Acts 2, Paul (Rom 1:3-4) and the Letter to the Hebrews, which present the risen Christ elevated to the heavenly throne, exalted as high priest, the new Melchizedek offering sacrifice (Psalm 110). This implies the idea of his divinity.

³⁸⁹ For the theme of the 'second God' see Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism*, Leiden 1977; Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel...*, cit. "The pure Jewish monotheism of Jesus and his earliest followers is chimerical, because Hellenism had already decisively encroached into Palestinian Judaism well before Jesus" (Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament*, Oxford 2015, p. 19). Daniel Boyarin (*The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ*, New York 2012, p. 102) baldly avows: "The ideas of the Trinity and the Incarnation, or at least the seeds of such ideas, were already present among Jewish believers before Jesus appeared on the scene".

³⁹⁰ *Who is like me among angels?* (4Q471b 5). In the *Self-Glorification Hymn* (particularly in 4Q491c) a similarity of language was noted with the *Songs of the Suffering Servant* of Isaiah. Holly Beers deduces: "The speaker of the hymn seems to identify with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah" (*The Followers of Jesus as the 'Servant': Luke's Model from Isaiah for the Disciples in Luke-Acts*, London-New York 2015, p. 67). In my opinion, the anonymous Essene author puts the hymn in the mouth of the Teacher of Righteousness, whose life had already been alluded to in the *Songs of the Suffering Servant*. This thesis is supported by the fact that from a paleographic point of view the fragments are dated to the late Hasmonean or Herodian period (Joseph L. Angel, "The Liturgical-Eschatological Priest of the *Self-Glorification Hymn*", in *Revue de Qumran*, 96 - 2010, p. 586). This is in line with Joseph Blenkinsopp's standpoint: "I find it tempting that 4Q491c was composed and recited by a disciple of the Master as a celebration of his life, death and post-mortem exaltation. If, as I have shown, the Master's profile is modeled on that of the equally anonymous Suffering Servant of Isaiah, we would have an impressive parallelism with the panegyric uttered by a disciple after the violent death of the Servant (Isa 53:1-11). The most obvious difference, the use of the first [singular] person instead of the third, might imply

participation in divine nature³⁹¹. The faithful who recited that prayer certainly felt inclined to extend the divinization to themselves, as they tended to identify with the Teacher, participating in the heavenly liturgy, at the side of, if not above, the angels. The eschatological goal had already been reached. This attitude involved the rehabilitation of the figure of the rebellious angels and in particular of Lucifer³⁹², who had aspired to sit on the throne of God: "In Isaiah and Ezekiel, the divine or semi-divine Lucifer is a figure of hubris, cast down to earth and death. At Qumran, Lucifer's sense of hubris is totally neutralized: Isaiah's villain or victim, dethroned and humiliated, was authorized as a hero; assumption of the promised heavenly throne is cited as a model by the sectarians in their liturgy"³⁹³.

Classic precedents. "I don't think there is anything in the world more beautiful than the countryside where Sybaris was. There you'll find everything: the charming open spaces of the surroundings of Naples, the grandeur of the most majestic alpine landscapes, the sun and the sea of Greece". This enthusiastic description, due to the pen of the French archaeologist François Lenormant³⁹⁴, vividly depicts this northern Calabria plain, enclosed between the Ionian Sea, the Pollino massif and the foothills of the Greek Sila. After the affluent city was in 510 BC defeated and destroyed by rival Croton, in 444/443 the Panhellenic colony of Thurii was founded on its ruins on the initiative of Pericles. The philosopher Protagoras was the writer of the constitution. The historian Herodotus and the orator Lysias were among the citizens. Here, in two mounds ("timponi", in the local

that the Hymn of self-glorification was intended to provide a model, a proleptic vision, from which the Master's disciples could draw inspiration" ("The Servant of the Lord, the Teacher of Righteousness, and the Exalted One of 4Q491c", in Duncan Burns and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Far From Minimal...*, cit., p. 51).

³⁹¹ As has already been expounded, in the Essene *Martyrdom of Isaiah* the prophet (a double of the Teacher of Righteousness) was accused of having declared himself superior to Moses and therefore implicitly endowed with divine nature, for having dared to aver: *I have seen God and continue to live* (3:9) against God's warning to Moses: *You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live* (Exod 33:20). The bold asseveration put in Isaiah's mouth will be taken up by Jesus: *Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father* (John 6:46).

³⁹² The myth of Lucifer (Isa 14:12-14, Ezek 28:2) is of Canaanite origin: Athtar (male deity, personification of the morning star) unsuccessfully attempts to usurp the throne of Baal.

³⁹³ Seth L. Sanders: "Performing Exegesis: A Study of how a Biblical Myth Became a Mystical 'Experience'", in April DeConick D., ed., *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism*, Atlanta 2006, p. 79. Similarly, in the Greek world, if Bellerophon was unsaddled by Zeus, while riding on Pegasus towards the summit of Olympus, the religion of mysteries proclaimed, on the contrary, the divinization of the initiate.

³⁹⁴ François Lenormant, *La Grande-Grèce. Paysages et histoire*, tome I, Paris 1881, p. 223.

dialect) were discovered in 1879 by F. S. Cavallari and L. Fulvio tablets with orphic inscriptions regarding the journey of the initiate into the Netherworld³⁹⁵. In them we read two memorable and unfading asserts: *You will be god instead of mortal - From man you have become god*³⁹⁶.

In the Mediterranean basin and in the Middle East, as well as in India, these concepts were widespread long before Christianity. Beginning with Alexander the Great, the Greeks borrowed from the Egyptians the cult of the sovereigns. Demetrius Poliorcetes was hailed as the "living god" in a hymn studied by Hans-Josef Klauck³⁹⁷. The title *Epiphanēs*, assumed by various sovereigns, means "(god) manifest". In Rome *deus* and *divus* had been synonymous until the apotheosis of Julius Caesar. From that moment *divus* meant 'divinized man'³⁹⁸. According to Suetonius, on his deathbed Vespasian announced the impending end with cruel self-sarcasm: "I am about to become a god".

A common theme in antiquity was the desire to achieve similarity with God. Empedocles³⁹⁹ says of himself: "immortal god, no longer mortal"⁴⁰⁰. Plato⁴⁰¹ teaches that the

³⁹⁵ On the orphic tablets and, in general, on orphism I point out Alberto Bernabé and Ana Isabel Jiménez San Cristóbal, *Instructions for the Netherworld: The Orphic Gold Tablets*, Leiden 2008; Radcliffe G. Edmonds, ed., *The 'Orphic' Gold Tablets and Greek Religion: Further along the Path*, Cambridge 2011; Stamatia Dova, *Greek Heroes in and out of Hades*, Lanham, Md, 2012; Vishwa Adluri, ed., *Philosophy and Salvation in Greek Philosophy*, Berlin 2013; Giovanni Casadio and Patricia A. Johnston, *Mystic Cults in Magna Graecia*, Austin 2013; M. David Litwa, *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture*, Eugene, 2013. For the differences between mysteries and Christianity: James R. Edwards, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*, Grand Rapids 2005. However, in the sacraments (called *mystēria* in Greek) Christianity reveals a link with esoteric cults. See Scott Hahn and Mike Aquilina, *Living the Mysteries: A Guide for Unfinished Christians*, Huntington, In, 2003.

³⁹⁶ Θεὸς δ' ἔσθι ἀντὶ βροτοῖο - Θεὸς ἐγένου ἐξ ἀνθρώπου.

³⁹⁷ Hans-Josef Klauck, *Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions*, London-New York 2000, p. 257.

³⁹⁸ Watson E. Mills, ed., *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, Macon, Ga, 1997, p. 752.

³⁹⁹ DK fr B 112.

⁴⁰⁰ Dag Øistein Endsjø, *Greek Resurrection Beliefs and the Success of Christianity*, New York 2009, p. 100, is of the opinion that the very presence among the Greeks of the belief in immortality and divinization (at least in some philosophical schools and in followers of the mysteries) explains the easy spread of Christianity in the Mediterranean basin. See also John Granger Cook, *Empty Tomb, Resurrection, Apotheosis*, Tübingen 2018.

⁴⁰¹ *Theaetetus* 176a-b.

flight from the world assimilates us, as far as possible, to God. For Aristotle⁴⁰², the philosopher, contemplating God, becomes, even if only briefly, kindred to him. The cynic feels to be divine since he needs nothing. For the Stoics we are God's children. Wisdom makes the Epicurean as serene as the gods. Identity with God was the aim of the mystery cults. Plutarch, who lived between 46 and 120 AD, deduces that all of us tend to approach God through immortality, power and virtue⁴⁰³. Referring to pagan doctrines, Justin Martyr, among those who were dead, resurrected in body and assumed into heaven, i.e., divinized, includes Asclepius, Dionysus, Hercules, Castor and Pollux, Perseus, Bellerophon⁴⁰⁴. It is hardly surprising that such ideas influenced Judaism. It is now commonly accepted that in the last centuries BC it has been deeply permeated by Hellenistic and Iranian doctrines⁴⁰⁵.

The Christian Superman

You will become like God.

The Jews answered, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God". Jesus answered, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'? If those to whom the word of God came were called gods - and the Scripture cannot be annulled..." (John 10:33-35).

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us (John 17:21).

⁴⁰²Metaphysics XII 7 1072b 13-30.

⁴⁰³Life of Aristides 287.

⁴⁰⁴ As for this hero with a Luciferine aspiration, Justin passes over the consequent punishment inflicted on him by Jupiter. Bellerophon who kills the Chimera soon becomes a Christian symbol of victory over the forces of evil (Marcel Simon, "Bellérophon chrétien", in *Mélanges d'archéologie, d'épigraphie et d'histoire offerts à Jérôme Carcopino*, Paris 1966, pp. 889-903). In the mosaic of Hinton St Mary (early IV century AD), he stands alongside Jesus. Later, the iconographic module of the pagan myth in the Palmyra mosaic (discovered in 2003 and datable to around 260 AD) was adopted to represent St George, an exemplary figure of the Christian hero, in the act of killing the dragon.

⁴⁰⁵ Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, eds., *Christian Origins and Hellenistic Judaism: Social and Literary Contexts for the New Testament*, Vol. II, Leiden, 2013. William D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, London 1963, p. 207, n. 5, affirms: "It must be recognized, however, that in I century Iranian and Hellenistic concepts had been assimilated by Judaism to such an extent that they merged with it in an inextricable way, becoming part of a syncretistic Judaism". See also Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrianism: A Shadowy but Powerful Presence in the Judaeo-Christian World*, London 1987.

Participants of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). And to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24).

He disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness (Heb 12:10).

We have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16); we are God's offspring (Paul in Acts 17:29); For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family (Rom 8:29); we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ (Rom 8:16-17).

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph 3:18-19).

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18)⁴⁰⁶.

The statement *God became man so that man might become God* with minor variations is found in Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Gentiles*, ch. 1 - Origen, *Against Celsus* III 28 - St Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 54 3 - St Ambrose, *De Virginitate* I 11. St John Chrysostom in the *Homily on the Letter to the Philippians* VII 2 5-8 assures: "Nothing supports the noble and philosophical soul in doing good works as the prospect of becoming like God".

New nobility. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor 5:17)

Among the privileges bestowed on the believer stands out the access to the presence of God. We read in Heb 10:19: *Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus.*

The Christian becomes *a child of light and of the day (1 Thess 5:5), salt of the earth (Matt 5:13), light of the world (Matt 5:14), created for good works (Eph 2:10), cell of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27), the habitation of God through the Spirit (Eph 2:22)*. The Letter to the Hebrews 6:5 speaks of Christians as *those who have a foretaste of the age to come*.

⁴⁰⁶ See David M. Litwa, *We Are Being Transformed: Deification in Paul's Soteriology*, Berlin 2012.

Miracle workers.

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father (John 14:12). And Jesus said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover". So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it (Mark 16:15-20).

Victory over the world.

Thus, he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4).

I am writing to you, young people, because you have conquered the evil one (1 John 2:13).

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession (2 Cor 2:14).

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered". No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth⁴⁰⁷, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:31-39).

⁴⁰⁷ Height and depth are astrological terms (Siu Fung Wu, *Suffering in Romans*, Eugene 2015, p. 197).

A new creation. The special feature of Christianity is the elevation of man, as far as possible, to the level of the divine⁴⁰⁸. Put another way, the creation of the Superman: son of the Father, brother of Jesus, animated by the Holy Spirit. The proposal or offering that Christianity makes to man is precisely this: to rise above nature (flesh and blood), not to deny it, but to incorporate it dialectically into a fuller life. "Grace awakens and amplifies attitudes and inclinations that would otherwise remain buried in us. The supernatural of the mystics is in reality our truest and deepest natural"⁴⁰⁹.

This means losing one's limited, selfish, coarse, individualistic vision, linked to the Ego and the immediate place and time (the here and now), to live in a fullness that is the result of accepting a higher point of view, the divine one. Whoever reaches that goal sees the world and human events with the eye of God, *sub specie aeternitatis*, greatly widening the perspective, the horizons. In short, he lets himself be guided by the Spirit, like a light sail driven forth by divine breath. Christianity is just that⁴¹⁰.

We do entrust others with the task to merrily operate subtle and penetrating distinctions on the nature of divinization (enthronement, deification, angelication). It is enough for us to know that from it comes out the Christian Superman, in the wake of an elevation to the superhuman to which the Greco-Roman culture and Hellenistic Judaism aspired. Of course, there is no doubt that this Superman is not God himself, he is only akin to God in certain functions. Only in this mitigated sense may he rightly be called divine.

The Christian lives fundamentally on the Spirit of God. Life in the Spirit is recognized by its fruits: *love, joy, peace, understanding, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control* (Gal 5:22-23). Which, otherwise said, is to lead an angelic life already on earth, to foretaste heaven in spite of adversities (perhaps precisely by virtue of them). It is a long strain, due to the fact that an authentic sign of holiness is to recognize oneself every day inadequate to the model and therefore to ask God for help to improve, to take another step forward. But the Christian is not selfish: he does not aim only at his own salvation or, better, he knows that this is linked to the promotion of the salvation of others.

⁴⁰⁸ "The believer is not God by nature, but becomes God by grace" (St Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 111).

⁴⁰⁹ Paolo Arrigo Orlandi, *I fenomeni fisici del misticismo*, Milano 1996, p. 6.

⁴¹⁰ *All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God* (Rom 8:14-16) - *If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit* (Gal 5:25). "To acquire the Spirit of God is the true goal of Christian life" (St Seraphim of Sarov).

A physical sign of life in the Spirit of God is the irradiation of divine light. The Transfiguration of Jesus acts as the archetype of the transfiguration of the saints.

St Seraphim of Sarov and His Disciple Nikolai Aleksandrovič Motovilov

Father Seraphim took me very firmly by the shoulders and said: "We are both in the Spirit of God now, my son. Why don't you look at me?". I replied: "I cannot look, Father, because your eyes are flashing like lightning. Your face has become brighter than the sun, and my eyes ache with pain". Father Seraphim said: "Don't be alarmed, son! Now you yourself have become as bright as I am. You are now in the fullness of the Spirit of God yourself; otherwise you would not be able to see me as I am".

Then, bending his head towards me, he whispered softly in my ear: "Thank the Lord God for His unutterable mercy to us! You saw that I did not even cross myself; and only in my heart I prayed mentally to the Lord God and said within myself: 'Lord, grant him to see clearly with his bodily eyes that descent of Thy Spirit which Thou grantest to Thy servants when Thou art pleased to appear in the light of Thy magnificent glory'. And you see, my son, the Lord instantly fulfilled the humble prayer of poor Seraphim. How then shall we not thank Him for this unspeakable gift to us both? Even to the greatest hermits, my son, the Lord God does not always show His mercy in this way. This grace of God, like a loving mother, has been pleased to comfort your contrite heart at the intercession of the Mother of God herself. But why, my son, do you not look me in the eyes? Just look, and don't be afraid! The Lord is with us!".

After these words I glanced at his face and there came over me an even greater reverent awe. Imagine in the center of the sun, in the dazzling light of its midday rays, the face of a man talking to you. You see the movement of his lips and the changing expression of his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel someone holding your shoulders; yet you do not see his hands, you do not even see yourself or his figure, but only a blinding light spreading far around for several yards and illumining with its glaring sheen both the snow-blanket which covered the forest glade and the snow-flakes which besprinkled me and the great Elder⁴¹¹.

⁴¹¹ In Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 228, 229. At the beginning of this work Lossky states: "The whole history of Christian dogma develops around the mystical pivot of the divinization of man" (p. 10).

HELP MY FAITH!

Doubt

Hanging by the thread of billions of favorable coincidences. I sit and think about the contingent character of my being. If I hadn't been favored by an incalculable number of coincidences, I wouldn't be here. It would have been enough to obliterate me if any one of my countless ancestors had passed away before he had secured a lineage. I'm hanging by a thread, not only for the past, but also for the present. What keeps me alive is the set of favorable conditions that make up my living environment. Then I feel unsubstantial, a feather at the mercy of any breath, a shaky house of cards.

The fog of incertitude. The opponents of religious faith do not realize that alongside it there are a thousand other undemonstrated convictions that allow us to live. Without the light of faith we would grope in uncertainty. We trust that the laws of the physical world remain unchanged, that past experience is valid for the future, that the world exists and is not a bleary dream, that tomorrow the sun will rise, that we are not on the eve of a cataclysm. It is an irrational faith in the future that induces us to procreate, to attempt bold undertakings. It is faith in ideals (homeland, love, nation, culture) that urges us to act, to endure hardships, to face death. Even the newborn baby shows off his inbred faith. It is an irrational faith in himself and in his future, in his right to live and, consequently, to be accepted and loved.

If you do not believe, you lose any prod to action and get lost in the labyrinths of doubt. If you want to live, you must believe. Faith is a leap into darkness that enlightens life. In our children we instill, even before they are born, our personal beliefs, almost never supported by scientific certainties. Above all, it is the wholly irrational faith in ourselves, in our value, in our destiny that makes us compete every day animated by instinctive determination. Those who do not believe in God then again believe uncritically in themselves and in a peck of values, where the rational basis is lacking.

Faith without the comfort of facts is a practical necessity of daily life, not a peculiar characteristic of theology⁴¹². Hume has clearly taught us that if we had to wait for irrefutable proof of everything, we would not be able to take a single step⁴¹³. The same distinction, fundamental in practice, between normal and abnormal is the result of entrenched beliefs no less shared than arbitrary, consensually accepted by members of a cultural or professional group. So is this, because so it seems to us. After all, there is not even the certainty that our much vaunted reality is not a long dream containing other dreams.

I wander through the mists of incertitude: nothing is entirely certain, nothing is without objections. But I must unblock myself and decide swiftly⁴¹⁴. In the game of life gambling is a must.

Every proof reveals itself as a belief, based on rules full of unproven assumptions. It is a circular thought on a large scale. Believing means leaning towards what in a given situation - which may last for years - seems to us the most likely option. There is no absolute and shared certainty. But then even science is reduced to belief: what seems most probable to scientists today is science; tomorrow it will be replaced by something else. No science can be proven exhaustively⁴¹⁵. Kurt Gödel argues that any mathematical or logical system will always be incomplete and will contain at least one indemonstrable assumption. Everything is based on postulates, therefore on beliefs. In order to avoid recourse to infinity with proofs to be proved in turn, it is necessary to suppose a self-

⁴¹² See Reginald O. Kapp, *Facts and Faith: The Dual Nature of Reality*, Los Angeles 2010. On the 'naturalness' of religious faith: Eugene G. D'Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience*, Minneapolis 1999; John J. McGraw, *Brain and Belief: An Exploration of the Human Soul*, Del Mar, Ca, 2004; Dean H. Hamer, *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired Into Our Genes*, New York, 2005; Andrew B. Newberg and Mark R. Waldmann, *Born to Believe: God, Science and the Origin of Ordinary and Extraordinary Beliefs*, New York 2007; Michael Shermer, *The Believing Brain: From Spiritual Faiths to Political Convictions - How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths*, London 2012.

⁴¹³ There is no logical guarantee that the sun will rise tomorrow or that the bread that fed me at lunch will not poison me at dinner (David Hume, *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, London 1748, essay IV, part 2).

⁴¹⁴ In the context of concrete decisions, where the absolute certainty of the premises is lacking, Card. John Henry Newman in his *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London 1874) introduces the concept of 'illative sense'.

⁴¹⁵ Mathematician Morris Kline argued: "A proof tells us where to concentrate our doubts".

proven truth as the basis of knowledge, an immediate original evidence of an intuitive nature.

The rationalists, always ready to denounce someone else's paralogisms, do not realize that their whole armored kit and caboodle of arguments rests on the most striking petition of principle. In fact, abhorring, at least in words, any irrational belief, they will not be able to base the certainty of the validity of reason except on a demonstration entrusted to reason itself, which in this anomalous trial would act as both defendant and judge, deeming as demonstrated precisely what is to be demonstrated⁴¹⁶.

The rationalist skeptic who doubts everything and makes sport of the certainties of others, if he were really consistent, would have to shut himself up in the most impenetrable autism. He has no conclusive evidence in his hands to have faith in his parents, in his partner⁴¹⁷, in his children, in his friends, in his nation, in science, in history, in progress, in mankind, in today's world, in tomorrow's world and above all in himself. All beliefs in this regard stand on brittle stilts, falling into the category of easily dismantlable myths. The dignity of man as such is no less indemonstrable than the existence of God. Atheistic Marxism has developed into a secular religion with its commandments, its unprovable assumptions, its utopian project⁴¹⁸, its appeal to the irrational and poetical flair: "Communist society will write on its flag...". God has been replaced by the people, in the wake of the age-old belief that the future Messiah will coincide with the Jewish people, the savior of the world. A surreptitious religiosity. In conclusion, the call to the irrational is present in any choice⁴¹⁹.

The first thing all of us instinctively do (and Heaven help us if we don't do it - we would be considered in need of psychiatric counseling) is to believe in ourselves, the most irrational of all beliefs, which indeed find in it their unaccountable basis. But in this way

⁴¹⁶ By lepidly comparing the enterprise of investigating with reason the validity of reason itself to the claim of those who want to learn to swim without plunging into the water (*Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse I*, § 41, Zusatz I), Hegel ends up elevating the validity of reason into an indisputable postulate. On the other hand, the validity in question might certainly not be inferred from the results, because this empirical criterion is invoked precisely to establish the validity of the diverse beliefs.

⁴¹⁷ Not a few, in fact, to avoid any nasty surprises, take care to warn in case of coming back home unexpectedly.

⁴¹⁸ The term must be understood in the sense given to it by Ernst Bloch.

⁴¹⁹ Nothing prevents a secular faith from being matched by its distinctive alternate state of consciousness.

those who have been branded as depressed are deprived of the possibility of competing on the level of rational discourse with the so-called normal. Then it is evident that pessimistic reasoning, sometimes subtle and convincing, or at least shocking, is invalidated, for it is thought to be damaged by illness, by psychic disorder, and this is due to an irrational choice, removed from discussion and falsely scientific. The so-called normal people start from the unproven assumption that life is beautiful, life deserves to be lived, and so on⁴²⁰. The drug addict, who knows that in drugs he finds a weapon of self-destruction, however such that he does not feel the weight of that squalid and unsolicited experience that for him is life, might well shore up his view with references to ancient and less ancient bywords: "It is better to die than to live", "Death is the best one might wish for those who have had the misfortune of being born", "Suicide is the highest act of human dignity". Conversely, the latter statement in particular is held to be the result of mental disorder by psychiatry, aligned on basic irrational positions in defense of life⁴²¹. Therefore, when we axiomatically proclaim "human life is sacred", "life is beautiful", the nonrational cornerstone of a new religion, not unlike the revealed ones, is already being laid.

My contention plays up one single point: precisely on the grounds that it is impossible to identify irrefutable bases of any cognition or idea, then you have to come up with a belief, a set of principles to cling to, because you need them, because it is good to believe in them, because believing in them exalts your (always questionable) idea of humanity. This is our limit. We cannot do without a set of fideistically accepted beliefs, whether we want to admit it or not, but, recognizing that they are mostly just the best guess of the moment, we remain open to other ideas. Rather than into rational or irrational, beliefs should be distinguished into functional and dysfunctional, depending on whether or not they prove to be suitable in practice in order to make our existence fuller and more meaningful⁴²². Each one in his firmament arrays and marshals the chosen constellations.

⁴²⁰ From the disasters we committed against planetary life it would not be difficult to argue that our species is a pest to be wiped out as soon as possible, in order to allow nature to resume its course undisturbed. See Michael Pollan, *Second Nature*, New York 2007, p. 112: "Weeds are not the Other. Weeds are us".

⁴²¹ Having noted that the concept of mental disorder varies from one culture to another, Marie L. Thompson wonders: "Is the diagnosis of mental disorder attributed to most suicidal tendencies based on objective diagnostic criteria or on moral or ethical principles?" (*Mental Illness*, Westport, Ct, 2007, p. 94).

⁴²² Arie W. Kruglanski, *Lay Epistemics and Human Knowledge: Cognitive and Motivational Bases*, College Park, 2013, p. 197+.

Providing reasons, churning out reasons. The most recent neuropsychiatry has shown that any decision is impossible without emotions and feelings⁴²³. I go even further. It is not enough for me to say that every decision is impossible in the absence of feelings. As I see it, it is love and aversion that decide. We first issue the sentence (which is after all a product of our emotionality) and then we calmly elaborate its motivation. In doubtful cases we do not sway between one reason and another, but between one feeling and another. Once the decision has been made, it is easy to provide gazillions of motives. Proof of this is the endless dispute between Christian denominations. If I hate the other, I shall not find it hard to decry the demonic mark in all of his traits. To make me believe that he is the incarnation of evil is not a chain of reasoning, but a string of feelings or rather resentments, so much so that, if we love a person, we are ready to forgive even the most monstrous betrayal, pinning the blame to others, to circumstances, to congenital weakness, to having neglected him or her. No one is short of excuses and pretexts. Those who hate, condemn without appeal and drool out a myriad of reasons. Those who love, forgive, and are able to find shedloads of whys and wherefores. It is the law of the infinite cornucopia, formulated by Leszek Kołakowski, which explains the process of rationalization (rational justification of feelings)⁴²⁴.

To argue and debate at this point amounts to beating the air and milling the wind. The Christian churches have been doing so for ages with the result of fanning the flames and adding insult to injury⁴²⁵. If the heart (i.e., the feeling) changes, the miracle happens that only love can operate. That is why one must take the initiative to love one's enemies and

⁴²³ See Sharon R. Krause, *Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation*, Princeton, 2008, p. 3. Specific books: Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain*, New York 1996; Vilayanur S. Ramachandran, *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind*, New York 1998; Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, New York 2000; Kevin S. Seybold, *Explorations in Neuroscience, Psychology and Religion*, Aldershot 2013; Luiz Pessoa, *The Cognitive-Emotional Brain: From Interactions to Integration*, Cambridge, Ma, 2013.

⁴²⁴ In *Religion*, New York 1982, p. 16. Cf Blaise Pascal: "Tout notre raisonnement se réduit à céder au sentiment... On aurait besoin d'une règle. La raison s'offre; mais elle est pliable à tous sens et ainsi il n'y en a point" (*Pensées*, Paris 1671³, p. 121, par. 310). Obviously there is no denying the irreplaceable role played by reason in the establishment of Bacon's *Regnum hominis* on the physical world.

⁴²⁵ In third-millennium Greece a spirited debate blazes on the crucial question of whether the denomination 'Christian Church' is appropriate for the Catholic 'heretics'.

not only one's neighbor (in the Old Testament, the fellow countryman or co-religionist⁴²⁶). It is not with pamphlets that problems are solved, but with forgiveness, with love. The one who loves, marks his excellence, rising to a level immeasurably higher than that of the petty person who, loved, does not love. To love and forgive, moreover, is convenient, in view of the fact that hatred is a worry that hurts those who brood over it, blocking them in a narrow horizon.

Imagine God as a sun that enlightens and warms. If you hate, you make yourself opaque and create behind you a cone of shadow into which you would like to banish the guys you frown upon so that the divine light does not reach them. The commandment of love enjoins instead that you must not absorb the light that comes to you from God, but, on the contrary, let it penetrate you, spread and expand it, once you have become perfectly transparent and therefore invisible⁴²⁷.

This booklet does not consist of a compact series of incontestable arguments. Underneath the sequence of laborious lucubrations, I hope you feel the passion that enlivens it, even though the poet's verses⁴²⁸ and the mystic's serene gaze are more apt to disclose such a personal worldview.

⁴²⁶ Marcus J. Borg, "Jesus and the Quest for Holiness: The Alternative Paradigm", in Craig A. Evans, ed., *The Historical Jesus: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies*. Vol. II: *The Teaching of Jesus*, London-New York 2004, p. 305.

⁴²⁷ *Balt' urrèj, / sharrnjèj / për drit', / got' e kristàlt'*. I abhor mud, I thirst for light as a crystal cup does.

⁴²⁸ *VARGU. Flake / ngallimë / mlutas / në damàrèt*. VERSE. Seed of occult flame in the veins.

Faith

I believe that Christian doctrine is true because Jesus is risen, but I believe in the risen Jesus because I take Christian doctrine as true. It is a vicious circle (*pistilli versatio*) only for those who do not understand that one falls in love with Christ and that in our case it makes no sense to distinguish between resurrection and message. They are welcomed as one. This is faith: letting oneself be seduced. An atheist entered like one a church and came out a fervent believer. The mystical atmosphere was enough to make the impetuous current of faith - the certainty of a new vision centered on the cross of Christ and his resurrection - burst into his soul, particularly predisposed at that moment.

Without love one cannot live. We need God like air. The mean, stingy and begrudged loves of the world are not enough for us. We aspire to an infinite love. This is the need that justifies faith. To renounce it is a suicide, since instead of it we attribute infinite value to money, pleasure and power. One creates idols that are more within reach, but in the long run they reveal themselves unsatisfactory.

We might establish a parallelism between bodily and spiritual needs. Both, if not satisfied, create unhappiness. From the most primitive hominids to present-day humans we have developed a distinctive heightened sensibility that goes beyond material needs. Food and sleep are not enough for us. We demand the approval of others, gratitude, affection, love. This changes self-awareness. We become more refined, more demanding. Sometimes we love loneliness, restlessness, melancholy. Nothing is enough for us. What a difference between the prehistoric beast who, once sated, fell asleep blissfully and the unrestful man who aspires to an infinite good! A new hierarchy is created, independent of success in the world, in contrast to the values of the 'winners'. The thirst for infinity⁴²⁹ makes us more aware of ourselves, prods us on into something noble and eminent, mobilizes our energies in view of higher goals, becomes the spring of the further process of humanization.

We say God the object of aspiration to infinity. Even if it were the fruit of a progressive refinement of sensitivity, it would still be in spite of everything a splendid blunder. Faith in God and the aspiration to God that bolsters it are for people who are never satisfied, selective people, perhaps dreamers, assuredly provided with a high sense of self, if they

⁴²⁹ The sense of infinity is powerfully conveyed in Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818).

dare to do without things that others yearn for. They are the true happy few, eagles flying over flocks intent on grazing. After all, the privileged ones. An aristocracy of the spirit. This is enough to give a different tone to life.

The realm of art borders on that of faith⁴³⁰. It is useless to argue with those who lack the taste for beauty and ignore the value of intuition contained in the poetic word⁴³¹. For the grubbing greedy boar, vain waste will be the nightingale's warbling melody. If he decides to demolish even the Bard's verses, the skeptic will certainly have no shortage of arguments. If he sees me admiring the rainbow, the sunset, an aurora borealis, for the rationalist it is easy to elucidate these phenomena with deviations of light rays, different wavelengths, and the like. All true. But let me have the freedom to be stunned and touched. Gorgias asseverates as regards the theatrical performances that stage mythical or otherwise unreal events: "The man who let himself be deceived is wiser than he who does not"⁴³².

When faith and poetry merge⁴³³, then the sublime is born.

In praise of the useless. Free gesture is the capstone of our evolution⁴³⁴. In the mists of time, every action was aimed at profit, first and foremost at survival. With the evolution of the human psyche we passed to seemingly useless purposes: the cult of physical beauty, visual arts, literature, music, knowledge without practical upshot, an impossible love cherished for decades, setting a record, suffering for others, giving oneself to others in anonymity.

⁴³⁰ Cf Wessel Stoker, *Is Faith Rational? A Hermeneutical-Phenomenological Accounting for Faith*, Leuven 2006, p. 14.

⁴³¹ FJALË. Për rret' / e së pathënshmes / lëvare / kur e tek. WORDS. Along the paths of the unspeakable, traces every now and again.

⁴³² DK 82 B 23.

⁴³³ Faith and poetry are interwoven in Giuseppe Serembe (San Cosmo Albanese [Stergario] 1844 - São Paulo of Brazil 1901), an emblematic figure of star-crossed loser with a wandering life. The poet was struck by death on the eve of the proclamation of his "spiritual Christianity". The manuscript setting out its principles has been lost, but a partial reconstruction is made possible by hints strewn in publications and letters. His sonnet *Night Vision* presents an extraordinary consonance with Enoch's 'heavenly journey', culminating in the contemplation of the Merkabah (1 Enoch 14:8-20).

⁴³⁴ The renowned French climber Lionel Terray entitled his memoirs *Les conquérants de l'inutile* (1961). In 1967, the film *Le conquérant de l'inutile* was based on them.

For those who have faith is valuable what appears useless or insane in the eyes of the masses: concealment, renunciation of the world's delights, unknown sacrifice, immolation for an ideal, faith in an invisible God, the wager on eternal life.

Hiding, not in the desert, but in the crowded city. Not clothes or symbols of recognition, not spectacular actions, not to be in the limelight, not weird penances, not fasting records where the demon of pride lurks⁴³⁵. Rather, perfect camouflage in the environment. The true religion is, in the eyes of the obtuse, the triumph of pointlessness.

There is no convincing evidence for those who do not want to believe. *One believes with the heart* (Rom 10:10). Faith is an act of love, not a theorem capable of imposing itself with such inexorable logic as to extort the assent⁴³⁶. The believer is rather similar to the lover⁴³⁷ who sees in the beloved a perennial source of inspiration for life, a motor of action, a turning point that paints the world with the most varied colors. Yet that same woman is for the rest of men an inconsiderable, anonymous being.

Those who do not want to believe will never be convinced, even if a deceased person comes back from the afterlife (Luke 16:31).

The apostles wanted to believe⁴³⁸ in the risen Jesus and for them were enough the available facts - which to the skeptics did not demonstrate, do not demonstrate and will never demonstrate anything -, just because in those questionable facts they wanted to see the clincher of a new spiritual order in which they already believed, albeit a bit nebulously, while Christ was alive. They wanted to believe in the risen Christ (like us, after all), not on

⁴³⁵ So as not to be like or more than the Master, St Nilus of Rossano (+ 1004) broke up one of his austere fasts on the thirty-ninth day.

⁴³⁶ "Rather than as certainty, faith may be described as an attitude of trust adopted in the face of our ignorance of God... Faith always goes beyond the evidence... Certainty is the opposite of faith. The quest for certain knowledge is one of the surest ways to destroy authentic Christian faith... When the nature and limitations of faith are forgotten, Christianity easily becomes an irrational and dogmatic creed claiming absolute truth for itself and engaging in a power drive to suppress or destroy all alternative points of view and those who hold them" (Jeremy Young, *The Cost of Certainty: How Religious Conviction Betrays the Human Psyche*, Cambridge, Ma, 2005, p. 6). "In matter of faith, uncertainty is unavoidable. Without uncertainty there is no reason to believe, for then we would know and there would be no risk in believing" (David Crump, *Encountering Jesus, Encountering Scripture: Reading the Bible Critically in Faith*, Grand Rapids 2013, p. 66).

⁴³⁷ St Augustine (*In Evangelium Ioannis* 26 4) has well understood and expressed the similarity: "Da amantem et sentit quod dico". - *Give me a lover and he will understand what I say.*

⁴³⁸ About the will to believe, see Scott F. Aikin, *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe*, London 2014.

account of an irrefutable proof (which for those who do not want to believe will never exist), but since they thought it preferable and exciting to throw themselves into a spiritual adventure that would transmute them into convinced bearers of a series of new values, beginning with their own divinization, which finds its seal in the faith in the risen Christ⁴³⁹.

Everything is possible in the risen Christ; but I believe in the risen Christ, because I want everything to be possible⁴⁴⁰.

Faith is a life experience. One believes not by dint of arguments⁴⁴¹, but inasmuch as one falls in love with a person who embodies an idea. Faith, therefore, is not propagated by theological disquisitions, but by example, by a flame that passes from one heart to another, by the light that emanates from the believer's countenance. I do not love Jesus because I know him, I know Jesus because I love him⁴⁴².

Those who live in a Christian family are fascinated by the conviction with which their parents live the Gospel. The disciples fell in love not so much with Jesus' doctrines as with the way Jesus incarnated them in his life. To believe is to listen to one's deepest aspirations and to objectify them in a person⁴⁴³.

⁴³⁹ Similarly, they believed in Christ crucified, because in him they saw (or rather wanted to see) the model, worthy of love, of the self-sacrificing life, therefore inasmuch as, following his example, they were willing to sacrifice themselves for others. Even an atheist may admit the historical fact of Jesus' crucifixion, but its expiatory and revolutionary value can only be grasped with the eyes of faith; it makes sense only for those who believe, indeed for those who want to believe.

⁴⁴⁰ On the other hand, of wanting everything to be possible, as a prerequisite of faith in the risen Christ, we are indebted to the same elevating Spirit. Thus, the circle is closed: even in the remotest sources faith is revealed as a gift from God. *No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit* (1 Cor 12:3). I have already dealt with the problems that consequently affect free will in *Anceps Necessitas*, Stergario 1976.

⁴⁴¹ Therefore, more silent witness supported by prayer is needed and fewer sermons crammed with well-wrought arguments and humdrum erudition.

⁴⁴² Only a loving spirit can know God: *Love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God* (1 John 4:7). "Per amorem agnoscimus" (St Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob* 10 8 13). "In mysticism we know through love... The mystical theology or secret science of God is learned through love" (St John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle A*, Prologue 3; 18 3).

⁴⁴³ It is not proofs that generate faith, but faith, for mainly apologetic purposes, builds proofs that it does not actually need. The economist Stuart Chase (1888-1985) effectively summarized the question in the well-known aphorism: "For those who believe, no proof is necessary; for those who don't believe, no proof is possible". The faith of St Thomas Aquinas did not stand on the 'five ways'. These were only the

Money, power, pleasures - deceptive goods inserted in the whirling pinwheel of routine flattered by the prospect of death - do not satisfy me. I aspire to something higher. Ordinary life has no meaning or has one only for people with torpid sensibility. I need something greater. I am a realist: I want the impossible - to revive the slogan of the French May. I want to be a brave man, get off the high road, say goodbye to the anonymous and intoxicated crowd, face the unknown, fight against witches, monsters and giants that mainly prowl within me, defy death and smash it up, triumph where so many have been put to route. It is the same taste for the extraordinary that pushes the climber to challenge the summit through a path never attempted before. The woodworm of dissatisfaction pushes us up: higher and higher, always leaving behind what until a moment ago satisfied us. *Excelsius!*

The experiential proof of God's existence is offered by the *Sehnsucht*, the disease of desire, the unquenchable aspiration⁴⁴⁴. The grey, toxic and mephitic muddy swampland in which so many men swallow doesn't befit me. I want to give meaning to life, feel the strings of the soul vibrating madly, feel the thrill of flight. I feel all the misery of an existence turning into the quicksand of short-sighted selfishness. I am insatiable. I want to give everything to have everything. I'm ready to climb the cross to crush death. *I just want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. I want to suffer and die in communion with him, so that I too may attain the resurrection of the dead* (Phil 3:10-11). I believe in God without proof, in order to dispel despair; for, in spite of the most depressing sophisms, I have the audacity to stake my all and gamble⁴⁴⁵.

God presents himself as a life project. *Faith is the translation into concrete life of our aspirations and the experiential proof of hidden realities* (Heb 11:1)⁴⁴⁶. Jesus is the character in

rationalization of an already existing faith, based on the will to believe and the direct experience of God. The logical demonstrations fall within the scope of the law of the infinite cornucopia, which also explains the corresponding confutations. The same applies to the proofs of his own particular status, found by Jesus in Scripture. The awareness that he was the Son of God was inculcated in him by the inspiration of the Father, with whom, in a continuous relationship of loving communication, he felt as one (John 10:30). The fragile scriptural proofs, on the other hand, were of a thoroughly incidental nature, as part of a questionable rationalization. Hence, the ancillary role of theory with respect to sentiment.

⁴⁴⁴ Correspondingly, religion is nothing more than openness to infinity.

⁴⁴⁵ I suggest listening to the song *Credo* by Giorgia (2017).

⁴⁴⁶ In the interpretation of the verse, lapidarily pregnant in the original text, I follow Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Grand Rapids 2012, p. 521.

whom our deepest needs are incarnated, the archetype to which it is wonderful to conform. I believe in his atoning death, my way to full life that no longer fears death. I believe in his resurrection, since I myself want to resurrect and in his resurrection I see the archetype of the certain resurrection of those who are inspired by him. I believe that God became man in Jesus, for as a man I want to become God. I believe in the Holy Spirit, because Jesus is not for me an unreachable model lost in a far-flung and inaccessible heaven, but he is already within me, engaged, through his Spirit, in a continuous dialogue, inspiring my ascent, companion in my journey through life, consoler in hardships. In a word, God presents himself to me as my deepest self. There is no need to look for him outside. Each one of us is a tabernacle that carries him around the world.

The aim that the Christian religion proposes to us is precisely to become aware of this (partial) identity, of this friendly divine presence in the recesses, unknown to us too, of our ego. This is the doctrine of mutual indwelling: God is in us, and we are in God. God is always the infinitely other, shrouded almost throughout in darkness, but fortunately, even if only for that smidgen that we can catch on, he manifests himself in our innermost self and makes us one with him. The Christian religious experience - a special zest for life - may only be understood in terms of love, feeling, elation, vibration⁴⁴⁷, dialogue, hug, cry⁴⁴⁸, joy, intuition, light⁴⁴⁹.

The *kērygma*, in a nutshell, is contained in the statement: *Jesus is the incarnate Son of God who, dead and risen, keeps on living by the power of the Spirit in the community he redeemed*⁴⁵⁰.

⁴⁴⁷ *Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the Scriptures to us?* Luke 24:32. Cf Henry L. Novello, *Passionate Deification: The Integral Role of the Emotions in Christ's life and in Christian Life*, Eugene 2019.

⁴⁴⁸ In the opinion of the Byzantine mystic Simeon the New Theologian (949-1022), a monk cannot approach the sacraments without shedding tears.

⁴⁴⁹ "The poetic texts of the New Testament represent the attempt of early Christian writers to create numinous experiences for their audiences.... These texts were aimed not at convincing, but, rather, at inducing "ekstasis", literally, transport, carrying their listeners into an alternative realm of reality, an experience that would fundamentally change their orientation in the physical and social worlds in which they lived" (Gary S. Selby, *Not with Words of Wisdom: Nonrational Persuasion in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, 2016, pp. 16, 17). It stands to reason that the thrill of music boosts the suggestion.

⁴⁵⁰ Without prejudice to this basic and inalienable truth of Christianity, in the rest, for example in the tendentious interpretation of the Old Testament, one can see the ineluctable reflection of the defective mindset linked to the times, as per the fact that the first inculturation of Christian truth took place in Judaism. The concept of revelation ought therefore to be revised and its traditional scope drastically

Yesterday as today, each Christian is called to make a personal synthesis of Jesus' message, naturally fluid, as it is exposed to the rhythms of love relationship⁴⁵¹. And this experience cannot be judged with cold mental quibbles. It's not by formulating sterile theories about sounds and keeping our ears plugged that we can let ourselves be overwhelmed by the wave of a symphony. For the believer, the proof that Jesus has risen and lives consists in an uninterrupted dialogue with his Spirit. Those who want to keep their hearts extremely close to absolute zero will never be convinced of this. Of the objections of the skeptical rationalists the believer is not afraid. He does not respond to them with learned lucubrations, but with life, with the light emanating from the furnace that, hidden away, burns in his heart, since he knows well that faith is not transmitted with logomachies, inexhaustible by definition⁴⁵², a convenient shield for the man unwilling to throw himself into the fray. I believe, for the reason that I have fallen in love with a set of values, but, foremost, I have fallen in love with Jesus, who is the bearer of values that raise me to levels previously unimaginable to me. I believe in Jesus, because I believe in an exciting life project. Faith is the bursting of an energy capable of mobilizing every fiber of mine⁴⁵³.

The founder of the Neocatechumenals, Francisco (Kiko) Argüello, embraced Christianity at the height of a hellacious existential crisis.

I saw that all this gave no meaning to my life. I had died inwardly and I knew that my end would surely be, sooner or later, suicide. And I was actually amazed that people were able to live, but I

reduced. In the tradition of the Apostles, the inalienable nucleus of revelation must be distinguished from the cultural superfetations and incrustations, which constitute the toll they had to pay to the culture of their time. As a consequence, the inessential nature of the Jewish element sticks out.

⁴⁵¹ Each Christian feels that the messages contained in the Gospel resound in his or her soul unlike from other believers and in tune with the diverse stages of life. Proof of this is the different charisms, furthermore developed over time, of the founders of religious orders. If adherence to Christ will be seen not as a registry status, but as an exclusive and inimitable path, linked not only to the historical climate, but also to the nature, culture and vicissitudes of the individual, then the variety of Christian experiences, attested to from the beginning, will not cause scandal.

⁴⁵² Faith cannot be reduced to the acceptance of a list of theological formulas. "Believing in God: so easy even a demon can do it": this is the heading of chapter V of a recent book by Peter Enns, whose title already says it all (*The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our 'Correct' Beliefs*, San Francisco 2016).

⁴⁵³ "And in the luck of night / in secret places where no other spied / I went without my sight / without a light to guide / except the heart that lit me from inside. / O guiding dark of night! / O dark of night more darling than the dawn! / O night that can unite / a lover and loved one, / lover and loved one moved in unison" (St John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. A. Z. Foreman, verses 11-15, 21-25).

wasn't. People deluded themselves with football, with cinema, things senseless for me. Living was just suffering. Every day the same thing. Who am I? Why get up? Why earn money? Why get married? And so everything made no sense to me... plunged into a chasm, I felt the sky like an overwhelming burden of gloom... I asked the people in my neighborhood: "Excuse me a moment, do you know why you live?". They couldn't answer, and yet they kept on living. I couldn't do it... I ran away from myself and an abyss opened up in front of me.

Then I was helped by a philosopher, Bergson, in whose opinion intuition is a method of knowledge superior to reason. God wanted to strike the first spark: I realized I was, after all, a rationalist who was ruining himself with his own hands. Thanks to intuition I came to recognize that everything made sense, that there was a God. But I didn't know how to find him... I went into my room and invoked this God I didn't know: "Help me! I don't know who you are". At that moment the Lord took pity on me, because I had a profound experience of encounter that frightened me. Tears flowed in torrents. I felt like someone sentenced to death, to whom, in front of the firing squad, you announce "You are free!". This was for me to go from death to the awareness that Christ was inside me⁴⁵⁴.

The dramatic experience of the eruption of faith cannot be traced back to a logical demonstration. It is, on the contrary, a personal interpretation of reality, it is a painting of the world with one's own colors, just as it happens with falling in love, when a desolate desert is metamorphosed into a boundless sweep of flowers. To believe is to give, in the first person, a sense to the enigmatic and unlivable ravel and jumble surrounding us from all sides⁴⁵⁵. The world (kósmos, order) is not something already given: it is what we want it to be. To interpret the world means to shape it. Harmony and symmetry are absent from the chaos in which we find ourselves thrown at birth. It is we who generate them with our demiurgic power⁴⁵⁶.

In Jesus the danger of disappointment does not exist, because for the believer the dialogue with him is as continuous as his presence is uninterrupted, his voice is heard at every juncture of life, his help is clearly visible in a web of joys and sorrows that only the loving

⁴⁵⁴ The passage reported is taken from a testimony of Argüello (Assisi, 1 November 1996), later merged into the autobiographical volume *Il Kerygma. Nelle baracche con i poveri*, Cinisello Balsamo 2013.

⁴⁵⁵ In the novel *La Nausée* by Sartre, Antoine Roquentin, sitting on a park bench, lives with revulsion the senselessness of the world.

⁴⁵⁶ *Nga vija të hëqura skandrështa / mândalan stisa, shëmbëlltÿrë / të rrokullis', kalà.* From lines drawn haphazardly I built the mandala, an image of the universe, a stronghold. - *Zgamth, / mbaj frymën, piks / metërthorì, / piks horë.* Chest, hold your breath, engender symmetry, engender harmony!

soul can perceive. The believer has not met an idea, but a living and real person, Jesus, and, precisely inasmuch as he believes him to be God, he knows that with him there are no diaphragms of space and time, no communication problems arise, while recurring trials of love follow one another in an ascent that makes the soul sprout eagle wings.

In a word, faith is a *sui generis* experience, which cannot be declared madness or abnormality. Let us say that the believer - like the creative artist - lives in an alternate (but not abnormal or delusive) state of consciousness, in a kind of calm exaltation. This is the category of enthusiasm, a word that not by chance initially indicated divine possession⁴⁵⁷.

The pure vision of things and the exact perception of time are learned in the school of suffering and love. Whoever manages to give thanks under the cross, gets to the point of experiencing the highest peak of human wisdom. The main obstacle to the *sequela Christi* lies in its being a shocking experience, which radically changes life's routine and its comforts. "I could not stop loving the cross. I saw and felt that only it was life. What unspeakable secrets my soul saw in such great suffering, in such painful journeys and, finally, on Calvary! The black darkness of the night did not prevent the soul from fathoming all those secrets that only the wisdom of a God can reveal. They were secrets, mysteries of redemption. United to this wisdom of which I can say nothing, I felt obliged to suffer and agonize" (Alexandrina, 1904-1955).

A virtuous circle (vicious for those who do not believe) is traceable in the Fourth Gospel regarding the Holy Spirit. The fundamental text is John 16:12-15: *I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*

The 'authentic' words of Jesus are understood correctly by translating them into life in the Spirit through the enlightenment offered by the Spirit himself. One does not come to the truth except through the Spirit. Understanding is not the premise of faith, but its fruit. Only those who believe understand. Faith is self-feeding⁴⁵⁸. If they had not believed in the Spirit, the disciples would not even have spotted him. They sensed him in the roar of the

⁴⁵⁷ I mean an inner enthusiasm, averse to splashy displays of faith.

⁴⁵⁸ By virtue of it we cross over into a new dimension that subverts the logic hinging on *Barbara Baralipon Fapesmo Frisesomorum*.

wind and in the tongues of fire in the light of a faith at least in germ, whereas an incredulous one in those phenomena would have recognized unusual natural events or an exhibition of surprising magical abilities, if not the malignant hand of Satan. *This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him* (John 14:17).

No matter how much effort is made to demonstrate the reasonable basis of our beliefs, adhering to faith, or, as they say, embracing a faith, is no more the result of a complex and articulate argument than embracing a woman.

Paradise Now

The tendency to perfection. Everyone is convinced that his action, at a given time and in a specific personal situation, is the best, the one from which he expects the greatest possible advantage. Even the suicide justifies the self-harm gesture with the prospect of a higher happiness, which he sees in the cessation of pain or unbearable distress.

An ineluctable consequence is the impossibility of selfless action. I may throw myself into the fire for others, suffer the most excruciating throes for religious or patriotic reasons, or even just in a fit of pique, for mistaken pride, but what in any case I promise myself is still my elevation. Not being able to love selflessly both God and other men was the worry of the saints who, despite their best efforts, could not cross the horizon of their own ascent⁴⁵⁹. We love God as we love, thirsty, the fresh spring water. Only God loves unselfishly, since he gives without needing the other: he is already perfect. Spreading the being and the good is in his very nature, since he is a sun that cannot hold back its rays. Accordingly, the saint is not the masochist who enjoys suffering in order to appease the Moloch who terrifies him⁴⁶⁰, but, on the contrary, the one who devises and realizes the most appropriate project for the purpose of his human realization. Christianity is only a hand outstretched to us in the steep slope that leads us to full happiness. It is of no use to God. It profits and benefits man⁴⁶¹.

Deus absconditus. Ethologist Fritz Franz Heinz von und zu Schweifenburg⁴⁶² has meticulously transcribed with Teutonic meticulousness a pacey dialogue between three ants who, having lost their way at the first cold weather of the season, had found refuge and warmth between the interstices of the always-on supercomputer in Kaiserlautern

⁴⁵⁹ "Non enim sine praemio diligitur Deus, etsi absque praemii intuitu diligendus sit". - *Loving God always involves a reward, even if it is not to be done by calculation.* St Bernard, *De diligendo Deo* VII 17. *Ad maiorem mei gloriam* is the unconfessed motto that underlies all our actions.

⁴⁶⁰ So the Christian God is conceived by José Saramago, who, in strictly alphabetical order, draws up an interminable list of saints who faced the oddest and grimmest trials of martyrdom (*The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, London 2008, pp. 290-294).

⁴⁶¹ Sin must be interpreted as our resistance to full humanization.

⁴⁶² "Lethal Metaphysical Temptations: The Strange Case of the Arguing Ants", in *Transactions on Animal Communication*, XCVII - 2013, pp. 745-779. Fritz is considered by the experts the only savant in the world able to understand that abstruse dialectal variety of 'ant language'.

(Rhineland-Palatinate). While one of them limited itself to expressing satisfaction for the contact with that unknown continent, without asking further metaphysical questions, the other two engaged in a silly argle-bargle about its nature, function, self-reproduction, volutariness or not of its kindness, sensitivity to chemical messages, possible fall into hibernation, willingness to welcome inside a colony of ants and amenities of the sort. The dispute did not take long to degenerate and the *argumentum baculinum* prevailed⁴⁶³ to such an extent that both ended up being mortally wounded, while the first one watched helplessly and incredulously the unfortunate epilogue of the academic skirmishes.

What could the ants catch on of such a daedal contraption, altogether alien to their understanding? In distinction to God we are immensely more ignorant than the emmets thus dear to our *von und zu* in comparison with the supercomputer. On closer inspection, if we take into account the infinity of God, we are almost entirely in agreement with the agnostics. What we know is barely an ounce of it and yet it is enough to give a plausible meaning to our lives. Of God - to me well-nigh totally incomprehensible - nothing else I know except that he has slightly revealed himself to elevate me, that he warms my heart and launches me into an exciting adventure. This is enough. It's only a glimmer, but it's sufficient to set me on fire and in motion towards the best. Let us leave further insights to those who on obscure lucubrations intend to build fame and career.

St Teresa of Ávila did not anguish over not understanding so many aspects of the Trinity⁴⁶⁴. About it the only thing to ken is that God has manifested himself in his Son Jesus and that, after the departure of Jesus, the Spirit of love of the Father and the Son lives in us. In other words, of God we only know how he has acted and goes on acting to our advantage, in the way ants can understand regarding the computer only that it gives light and warmth, not what it is in itself, its internal structure, the uncountable functions it performs. We blather about the essence of God, whereas at most we are apt to communicate the experience of his love. If we dare to probe what he is in himself, we

⁴⁶³ Viz., they came to blows.

⁴⁶⁴ "I do not rack my brains on it... The less I understand it, the more I believe it, the more my devotion increases" (*Relaciones* 5 8 / 33 3). "Theologians, on the other hand, are able to muddle through", the saint points out, alluding with ill-hidden and biting irony to their rash forays into the most impenetrable realm. But let the silent adoration of mystery not be upstaged by the clamor of a raucous and unavailing donnybrook.

inevitably get entangled in an abyss of darkness, because we presume to grasp what by definition is precluded to us⁴⁶⁵.

God reveals himself. God manifests himself in all peoples and cultures. It is divine-willed and programmed by God - the same process of humanization, of raising man from bestiality to the most self-denying and sublime ideas and feelings. In Rom 2:10-16 Paul states that God has revealed himself to the Gentiles in their hearts and concludes: *This is the message I have received*. We may be convinced that God's revelation in Christianity is more effective for the reasons abovementioned, but this does not detract from the fact that in other religions, and even in atheists, God unveils his greatness. Why not see a divine seed in the selfless act of the girl who, faithful to the collectivistic ethic of communism, ran at the first earth tremor to get the herd out of the barn and almost at the end of the operation was overwhelmed by a second, more powerful shock? This does not mean to put all things on the same level, but to underscore the positive aspects, all linked with God, which stand out in every human group and in every conception.

Wars of religion do not make sense, since, as Cusanus has well taught in *De pace fidei*⁴⁶⁶, the infinity of God will never be comprehended. In the perspective of infinity the divergences that seemed insurmountable are smoothed out and tend to disappear, the varying conceptions appear to differ hardly at all, even if one faith should not be swapped for another. I am a Christian and proud to be so, not willing to change my faith, on the grounds that it offers me a more opportune way to get closer to God. That doesn't mean nevertheless that I may despise others who believe dissimilarly or who do not believe in anything.

If a canon of sacred books is good as a general orientation, it must be admitted that, within the Church, God keeps on manifesting himself in the saints and to the saints. But he also manifests himself to each man in a mysterious and personal way. Mankind in its most advanced stages carries forward the revelation of God, regardless of faith, because if an atheist attains moral dignity, there is present the vestige of God. Even intellectual

⁴⁶⁵ Thus St Augustine (*Sermones* LII 6 16): "Si comprehendere potuisti, aliud pro Deo comprehendisti". - *If you think you understood God, then that means it was something else entirely*. It is senseless to transfer into the Infinite Being the typical categories of the limited and contingent world. In the case of God it is not ignorance that disturbs us, but the illusion of knowledge, a deplorable delirium of presumption, an inexhaustible inspiration for unreasonable and inconclusive rharbarbs, which too often lapse into persecutions and massacres.

⁴⁶⁶ The work was composed in 1453, immediately after the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks.

achievements, what are they if not legs of the march towards God, this end of ends, this unreachable goal of the whole process of humanization?

The wind [of the Spirit] blows where it chooses (John 3:8). Everything that is properly human cannot become an object of dispute, but must be considered a common heritage. Let us strip ourselves of our short-sighted perspective and admire mankind launched into this elating progression⁴⁶⁷.

Man's self-awareness is the gradual unveiling of God. Every reflection that man conducts on himself, every broadening of our human horizons is a revelation of God. Whatever humans have produced on the most varied levels - the ideas of philosophers, poets, scientists, mystics, even simple men and women in the face of the hard trials of life -, everything must turn into a subject of meditation if we are to take a step ahead towards perfect human fulfillment⁴⁶⁸.

We hear an inner voice that expounds, admonishes, exhorts. It is the voice of God. To believe that YHWH on Sinai gave Moses the tablets of the commandments may only be a sensible way to give a divine seal, an indisputable authority, to truths that have gradually arisen in man through a divine revelation from heart to heart, in the true way God communicates with us⁴⁶⁹.

Everything in consciousness. The progressive revelation of God in prehistory and in the history of mankind comes to coincide with the process of humanization and divinization

⁴⁶⁷ "Quidquid verum, a quocumque dicitur, a Sancto dicitur Spiritu" (Ambrosiaster, *Commentarium in Epistolam I ad Corinthios XII 3*) - *Every truth, whoever enunciates it, comes from the Holy Spirit*. St Thomas Aquinas was so convinced of the validity of this maxim that he quoted it, slightly retouched in form, 18 times in his writings (Gerald O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, Oxford 2011, p. 174). With regard to the multiform and irrepressible presence and activity of the Spirit I point out Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation*, Grand Rapids, 2016. This is the fourth volume in the series *A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*.

⁴⁶⁸ Thus Don Tonino Bello invoked the Holy Spirit: "Give us the joy of understanding that you do not speak only from the mikes of our churches. That no one can boast of possessing you. And that, as the seeds of the Word are spread in all the flowerbeds, it is also true that your moans are expressed in the tears of the Mohammedans and in the truths of the Buddhists, in the loves of the Hindus and in the smiles of idolaters, in the good words of heathen and in the righteousness of atheists".

⁴⁶⁹ The Ten Commandments were drawn from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. The initial word is a clue: Anokhi - *I am*. See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations*, New York-London 2006, p. 483.

of man. Man gradually becomes conscious of God and himself. The energy of the elevating Spirit is displayed in the progressive consciousness, which is not only abstract knowledge, but motion of heart and action. The fruit of the Spirit is a conviction capable of steering us towards new noble purposes.

When we love God, when we feel to be one with him, our consciousness no longer has the impression of being led from outside, because then it opens itself to the deepest mystery: God is its foundation⁴⁷⁰. The so-called voice of conscience is the voice of God himself. What Freud called Superego, we may call it God, Holy Spirit. It is nothing other than what we can perceive, receive, of God. It informs and conforms us in the image of God, it assimilates us to him. It is not a permanent and immutable fact, but a long strain, a dialectical action that takes place between ups and downs, errors and misperceptions, thanks to a work that eliminates the dross, the ballast, and brings out the true face of God and the Ego, which, for its part, is all the more itself (the realized self) the more it assimilates itself to God, welcomes him, lets itself be guided by him and with him merges: *It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me* (Gal 2:20)⁴⁷¹.

This appears overtly in the saints. To realize this, let us read the *Story of a Soul* of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. Love, only love: this is the message. Love of God, full devotion to someone who knows how to offer us on the cross delights unimaginable for weak and

⁴⁷⁰ For an overall discussion of mysticism I refer to Richard H. Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism: Raids on the Ineffable*, Albany, NY, 2016. Regarding Christian mysticism see Louise Nelstrop and Simon D. Podmore, eds., *Christian Mysticism and Incarnational Theology: Between Transcendence and Immanence*, London-New York 2016.

⁴⁷¹ Ben C. Blackwell (*Christosis: Pauline Soteriology in Light of Deification in Irenaeus and Cyril of Alexandria*, Tübingen 2011) calls *christōsis* (christification, fusion with Christ) the Pauline version of *théōsis*. "Since Jesus is the Image of the invisible God, the indwelling of his spirit has a powerful transformative effect on the possessed. Its presence within the believer works to transfigure him or her into the same Image of God" (April D. DeConick, "Early Christian Mysticism", in Glenn Alexander Magee, ed., *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, New York 2016, p. 74). "On the cross my whole being was transformed into Christ. I was so pervaded by it that there was nothing in me that was not his. It seems to me that Jesus entered into me with more intensity than the rays of the sun through a stained glass window. I had no eyes, no hearing, no thoughts, no lips, no heart that were not Jesus'. I suffered with him, or rather, it was he who suffered in me: only he suffered... This love was in my heart, but it did not belong to me: it was the love of Jesus. He was the one who loved, sacrificed himself and gave life... My whole being became Christ, the suffering life of Christ. And so, all Christ, I fell on the ground of the Garden" (Alexandrina, *Diary* 30 March 1951, 15 August 1952, 5 September 1952).

cowering spirits and makes us climb the steepest crests, pushing us from peak to peak, elevating our humanity to the point where it is bordering on the divine⁴⁷².

J'adore adorer. What in the reader's eyes is a derisory play on words, incapable of coloring hours upon hours of dull and fluctuating recollection, sums up for the spunky soul the adoring ecstasy that it would never want to end, the spring that drives us on, the dizziness of a flight into the boundless space of daring, of overcoming the force of gravity inherent in the transient and mean, the thrill of the realization of the Superman, a fusion obtained at a temperature that dissolves any lump, lightens us, evaporates the boundary between lover and loved, human and divine.

By loving God, we love our innermost self. Conversely, in the words of Spinoza, the mind's intellectual love towards God is part of the infinite love by which God loves himself⁴⁷³. "This lovable Heart [of Jesus] will make up for everything that may be lacking on your part, since he will love God for you, and you will love him in him and for him" (Margaret Mary Alacoque, 1647-1690). "When we praise God, it is not we, but he who praises himself" (Gemma Galgani, 1878-1903). "The divine Heart of Jesus did not cease, in me, to love. It was in my heart that he loved all humanity" (Alexandrina).

The most sublime wisdom is within everyone's reach. "The soul knows, sees, understands, without knowing, seeing, understanding. It is all concentrated in one point, an infinite and eternal point, a point of uncreated love. Only there it does breathe life, it is calm and happy, out of time" (Conchita Cabrera, 1862-1937). "Enter the treasure room within you and you will see the room of the heavenly treasure. They are one and the same and there is only one entrance for both of them" (Isaac of Nineveh, † about 700). "The heart is a small vessel, but everything is contained in it: God is there and also the angels, life, the kingdom, the city of heaven and the treasures of grace" (Macarius the Egyptian, 300-391).

⁴⁷² "The science of Love, ah, yes, this word resounds sweetly in the ear of my soul and I desire only this science" (*Story of a Soul, cit., Manuscript B 1 r*). "To live of love, 'tis by Thy life to live, / glorious King, my chosen, sole delight! / Hid in the host, how often Thou dost give / Thyself to those who seek Thy radiant light. / Then hid shall be my life, unmarked, unknown, / that I may have Thee heart to heart with me, / for loving souls desire to be alone, / with love and Thee... To live of love, 'tis without stint to give..." (*To live of love!*, vv. 17-24, 33 - trans. S. L. Emery).

⁴⁷³ *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata* V 36. Spinoza was preceded by St John of the Cross: "The will of the soul is transformed into the will of God... The soul therefore loves God perfectly, with the same love with which he loves himself... God loves nothing outside of himself. Therefore, when he loves a soul, he in a certain way puts it into himself and makes it equal to himself, so that he loves the soul with the same love with which he loves himself" (*Spiritual Canticle A*, 37 2-3; 23 5).

When challenged with such mystical summits, sound narrow-minded the reserves of rationalist intellectuals, who, pleased idling away the time with their whims in the cage cooled by circuits in which roam stale skeptical formulas and comfortable alibis copiously bestowed by the captious reason, know how to keep themselves safe from an adventure that would launch them into the flames of unusual experiences; not unlike the kook who, instead of listening to a symphony, carried on following its graphic representation on a screen. Let them warm themselves by painted flames. Let us, by contrast, throw ourselves without hesitation into the furnace, where, as if in a crucible, our humanity is purified, and we are reborn, more than men, heroes who enjoy shining in an infinite darkness, regardless of the fact that mortal eyes do not perceive their daily metamorphoses. This is the mystery to whose sublimity we are to be initiated.

The worshiper sees, in the white host, a cross drawn and imagines that in the center of the host is the heart of Jesus, manifested by the gash in the side. His attention is fixed in that spot where all the pains of the racked man are gathered and from which a divine power radiates. There is virtually enclosed the world with its history, time and space. There everything is summed up. A lifetime is not enough to understand the implications of that ideal pivotal point, but it is certainly not difficult to understand the elevating potential it holds for the contemplative⁴⁷⁴. So Jesus to Margaret Mary Alacoque: "Here is the plague of my side, where you must dwell forever. Here you will be able to keep the white stole of innocence of which I have clothed your soul, so that you may now live only the life of the Man-God. Live as if you were no longer living, so that I may live perfectly in you; or work as if you were no longer working, but it is I who work in you, because I want to be everything for you. Let it be your task to love and suffer blindly; one heart, one love, one God".

Every wretched believer, however ignorant, is offered the chance of transcending himself, of taking flight, on one condition: that he loves God, that he directs all his affection towards him, that he enjoys conversations with him, like a true loving spirit. This is the miracle. Our confession, precisely because it implies a personal relationship with a God-Man, Jesus crucified and risen, allows the full elevation of the faithful. In fact, to love is to

⁴⁷⁴ After the Eucharistic ecstasy of 6 December 1273 St Thomas Aquinas cut short the writing of the *Summa Theologica*, because, compared to what he had contemplated, every one of his works seemed to him a vile stuff. On this theme I point out the profound and penetrating reflections of Bruno Forte (*Il silenzio di Tommaso*, Casale Monferrato 1998).

be transformed into the beloved, to blend in with him, to become one⁴⁷⁵. The *théōsis* is the great prodigy operated by love⁴⁷⁶. This goes beyond imitation, which still implies the difference between imitator and imitated. In love, the conformation of the lover to the beloved takes place without him being aware of it or proposing to imitate him⁴⁷⁷. Spending hours in front of the host may be sickening only for those who do not know the excellence of the one who in this case is the beloved and whose attractions one is never weary of considering and treasuring⁴⁷⁸.

The saint who burns with love for God actually loves his deepest self. Lover and beloved are identical: the lover loves the self that he does not fully know, but that he glimpses and discovers as he goes along. It is a long story of love, as long as life; it is the exploration of the self, of the region of the spirit whose boundaries are not well-fixed, but move further and further in a crescendo of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, in an ever-changing contrast of light and darkness. The God that we depict may only be the ideal image of the self, the planned self, the self that we intend to realize and that changes from one era to another becoming increasingly self-aware. God is absolute perfection, beyond our reach. We can only know his function *quoad nos* [in relation to us], that which, rooted in our spirit, reveals a certain affinity. To develop our thought, that is, self-awareness, means to know him better, to come closer to his unattainable perfection. In this sense, thought is what is divine

⁴⁷⁵ This is how St Mechtilde of Hackeborn (c. 1241 - 1298) in her *Book of Special Grace* describes the experience of God: "[Jesus said to me:] «I give you my eyes so that you may see all things with them, my ears that you may understand what you hear, my mouth I also give you, so that all you have to say, whether in speech, prayer or song, you may say through it. I give you my heart, so that through it you may think everything and may love me and all things for my sake». At these last words the Lord absorbed my soul entirely, uniting it to himself closely, and I saw with his eyes, with his ears I heard, I spoke with his mouth, and I had no heart but that of God" (II 34).

⁴⁷⁶ *Kénōsis* is the condition for God to become man and, conversely, for man to become God. See Sigurd Lefsrud, *Kenosis in Theosis: An Exploration of Balthasar's Theology of Deification*, Eugene 2020. The crucifix is the incomparable book to meditate upon in order to conform ours own to the *kénōsis* of the Logos. The visual transposition of this concept can be admired, although the original has been lost, in the painting *Bonaventure shows Thomas Aquinas the Crucifix* by Francisco Zurbarán (1629).

⁴⁷⁷ "As kiln fire burns the stone, so turn me too into flame" (Giulio Variboba, 1725-1788).

⁴⁷⁸ "Christian contemplation is born of love, tends towards love and is the work of love... It consists in the *pati divina*, that is, in the interior experience in which the soul does not act, but is guided by God through the gifts of the Spirit" (Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, Eugene 2011, p. 220).

in us. By knowing ourselves, we know God, we become like him: it is a project of self-surpassing, through ever higher levels, which is also a project of self-realization.

Man participates in God through a progressive clarification of his own being⁴⁷⁹. Consciousness develops, patrols areas of shadow. Our dignity gradually reveals itself to us and leads us more and more away from the innumerable forms of abjection. Our task is to discover the god who is in us, or rather God himself who is within us⁴⁸⁰ and is revealed to us over time⁴⁸¹. However, without the charismatic aspect (grace, sacraments, prayer as a continuous dialogue with Jesus, mutual indwelling) Christianity is distorted into philanthropy or rationalist humanism.

The God who loves us is the God who has put into the spirit the goad that gives us no rest, who demands every day the death of the old man and his transfiguration into the new one. In the Jesus whom they loved wildly, even to the cruelest sacrifice, and who in reality (as he is absolutely perfect) does not need any of our torments as much as our love, the saints saw two things interrelated: the ideal of our humanity and the spur (through grace) to achieve it. God has revealed himself: he is not a question mark, an impenetrable wall of darkness. God has become like us: in Jesus he has shown us the way to follow for self-realization, for the supreme elevation of the self, for divinization.

Mysticism. Religion was certainly born from fear, from the need for protection, from a sense of insecurity. Unbelievers are not wrong when they lay bare the vile and petty foundation of a religious behavior of someone who tries to ingratiate himself with God, who even prays for the ruin of his adversaries (who, needless to say, are always devilish and therefore deserve the most vicious punishments), who pacifies the conscience with ritual gestures and thus does have his way and make his way. There is no shortage of those who practice faith out of vanity, willing even to be laid in the coffin to attract people's gaze⁴⁸². At the end of the day, this religion is a *quid pro quo* in which little or nothing is given, and immense profits are promised already in this valley of tears. Stuff fit for weathercocks and whited sepulchers.

⁴⁷⁹ In this sense he can term himself a tendential God.

⁴⁸⁰ "Tu autem eras interior intimo meo". - *You were more inside me than my deepest recess*. St Augustine, *Confessiones* 3 6 11.

⁴⁸¹ See Victor Emil Frankl, *The Unconscious God*, New York 1978.

⁴⁸² So many who stand up as defenders of the last would never accept to confuse themselves anonymously with them.

To this inferior religion (or caricature of true religion) Bergson contrasts the animose religion of the mystics⁴⁸³, who do not pursue such contemptible rewards, but find their happiness in union with God, in silence, in concealment, in atoning sacrifice for the salvation of all⁴⁸⁴. To welcome the will of God, to abandon oneself to it, means to come out of the shell of the limited personal vision, to embrace something greater and higher, more universal, even if it seems to destroy or at least maim us. The most striking example that unites the two exposed attitudes (readiness to sacrifice for the salvation of others - surrender to God's will) is in Paul, who in Rom 9:3 hopes: *For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.* This is the ultimate sacrifice - one's own eternal perdition - for the benefit of the erring brothers. Paul reasons like this: if God subordinates the salvation of Israel to my damnation, well, at this point his will may be done, I am ready to accept this also from God. A peak of unselfishness⁴⁸⁵. But, dialectically, the reasoning is reversed, because adhering fully to God's will is precisely what Paradise consists of.

The mystic, like Paul, renounces even the need for justice, although in any case the extreme altruistic impulse cannot fail to have a positive outcome in the process of perfecting for those who sacrifice themselves for others. Some hypothesize that the final judgment has been devised on the impulse of the need to re-establish the right trampled on by bullies, to give the good a reward, the bad a punishment. The mystic, on the other hand, loves so much to forget even this, to renounce the eternal reward. He prefers to be detached from Christ, to be damned, in order to see saved the others he cares about.

Here we have reached an extreme where the current logic is subverted, for the simple reason that the logic of love, governed by the old saw "You don't give anything, if you

⁴⁸³ A witty and pungent etymology: *Mysticism begins in mist, has an I in the middle and ends in schism.* The mystical experience is not reserved for the privileged few. See the book by the Jesuit Edward Carter, *The Mysticism of Everyday*, Kansas City, Mo, 1991. Karl Rahner, another Jesuit, has foretold: "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all" (*Theological Investigations*, XX, Chestnut Ridge, NY, 1981, p. 149).

⁴⁸⁴ For the Christian mystic, the experience of God (mainly of his love) and abnegation are two sides of the same coin. An illiterate monk of Grottaferrata (Rome), Brother Damiano da Plàtaci (1919-2009), practiced his own personal version of simple prayer, consisting of thinking 'God' in the act of inhalation and 'Fire' in that of exhalation. A perfect action-oriented meditation, within everyone's reach.

⁴⁸⁵ "I long for my fearful darkness to turn exclusively into light for all mankind, even if I, alone, were to remain for the rest of my life in the boundless abyss of my darkness" (Alexandrina, *Diary* 1 August 1952).

don't give everything", braves the most daring, the most insane trials⁴⁸⁶. The summit of humanity is in the oblatinal love, ready for atoning sacrifice, renunciation, immolation, as it came to pass in Damiaan De Veuster (the apostle of lepers), Maximilian Kolbe and countless others⁴⁸⁷. Here we are on the level of the Superman. Here I see the crown of human evolution, the true big leap from animality and watchful utilitarian selfishness. With the Crusades, in the name of God, non-believers were killed. With oblatinal or sacrificial love, it is we who are ready to die for the salvation of the unbelievers. Through his blood Jesus sealed the apex of his message.

Isabelle Prêtre⁴⁸⁸ speaks of the supreme intelligence of love. Yes, it is precisely in love that we reach the highest degree of understanding, given that only by loving can we see reality with the eye of God. Love is empathy, mysterious identification with the other, overcoming of the abyss that separates subject and object.

Yet faith knows the torture of doubt⁴⁸⁹. When St Thérèse of Lisieux got the cross she was craving for, consolations faded away, perplexities milled around, she feared to be wasting her life and came to the brink of suicide. Jesus himself felt on the cross that the Father had abandoned him⁴⁹⁰.

Faith doesn't benefit lazy and pusillanimous people. It's only for the extremists, for the daredevils. Religion was certainly born out of petty utilitarianism, but human evolution

⁴⁸⁶ "Amore amoris tui facio istuc". - *For the sake of your love, I'm induced to do so.* St Augustine, *Confessiones* 2 1 1; 11 1 1.

⁴⁸⁷ "I am a mother weeping tears of blood that bathe all mankind. I can't give myself a break. I want to save the world; I want to suffer every pain, to give my life for it" (Alexandrina, *Diary* 8 March 1945).

⁴⁸⁸ *Thérèse de Lisieux ou l'intelligence de l'amour*, Paris 1997.

⁴⁸⁹ Every authentic Christian, dismayed by the divine *kénōsis*, feels innate the awareness of his own cognitive and moral fragility, but, on the other hand, he considers extraneous the refractoriness to doubt, the presumption of infallibility, the fanatical and triumphalist attitude, the celebratory parades, the spirit of crusade, the *Te Deums* of victory.

⁴⁹⁰ "In this life without life, in this night without stars, in this frightening darkness my heart and soul cry out to Heaven... Poor soul who cries out to Heaven with the doubt that God does not exist... I went up to Calvary without faith, without believing in eternity, and in such temptation I felt I wanted to commit suicide" (Alexandrina, *Diary* 15 January 1954, 15 October 1954).

and the divine example of Jesus have led far beyond, to the audacity of men who, instead of describing fire, choose to burn⁴⁹¹.

Church visible and Church invisible. From the beginning, the Church holds a structure with a gradually developing hierarchical order. This is the visible Church, the guarantor of authority, apostolic succession, right faith, administration of the sacraments⁴⁹². But, in addition to it and not necessarily coinciding with it, we must admit an invisible Church in which there are no degrees and the only distinction is made by right conscience and intensity of faith. *Abscondita est Ecclesia, latent sancti* [The Church is hidden, the holy ones are kept out of sight]: so Luther in *De servo arbitrio* [1525]⁴⁹³, where he elaborates the doctrine of the *Verborgenheit der Kirche* [invisibility of the Church], which counts among its precursors St Augustine who already distinguished between *Domini corpus verum* and *Domini corpus permixtum*⁴⁹⁴.

The authentic Church is known only to God, and she is made up of hearts docile to the impulse of the Spirit⁴⁹⁵ and sincere believers who strive, although naturally sinners, to follow in the footsteps of the Master. In consequence, no one among those who don the stole is allowed to bask in the certainty of belonging to the flock of the chosen ones. Nevertheless, it is not up to us to determine who is living in grace. Jesus bans the vain speculations about the fate of others and invites, conversely, each one to strive rather to

⁴⁹¹ *Zjarrin u' nuk përshkrùaj, / në zjarr përshkrëndem. I do not want to tell of fire, myself in fire I empty and burn - Ahjt në mua frymën tënde / ëm' t' pështillem me flakë, / humbmë që t' bëhem dritë. Breathe in me your spirit, wrap me in flame, annihilate me so that I may turn into light.*

⁴⁹² The time-honored structures of the visible Church must be adapted to a profoundly changed society, or else they will be at risk of growing antwackie. Christians who accept the challenge of the times are called today to imagine more effective ways of transmitting the Spirit. See Pete Ward, *Liquid Church*, Eugene 2013²; Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements*, Grand Rapids 2016².

⁴⁹³ Weimarer Ausgabe 18 652 23.

⁴⁹⁴ *De doctrina Christiana* 3 32 45.

⁴⁹⁵ "Even those who blamelessly ignore the Gospel of Christ and his Church, but sincerely seek God and under the influence of grace strive to fulfill his will, known through the dictates of conscience, can achieve salvation. Even those who through no fault of their own have not yet come to an explicit knowledge of God, but strive, not without divine grace, to lead a righteous life, divine Providence does not deny the help necessary for salvation. In fact, all that is good and true in them, the Church sees it as a preparation to accept the Gospel, as a gift granted by the one who enlightens every man so that he may finally have life" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium* II 16).

climb up the steep slope of sacrifice: *Someone asked him: Lord, will only a few be saved? He said to them: "Strive to enter through the narrow door"* (Luke 13:23-24).

Silence, the sacrament of the world to come. This aphorism of Isaac of Nineveh, thus cherished by St Seraphim of Sarov, warns us against the blather and the vain agitation hankering after spotlight⁴⁹⁶. If there is no interiority and prayer, even in the most active life dedicated to others there is no Christianity. Silence anticipates the ineffable contemplation⁴⁹⁷, hides us from the eyes of others, allowing us to source in peace from the divine well⁴⁹⁸ what later will flow in manifold ways on others. The contemplative saves the world at large and mankind, because the spiritual sphere is a set of mysteriously communicating vessels⁴⁹⁹.

The last horizon. Every authentic Christian lives in time with his heart and eyes focused on eternity, on true life, on the city that is his ultimate goal. The privilege by virtue of which on earth he tastes Paradise does not make his nostalgia any less burning.

*Cordis atras peramantis
more noctes vigila.
Milvi solem inhiantis
instar i per aethera.
Lacus luminis flammantis,
late lucet patria⁵⁰⁰.*

⁴⁹⁶ See Robert Sarah with Nicolas Diat, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise*, San Francisco 2017.

⁴⁹⁷ *Maj' e malit të fjälëve - heshtja*. Peak of the mountain of words - silence.

⁴⁹⁸ *Në hambòre kullòt qiell të kullùar*. In the desert I feed me on clear skies.

⁴⁹⁹ "Acquire inner peace and thousands will be saved around you" (St Seraphim of Sarov).

⁵⁰⁰ Keep awake in night's darkness, as an ardent heart does. Like a sun-thirsty hawk, soar up into the welkin. A realm of flaming light, widely glows the homeland.

