Transforming the Crisis in an Opportunity: Wisdom Literature and Patristic Exegesis

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1. Introduction

Yuval Noah Harari wrote in 2016: "Yet at the dawn of the third millennium, humanity wakes up to an amazing realisation. Most people rarely think about it, but in the last few decades we have managed to rein in famine, plague and war. Of course, these problems have not been completely solved, but they have been transformed from incomprehensible and uncontrollable forces of nature into manageable challenges. We don't need to pray to any god or saint to rescue us from them. We know quite well what needs to be done in order to prevent famine, plague and war– and we usually succeed in doing it."[1]

This quote read today, after the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic, may seem tragicomic, in the sense that it outlines a representation of reality that has been undermined by the dramatic confrontation with the limit of disease and death, sparing no one. But Harari's text, placed at the beginning of his book significantly entitled *Homo Deus,* has the merit of highlighting the religious dimension of the issue.

For this reason, the crisis can also be seen as an opportunity, if we read it in the light of its Greek etymology, i.e. as a judgement. The proposal put forward here is that such a judgement can be greatly facilitated by an approach to Scripture that takes as its hermeneutical criterion the relationship between the Wisdom literature and the didascalic language that corresponds to it in the New Testament parables.[2] This has an immediate exegetical impact also linked to the crisis of modernity that the post-modern project highlights and that the pandemic has catalysed.[3] This perspective also makes it possible to grasp the topicality of Patristic exegesis, overshadowed by modern research, but which contemporary thought is rediscovering.

2. The desert

In *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, one of the most translated books after the Bible, the meeting between the aviator and the mysterious protagonist takes place in the desert. There, in that place which is beautiful because it always hides a well somewhere,[4] a journey takes place, a "flight" one might say, which is not made possible by the technological means, as the plane which at that moment does not work anymore, but by a relationship that arises in that inhospitable and dangerous environment for life, but which confronts the aviator, i.e. the modern man, with his limits and the limits of his instruments. This makes it possible for the question of meaning to emerge, a question that lurks in the very life of the author of the story, in dramatic tension between the home where his wife Consuelo, represented by the rose in the story, awaits him and would like him to stay, and the desire to fly which always takes him away from that

1 Y.N. Harari, *Homo Deus: A brief history of tomorrow* (New York: Random House, 2016).
2 Cf. F. Rosini, «L'arte della parola al servizio della parola. Note esperienziali sulla comunicazione della fede», στο AA.VV., *La predizazione cristiana oggi* (Bologna: EDB, 2008), 65-74.
3 Cf. P. Donati - G. Maspero, *Dopo la pandemia. Rigenerare la società con le relazioni* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2021).
4 Cf. A. Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, c. XXIV.

home.[5] In metaphysical terms, this tension is that between the finite and the infinite, between the one and the many.
From the point of view of biblical exegesis, Saint-Exupery's story shows how the desert is the place where the limit becomes poetry, illustrating through a metaphor the power of that biblical place. The fundamental point is that in both the Old Testament and the New, it is God who draws the people into the desert, from the exodus, when the Law is given to the people, through the prophets, such as Hosea, to Christ himself, whom the Spirit leads into the desert to be tempted.[6] Why does this happen? What is special about the desert?
From the theological point of view, man is naked there, he has nothing of what he produces and achieves to protect himself and, therefore, he is exposed to his own limitations, without even having a bush to hide from God who seeks him as for Adam in the beginning. The reference to the original sin is not merely metaphorical, because a Wisdom reading of Gen 3 shows that the very rupture of the relationship with the Creator made the limit problematic, which before was only an opportunity to draw on the divine source itself. From the Latin point of view, *limes*, i.e. the border, was also *limen*, i.e. threshold, a place that introduces a new space, a home and a beginning. The limit has such a double etymology that refers to an ambivalence that finds its own explanation in Genesis, if we read it in an etiologic key, as the Wisdom literature allows us to do.
The thesis advanced here is that even the pandemic can be biblically presented as a desert, which hides a well, not like those of the Sahara, but a village well, as Saint-Exupery specifies, referring to Sichar.[7] In fact, unlike what Harari expected, the experience of the limit liberates, in the sense that it makes idols fall, ancient, modern and post-modern.[8] These are nothing more than the projection onto a finite reality of the desire for infinity inherent in the human heart by the very fact of having been created in the image and likeness of God.[9] This projection can lead to nothing but slavery, as in Egypt. And this is not limited to the religious sphere, because every human being is in fact a believer, insofar as, regardless of one's faith, by our actions we reveal the meaning of our existence, hence what we believe in, even in the case of atheism. From this perspective, the techno-gnosis in which we are immersed, and which some versions of post-humanism propose in an exaggerated form, promises precisely the overcoming of human limits through *praxis* and *techne*. The fragility of the human being, highlighted by the desert and the pandemic, on the other hand, refers to the relationship as a constitutive element of our being. Far from being negative, the crisis thus shows the human being's foundation in a relationship that is both vertical and horizontal.
In fact, *idol* is a term derived from the same Greek root as *idea*, so as to imply a shift from reality to the logical dimension. In this, there is only room for identity as conformity to a conceptual model or dialectical antithesis. The essence of original sin is, therefore, the placing of thought above the relationship with reality, in an attempt to satisfy in a non-relational way, i.e. by oneself, that infinite desire inscribed in the human heart. From a philosophical point of view, this recalls the modern parable that moves from the operation of Descartes, who from a gnoseological perspective called the act of thinking as proof of one's existence, up to the idealist reinterpretation, which with Hegel translates the operation onto the ontological plane. The Cartesian thinking is not in itself anti-relational, because it thinks something external to the subject, but when being is identified with the very thinking of the subject then the metaphysical framework that

5 Cf. C. de Saint-Exupéry, *Memorie della rosa. La mia vita con Antoine de Saint-Exupéry* (Siena: Barney, 2014).
6 Cfr. Mat 4:1-11.
7 Cf. John 4:5-26.
8 Cf. P. Sequeri, *Ενάντια στα μετασύγχρονα είδωλα* (Athens: Armos, 2017).
9 Cfr. Gen 1:26-27.

arises can only be anti-relational. From here we deduce that idolatry, from a certain moment onwards and to some degree, is intrinsic to the modern view, because what the subject thinks takes the place of what is, similarly to what happened to the thought of the progenitors at the moment they sinned.
The question is properly modern, because the difference with respect to ancient Greece is radical: there being is identified with the idea (Plato) or with the intelligible form (Aristotle), but as a universal and not as the thought of the subject, which had not yet been discovered before the encounter with Christianity. On the other hand, in the Judeo-Christian thought, the personal relationship with God and with His *Logos* who became flesh made it possible to recognize the human being as a subject endowed with an interiority. But with modernity, the ontological closure in thinking traps the subject in himself, excluding him from the relational dimension. In other words, man, who has discovered himself to be a subject by speaking face to face with God, and therefore in a personal relationship with Him, believes that he can be self-founded, remaining enclosed in that mental dimension which is transformed into a pantheon of idols.

3. The dialectics of myth

Thus the identifying mark of idols is dialectics, because human infinite desire clashes with the finite and makes the other a scapegoat, while the biblical message, if read from the Wisdom perspective, refers to the relational dimension. René Girard has powerfully presented the mimetic mechanism as the basis of idolatry and the conflicts it provokes.[10] This is evident both in Babylonian traditions, as in the *Enūma eliš*, and in Greek traditions.[11] In both cases we are faced with a kind of mafia war, whose protagonists belong to a dysfunctional family, characterised by conflicts that highlight the failure of the attempt to hold together the one and the many, an unavoidable undertaking in human life because of the relationship between fathers and sons.
In fact, according to the reconstruction of the *Biliotheca*, a mythographic collection erroneously attributed to Apollodorus of Athens, from the second century BC, but in truth dating from the second century AD, the first lord of the world is Uranus, who marries Gaea, by whom he has numerous children. Among them are the Cyclops, with one eye in the middle of the forehead. The father, however, fears them so much to put them in chains and lock them in the Tartarus. Then Uranus has from Gaea other sons, the titans, the youngest of which is Cronus. The mother, angry at the loss of the Cyclops, persuades the Titans to attack Uranus and gives the youngest a scythe of steel, with which he emasculates Uranus, dethroning him and freeing his brothers. But history repeats itself, because even Cronus is afraid of the Cyclops and locks them again in the Tartarus. So he marries his sister Rhea, but swallows all the children he has with her, because his mother and father had prophesied that a son would take away his power. So Cronus swallows Pluto and Poseidon. Rhea, of course, is angry about this, so when she is pregnant with Zeus, she flees to Crete and in a cave gives birth to him, then entrusting him to the nymphs. She gives Cronus a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes for him to swallow, thinking that it is his newborn son. The war goes on for ten years, until Gaea predicts that Zeus will have the victory only by allying himself with the Cyclops, who give him the lightning, as well as give the helmet to Pluto and the trident to Poseidon. With these weapons Zeus defeats his father and shares the power with the allies, taking control of the sky, as well as Pluto takes the government of the hades and Poseidon

10 R. Girard, *Wissenschaft und christlicher Glaube* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007.
11 Cf. W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Ann Arbor, MI: Eisenbrauns, 2013).

that of the sea.[12]
So the world always originates from a couple and from a family crisis, for the dialectic that follows from generation. The divinities are personification of the natural powers, of which they maintain the conflictual dimension.
The mythological clash between father and son is refined and exemplified in the tragedies, among which the Oedipus Rex cycle is paradigmatic. In Sophocles' narration, the enlightened sovereign discovers that the epidemic afflicting his city is caused by the fact that he himself killed his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta. The son would have killed his father significantly at a crossroads traveling between Delphi and Thebes. The relational collapse due to the disappearance of the differences between father and son, mother and bride, makes the city unlivable, cutting at the root the possibility of sociality.
And this tragic effect is transmitted to Oedipus' offspring, as narrated in Antigone, where his daughter finds herself trapped in the tragic knot between the law of the city (*polis)* and that of the family (*genos*). If we want to avoid anachronistic readings of the text, in the work of Sophocles we are not faced with a romantic heroine, but with the impossibility of obeying two laws that are as absolute as they are irreconcilable. In fact, seven valiant champions had attacked Thebes, where Creon, Oedipus' brother, had become tyrant. They had been confronted by seven other champions, who defended the city. In the clash one of Antigone's brothers had found himself facing another brother and, as must happen in a tragedy, the two had killed each other. Euripides had narrated it in *The Seven Against Thebes*, around 467 BC. Twenty-five years later Sophocles makes us participants in the split of the sister, who as a citizen is subjected to the decision of Creon that the corpses of the fallen attackers be left to the birds of the air, a decision that had ominous consequences for the fate in the afterlife of the deceased. But she, as a sister, must bury both her fallen brother defending Thebes and the one who had attacked it. This relational "cross" also includes Aemon, son of Creon and Antigone's fiancé, who intercedes for her with his father, invoking natural law and reason that protects the innocent. But the ruler's argument is that if his son and his family members, i.e. his *genos*, did not obey the law of the *polis*, then the city itself would cease to exist, because no one would obey anymore, not even in battle.[13] This is the same conflict that leads the seemingly perfect Athenian *polis* to decree the death of Socrates.

4. Relationship in the Word

But if we move into the biblical context, we discover that the picture is completely different. If one does not limit oneself to a historical-critical investigation, but recovers the data it offers in an etiologic and Wisdom reading, one can discover the strength of a relational reading. This requires not limiting oneself to analysis, but coherently with the synchronic and diachronic unity of the object studied, it is necessary to push oneself towards a synthesis, always open, always in relation. Significantly, in fact, the Bible (*ta biblia*) is simultaneously a singular and plural name, inasmuch as it is a plural that has become a singular name. So the deeper meaning of its parts cannot be grasped except by reading them as a whole.
Thus, if we take the relational perspective and compare the beginning of the Bible with the mythological narratives mentioned, we have an immediate gain. In fact, the first chapter of Genesis, commonly believed to date from the sixth century BC, already presents a radical novelty in

12 Cf. R. Hard, *Apollodorus: The Library of Greek Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
13 Cf. Sophocles, *Antigone*, vv. 496-540.

its *incipit*, because from an original couple we pass to an evident monism. The statement "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"[14] has in fact three elements: (a) God in the beginning (*bərē'šîṯ 'ĕlōhîm*); (b) the act of creating (*bārā'*); (c) the pair of heaven and earth (*'ēṯ haššāmayim wə'ēṯ hā'āreṣ*). So we have an absolute principle that is unique and is identified with God, we might say on high. And this unique principle places an act vertically, expressed with a verb that can only have Him as its subject, precisely because it is radically vertical. But from this act originate in the lower horizontal dimension also the heavens and the earth, that is a couple object of this creative action. What was vertical in the Babylonian and Greek conception is now only horizontal, because an absolutely transcendent dimension has been opened up.

This first verse would be enough to illustrate the extraordinary metaphysical novelty that a small people, essentially shepherds, managed to introduce before Parmenides and Plato. And the reason for such an extraordinary leap points to an encounter the "fathers" had with God. Here, comparatively, and therefore relationally, we see that the "two" is no longer original, but everything draws its origin from one Subject who freely poses an act that only He can pose. Counter-evidence of the novelty of this element is the observation that dialectics is entirely absent from the Jewish explanation of how the cosmos originated.

The continuation of the narrative makes this clear, because the first five verses, in which the first day of creation is explained, indicate the latter not with the cardinal adjective, but with the numeral one: it is the day "one" (*eḥāḏ*), not the "first." This is fundamental because the cardinal adjective can only be said if there is a two, i.e. a second. Instead, the beginning here described is absolute and from this radical unity all the rest, the multiple, is presented as a gift and fruit of the immanent life of God who performs five actions: (1) creates, (2) says, (3) sees, (4) distinguishes, and (5) calls. The Creator first of all brings about creation, an action expressed through the verb *bara'* (1), but this happens through His word, because it is enough for Him to say (the verb is *amar*) "let there be light!" for there to be light (2).[15] This creation through speaking refers back to God's interiority, connecting the visible and external world to a *logos*, a thought, which the Christian tradition will later reread as the Word who, according to the Father's plan, becomes flesh as the first and last meaning of creation.[16] Here already emerges the Trinitarian foundation of creation itself which, thanks to the Gospel revelation, it is possible to grasp *a posteriori*. The subsequent actions of this unique Principle belong to the same track, because they express a judgment (3) on the result of the creative act, which is seen (the verb is *raah*) to be "good" (*towb*) and, therefore, is distinguished (the verb here is *badal*, the Greek *diechôrisen* of the Septuagint) by the Creator Himself into two realities (4) which are light and darkness, called by Him (the verb is *qara*) day and night (5).

The world thus arose as a liturgy and is a liturgy because day and night continue to respond to God who calls them, in such a way that time itself, seen here in its origin, can be read as a response to God. Life, human history, the tides, the clouds passing through the sky, everything is dialogue.

From the same perspective one can highlight the importance of the divine judgment that declares good what God has created and immediately, as indicated by the simple copula that connects the two actions, is translated by the Creator into a further action. This consists in the distinction that brings out a pair that is no longer merely original, but now originating, i.e. source of other couples. In fact, in the following days the pattern repeats itself and multiplicity appears as the result

14 Gen 1:1.

15 Gen 1:3.

16 See, for example, the magnificent text by Maximus the Confessor, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, q. 22.

of the creative act, that is as the fecundity of divine unity. On the second day, in fact, the five verbs are repeated, because God speaks to create the firmament which He calls heaven and then distinguishes between the waters above and those below. Then on the third day in the waters below the heavens the pair of the earth and the sea is constituted and is judged good as relationship. From the earth the Creator causes vegetation to arise, introducing a further distinction, which again leads to the judgment of goodness. This is repeated for the next pairs, the day and the night, with their respective sun and moon regulating them. From the comparative point of view, one cannot help but point out that for the Jewish people of the sixth century BC, the natural realities that refer to the main deities in the pagan sphere are recognized as mere creatures. On the sixth day, after the creation of the animals of the sky and of the seas, each according to its own species, therefore still in relation, if we do not let ourselves be misled in the reading by evolutionary concerns, we reach the climax with the creation of yet another couple. This is introduced by a solemn formula in which God expresses Himself in the plural, because it is a creation in His own image and likeness, so much so that this must be the head of all other creatures: "God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male (*zakar*) and female (*neqebah*) he created them."[17] The verb *bara'* is solemnly repeated three times because we are in the deepest core of meaning of the creation narrative: the one Principle of all things expresses Himself by placing out of Himself creatures that He Himself judges to be good, because they are relational, to the extreme of infusing His own image and likeness into that dust of which the next chapter speaks in the narrative that, however, chronologically most likely originated three centuries earlier. The point is crucial because this last step marks a qualitative change in the whole of creation which is no longer just good, but is now judged by God to be very good (*meod towb*).[18]
Here we clearly see in action a cultural and theological framework profoundly different from the Babylonian and Greek cosmogonies. Yet mythological and tragic elements remain in the text, such as the references to the garden and the serpent, or the divine punishment of the Pharaoh who, like a new Oedipus, took as his wife the beautiful Sarai, whom Abram out of fear said was his sister when he went down to Egypt to escape a famine.[19] Again, the issue is at the same time metaphysical and social: human relationality is presented as an expression of God's uniqueness and as the meaning of all creation, structured precisely in couples that are founded in the One who is God. Here there is no conflict between the one and the many because, in a certain way, in the light of evangelical revelation, we can recognize the relationship already in God, as John will do later by focusing the beginning of his gospel on the creation in six days and, in particular, by recalling in the *incipit* of his narration the *incipit* of Genesis. One could say that the creation narrative really closes with the first verses of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God: all things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made of all that exists."[20] Nothing was created without the *Logos*, which is not only the Word of God, but which is God, as Son, that is, Relation which reveals God Himself as Father.
John formulates a *chrêsis* of his Old Testament sources, taking up the *incipit* of Genesis with the beginning and creation through the Word, but at the same time he also refers to the metaphysical dimension, through the terms *archê* and *logos*. This philosophical reference is perfectly consistent because, as we have seen, the cosmogonic narratives in both Greek and Babylonian mythology raised precisely the metaphysical question of the relationship between the one and the many.

17 Gen 1:27.
18 Gen 1:31.
19 Cf. Gen 12:10-20.
20 John 1:1-3.

And Wisdom literature highlights precisely this point, as the example of Sirach shows through the reference to relationality as the path to understanding creation: "Consider therefore all the works of the Most High; two by two, one in front of the other."[21]
Thus the Wisdom literature is proposing the relationship imprinted in creation by the one God as an expression of His inner life as a solution to the tension between the infinite desire of the human being and the very limits with which this constantly clashes and which the pandemic has dramatically highlighted, acting as a 'desert'.
In the New Testament, the dimension corresponding to that of Wisdom literature is the didascalic language of, for example, Jesus' parables. These show the significance of the kerygmatic proclamation for the concrete life of Jesus' listeners. For this reason they are intrinsically relational and existential, as the psalms or the events narrated in Job were. The term *parable* itself refers to this relationality, since it derives from the verb *paraballein*, meaning to compare. Thus, the (effective) proclamation of the Gospel always passes through the emergence of relationality as the meaning of the world and history.

5. The Wisdom Path

The crisis caused by the pandemic is, then, a great opportunity, if we go back to Scripture and the perspective in reading it developed by the Fathers of the Church. This implies that the Bible must be read in all its parts, as a single narrative, i.e. the memory of a living people. I became aware of this once, in a traumatic way, during a conference organised for the International Festival of Jewish Literature in Rome, in a discussion with Rav. Riccardo Shemuel Di Segni, chief rabbi of the Jewish community of the Italian capital. The theme of the conference was the biblical relationship between work and rest. As soon as the moderator gave me the floor, I began by pronouncing aloud the name of God, as I had learned in my exegetical studies to read the tetragrammaton. The faces of those present, and particularly that of my distinguished interlocutor, immediately gave me back a sense of the gravity of what I had said. It was as if I had invited an expert to speak in a church and he had begun with a blasphemy. After apologizing, Rav Di Segni told me that he had discussed this problem with Joseph Ratzinger, who had told him that the origin was historicism, which teaches us to treat Scripture as a dead object, disconnected from the relationship with the faith of the Jewish people and, unfortunately, also from that of the Christian people.
This theological "trauma" seems to me to be extremely significant, because it highlights that the current theological approach runs the risk of losing its relationship with the Word of God as a living reality. Biblically, it is as if we had separated the nomistic language from the prophetic and the Wisdom ones. The Mosaic Law and the Exodus seem to be outdated phases that have nothing to say to the contemporary reader. On the contrary, if Genesis is really read through the lens of Wisdom, we realise that every man, with his tension between finitude and desire for the infinite, is destined for an exodus. Only by going out of ourselves, in fact, i.e. only by beginning a journey, we can find ourselves. It is significant that in Hebrew the Jew is called *ivrit*, that is, the one who crosses over, who leaves. After all, the expression "wandering Jew" is a pleonasm that in truth describes the deepest structure of every human being. On the other hand, the people of Israel were aware of the relationship between the Law and creation, since the Ten Words reconstituted the latter, wounded after the original sin, renewing the ten words with which the Creator had

21 Sir 33:15, see also 42:24.

brought everything into being. In ontological and Trinitarian terms, one could say that the Law and the Prophets do nothing but bring the believer back to the relational root of the world and of the human being.[22]

Thus the moral teaching of the prophets is not simply a rebuke for not obeying, but more profoundly, the correspondence of words and events, shows how obedience is a relationship with the real, with the truth and the foundation of the human being, unlike idolatrous images. Outside the Word of God, one cannot live, not because otherwise the Creator will get angry and strike us down, but because there is simply no life outside the relationship with Him. When the shutters are closed and the light is prevented from entering, the house is filled with darkness, which is not something, but an absence of light. And the cause of the darkness is not the light, but the choice of the one who has decided to prevent access to it. This metaphysical reasoning can be linked to the prophetic preaching, which once again must be read in a relational sense. But in order to do so, it is necessary to start from Wisdom literature, which have the task of showing the value of everything that preceded it in the Bible for the concrete life of the believer.

It is significant that much of this literature, which closes the course of the First Testament and immediately prepares for the encounter with the Messiah, is prayer and poetry. One thinks of the Psalms, which occupy a special position in the Church's liturgy precisely because they serve as a hermeneutical criterion for the whole of Scripture, a role that is unfortunately neglected today. In the Wisdom literature it is possible to find a path that can be recognised as extremely significant from a narrative and theological point of view.

The book of Proverbs presents the cosmos and the life of mankind starting from the existence of a beautiful woman, *Sophia*, who represents the meaning of everything, the very possibility inherent in creation and history of recognising the hand of the Creator, who made everything with art, with a design, which is Wisdom. It is not by chance that "my son" is an epithet that appears many times in the text and that the relationship between God and the human being revealed by this book of Scripture is filial.[23] So this first step is about the beginning, corresponding to the infancy of life, when one discovers that the world is ordered, that everything has meaning, that there is a good internal law. The New Testament will then say that this Wisdom has to do with the *Logos* becoming flesh, from the beginning in the Creator's design, in the mystery hidden before the ages.[24]

After this founding beginning, the Qohelet represents an "adolescent" phase, in which the believer leaves the ordered space of the filial world designed by Proverbs to come up against the limit. If Proverbs is a "maternal" book, we now move on to the "paternal", post-initiation sphere, where the limit is perceived with all its force. The excruciating opening words of Ecclesiastes "vanity of vanities, all is vanity"[25] actually liberate, because they relate to reality and refer to the need to base one's desire for the infinite only in obedience to the Creator who is able to save. The text covers the most important realities of human life, from work to wine, from laughter to weeping, the whole of existence in its daily concreteness is scrutinised, to say that everything fails and nothing can take the place of God. The anti-idolatrous function is evident, but it is expressed in terms meaningful for the human being, for every human being, with his or her questions and search for fulfilment. The reference to the different times, the time to be born and the time to die, the time to plant and the time to uproot, the time to destroy and the time to build, di-

22 Cf. J.D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness. Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

23 Cf. Pro 1:10; 2:1; 3:1; 3:11; 3:21; 4:20; 5:1; 6:1; 6:3; 6:20; 7:1; 7:24; 19:27; 23:15; 31:2; see also 8:32.

24 Cf. Eph 3:9 and 1 Cor 2:7.

25 Qo 1:2.

rectly attacks the postmodern idol of unlimited growth.[26] The time to be silent and the time to speak put a limit to the idol of compulsive communication,[27] reiterated by the statement "out of much worry come dreams and out of much talk comes the speech of the fool".[28] The dusty origin of man will be his inescapable destiny,[29] and money, an instrument with enormous idolatrous potential because it can potentially acquire every form in the mind, cannot fill the heart.[30] For this reason, it is necessary to fear only God and to observe His commandments,[31] here proposed as the internal law of man's life, starting from the almost expressionist description of his limits.

After this *pars destruens,* which spans the reader's entire real existence, the journey of Wisdom culminates in a double finale, in the feminine and masculine declension, with the Song of Songs and Job. Both these books have a structure that, in the light of the New Testament, we can define as Easter, [32]because they propose a "death and resurrection" based on fidelity to a personal relationship with God. The bride is looking for her bridegroom, but to find him, following his voice that drifts away like a fawn,[33] she must begin a journey that is not at all romantic, along which she is also beaten by the guards.[34] Each time the meeting seems to have taken place, it turns out that in truth the search still continues. Only in the end, in this ever-renewing search, does she find her beloved, who is in her as she is in him, not statically, but dynamically, precisely because she is looking for him, because she is turned towards his love. This is demonstrated by the paradoxical ending, in which the bride says to her bridegroom: "Flee, my beloved, / like a gazelle / or a fawn, / over the mountains of aromas!".[35] The fulfilment of the journey and the meeting are not given in an idolatrous romantic ideal, but in the experience that "as strong as death is love"[36] and that "the great waters cannot extinguish love."[37] Translated through the Wisdom lens, this means that the desire for the infinite that constitutes the human heart need not fear the limit, because the Creator loves His creatures and continues to tell them that they are beautiful, taking care of them.

From the house, which corresponds to the experience of Proverbs, the bride, whom the Fathers interpreted as a symbol of both the soul and the church, must pass through the experience of frustration, going out of herself towards the clash with limits, of which the Qohelet tells us, and only in this movement does she find the bridegroom and join him. Thus in Job, where the satanic temptation and anti-idolatrous criticism is more explicit, from the initial situation of family well-being the protagonist is projected outside himself, in a "journey" of the soul that is subjected to the moralism of his friends and the criticism of his wife, and then takes the initiative against God, suing Him as one does with the guilty,[38] and finally arriving at a greater state of well-being, which is fulfilled in the experience of having seen God. This happens through Job's return to an approach to Him that is proper of a creature in relation with the Creator,[39] precisely in the con-

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26 Qo 3:2-3.
27 Qo 3:7.
28 Qo 5:2.
29 Qo 3:20-22.
30 Qo 5:9.
31 Qo 12:13.
32 Indeed, the Song of Songs was also read as a preparation for Easter in the Jewish liturgy.
33 Song 2.8.
34 Song 5:2-7.
35 Song 8:14.
36 Song 8:6.
37 Song 8:7.
38 Cf. Job 13.
39 Cf. Job 40.

frontation between God's greatness and one's own limitations.[40] Thus, for her and for him, for the bride and for the man from the land of Uz, the journey of wisdom culminates in a personal relationship with the transcendent and infinite God who comes close to the human being.

One understands why these texts are an immediate preparation for the encounter with Christ, who sets as the only condition for being saved the knowledge that one is in need of salvation. He, in fact, did not come to judge the world but to save it,[41] so He seeks out the sick, the lepers, the blind. But if a person thinks he or she does not need a doctor, then the encounter does not take place, because God always acts in and for freedom.[42] That is why, with tenderness, God comes close to man, sharing his fragility.

We thus come to the heart of what the Wisdom rereading of Scripture can offer to our research on how to speak of God today to our contemporaries wounded by the pandemic. Jesus does not change one iota of the law and fulfils the message of the prophets.[43] In the transfiguration He speaks to Moses and Elijah.[44] But what He adds to them is precisely the relationship with the Father in heaven, who causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust, communicating a life without limits.[45] The paradox of the Beatitudes[46] cannot be reduced moralistically by saying that it is good to weep or be persecuted, but must lead to openness to the One who alone can console, because He is Father. We are all poor in spirit, because we have an infinite desire, but we are finite. We are all persecuted because of justice, because we will surely end up as scapegoats. So the Beatitudes tell us that our desire needs to be redeemed. And the same is the Wisdom message of the parables. From the precious pearl in the field[47] to the prodigal son,[48] from the lost sheep[49] to the workers of the last hour,[50] everything translates the paradox of the Beatitudes in terms related to the daily life of the listeners, revealing the significance of the encounter with Jesus of Nazareth for the infinite desire of the listeners. The miracles point to this point, starting with the first at Cana.[51] In fact, every man in his existence finishes the wine, every love, every friendship, every job, every passion is marked by this radical experience of the limit. And the crisis caused by the pandemic has stressed this dimension.

From this perspective, the question of who is that Jewish carpenter, cousin of the Baptist, who taught His first disciples to fish, acquires infinite value. Thus the call to conversion is presented as possible, starting from the theological dimension given by His presence. But the *kerygma* and the moral call must follow and not precede the Wisdom dimension, strengthened by Christ's preaching in parables and by His miracles.

Therefore, taking the Wisdom perspective seriously means reading Scripture as a single story, in which time and eternity have embraced each other once and for all. From this it follows that the reading of the sacred text cannot be conceived apart from reference to liturgy and sacramental life, since these are its most authentic *Sitz in Leben*. In this way, between the concrete moment of the past, with all its historical determinations that the historical-critical method helps us to find,

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40 "I knew you by hearsay, but now my eyes see you" (*Ibidem*, 42,5)
41 John 3:17 and 12:47.
42 Cf. Matt 9:9-13.
43 Cf. Matt 5:17-20.
44 Cf. Matt 17:1-8 and parallels.
45 Matt 5:45.
46 Cf. Matt 5:3-12.
47 Matt 13:45-46.
48 Lk 15:11-32.
49 Matt 8:12-14.
50 Matt 20:1-16.
51 John 2:1-11.

and the present moment there is no opposition, because the Wisdom perspective allows us to recover the typological element and the ecclesial one, as a network of relationships that ontologically constitute the fabric of the time of every human being, a being rooted in the finite but reaching out to the infinite.

6. The exegesis of the Fathers

This relational and unitary conception of Scripture is what characterised the exegesis of the Fathers of the Church. Their recourse to typology and spiritual interpretation was not arbitrary and anti-historical, but simply took up the didascalic dimension of the New Testament and Wisdom literature. The criticism of the Hellenisation they supposedly implemented has, in fact, prevented us from grasping the value of their biblical interpretation and the perspective presented in the previous section. Although they were far more competent than contemporary scholars because of their historical and philological proximity to the Christian event, their exegesis took on spiritual and existential overtones. And this is consistent with their need to announce the Gospel to pagans immersed in the perception of their own limits and disappointed by idols. In this sense, their exegesis followed a didascalic and relational path.

Two examples may help to grasp what we are trying to highlight. The first is Gregory of Nyssa's reinterpretation of spiritual progress according to Origen in the fourth century, and the second is Cyril of Alexandria's exegesis of the scapegoat of Lev 16 in the fifth century.

Just as in the picture proposed in the previous section, Origen described the spiritual progress in three stages, each corresponding to one of the books of Scripture traditionally attributed to Solomon: childhood corresponds to the book of Proverbs, youth to Qohelet and maturity to the Canticle.[52] Gregory took it up in the context of the mysticism of darkness, applying this succession to the sacraments of Christian initiation, which begin with baptismal illumination and culminate in union in the "darkness" with the Eucharist.

This sequence reads the Song of Songs, a book clearly belonging to Wisdom literature, from a mystical perspective. In his interpretation, the bishop of Nyssa points out that the bride must always chase the Bridegroom, in a dynamic growth, which is interpreted in the sense of *epektasis*, that is, the divinization of man, who in his own finitude is made by God ever more capable of uniting with him, growing infinitely.[53] Here, commenting on Ex 33:21-23, he writes: "I believe that with these words the text teaches that those who wish to see God see the One to whom they aspire in constantly following Him, and that the contemplation of His face consists in the ceaseless walking towards Him, which is accomplished by following closely in the footsteps of the Word."[54] So the metaphysical tension between the one (divine) and the multiple (created) is reconciled by the relationality of the triune God who gives himself by attracting the human being into his infinite life.

But beyond the value of this exegesis, what is fundamental to the thesis advanced here is that Gregory also reads a nomistic text *par excellence* such as Exodus in the same sense. Indeed, in *De vita Moysis* he presents Moses involved in the same limitless progress that characterises the bride. In doing so, he also has recourse to the Greek philosophical sources and the exegesis of

52 Cf. Origen, *In Canticum*, GCS 33,75.

53 Cfr. G. Maspero, *Ontology, History and Relation (schesis): Gregory of Nyssa's Epektasis*, στο A.T.J. Kaethler και S. Mitralexis (επιμ.), *Between Being and Time. From Ontology to Eschatology* (Lexington: Lanham 2019), 23-36.

54 Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum Canticorum*, GNO VI, 356, 12-16.

Philo. Indeed, the Pythagorean invitation to "follow the god" (ἕπου θεῷ), had been taken up by the Hebrew philosopher and applied to Moses in his relationship with the Creator.[55] Gregory of Nyssa has recourse to the same theme applying it to the Lawgiver, who, like the bride in the Canticle, encounters God only in the darkness, because he is in relationship with Him and knows that to know Him is to follow Him, to walk after Him.

In fact, in *De Vita Moysis*, commenting again on Ex 33:20-23 together with Gen 28:12, Gregory points out that the patriarch sees God only from behind.[56] And he explains: "Therefore, Moses, who is anxious to see God, is taught how it is possible to see God: to follow God wherever He leads, that is to see God".[57]

Another outstanding example of a Wisdom literature reading of a nomistic text by the Fathers is Cyril of Alexandria's interpretation of the scapegoat. In his *Epistula* XLI, after a rhetorical introduction which highlights the difficulty of the subject it deals with, i.e. the rite of purification of the Holy of Holies[58] which the high priest performed on the feast of *Yom Kippur*,[59] the exegesis presents Lev 16 from a Christological perspective, which is inseparable from a typological reading of the text.[60] This leads to a clear rejection of the interpretation then current that identified the goat sent into the desert as an offering to demons, a reading radically incompatible with the anti-idolatrous critique that runs through the Bible from Deut 6:13 to Ex 20:3, from Deut 12:1-3 to Ex 32:7-9, up to Nm 25:1-9.[61] Cyril's central thesis is immediately enunciated: exegesis requires removing the veil from the Old Testament text, as from the face of Moses, reading Lev 16 not semantically, as a reference to pagan sacrifices, impossible in the context, but syntactically and relationally as a proclamation in shadow of New Testament truth:[62] "So the names of the Lord's goat and the scapegoat both signify the one and only Son and Lord Jesus Christ".[63]

This perspective opens up the possibility of interpreting the difference of the two goats not as a dialectical opposition, inevitable from a merely semantic perspective, but in a relational and historical key, as a reference to the two moments of Christ's own life.[64] The scapegoat sent into the desert, in fact, lives because it is the image of the resurrection: "Jesus Christ, the Only-Begotten and Lord, is portrayed in both, while He suffers in His own flesh but is above suffering and while He is in death but is above death."[65]

At this point the development of the exegetical reading demands that an interesting objection be answered. In fact, since there are two goats, we seem to be talking about two Sons or Christs, one born of David and one born of God. The Pauline cry of "one Lord, one faith, one baptism"[66] is the starting point of the answer, which touches the dogmatic heart of the letter, fundamental for the Council of Ephesus, also reiterated in the fourth anathema of Cyril's third letter to Nestorius.[67] The two goats, in fact, evidently have the same nature, while the Son of David and the Son

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55 Cf. Philo, *De migratione Abrahami*, 13.

56 Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Moysis*, II, 220.

57 *Ibidem*, II, 252.

58 Cf. D. Stökl, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century* (WUNT 163) (Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen 2003).

59 Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *Epistula* XVI, in: E. SCHWARTZ [= ACO] 1-2: 40,3-17.

60 Cf. *ibidem*, 3: 40,18-41,15.

61 Cf. *ibidem*, 4-6: 41:15-42:21.

62 Cf. *ibidem*, 7-8: 42,21-43,16.

63 Cf. *ibidem*, 1,1,4.43.2-4.

64 Cf. *ibidem*, 13-14: 44:27-45:14.

65 *Ibidem*, 1,1,4.45.10-12.

66 Eph 4:5.

67 Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *III Epistula ad Nestorium*, in: E. SCHWARTZ [= ACO] 1,1,1.41.1-4.

of God must necessarily be differentiated according to nature. The two goats are presented, therefore, as two different sketches, which the sacred text traces, first of Christ in the passion with the sacrificed goat and then of the risen Christ in the liberated atoning goat.[68]
This reading shows how difference can and must be read as a relationship in the unity of the same narrative. This is reinforced by the exegesis of the sacrifice of Abraham and Isaac in Gen 22:1-10. The two goats would be like two frames of a single narrative, similarly to what should be done for the patriarch, describing when he goes up the mountain with his son and the servants, then when he goes on alone with him, until the dramatic climax when he raises the knife. Cyril explains that in such different descriptions Abraham is always the same even though he is represented in different situations, because it would be impossible to show the whole story in a single image.[69]
From the examples given it emerges that both Fathers cited offer a didascalic reading in the line of Wisdom literature of the first books of the Bible, to show their relevance to their hearers. The story of salvation is thus related to the travails of the heart of every reader gripped by the tension between the desire for the infinite and the limits that concrete existence brings to bear, beyond the idolatrous illusion.

7. Conclusion

In the context of this pandemic that has challenged the idols of modernity and postmodernity this can be a great resource for transforming the crisis into an opportunity. But this requires that, without neglecting the great results that the historical-critical approaches to Scripture have offered us, we also flank them with an approach to the sacred text that is not only canonical, therefore capable of seeing the whole beyond the individual forms, but also relational with respect to our contemporaries. In fact, despite the great changes in the historical contexts crossing the times in which the different parts of the Bible were written, the tension between the desire for infinity and the clash with existential limits remains constant. And the Fathers of the Church were masters of this. It is obviously not a question of re-proposing their concrete exegetical choices, but of recovering their outlook and their epistemology.
This task is urgent, because the health crisis has brought out a real cry from the heart of contemporary man, who begs for precisely that response that Scripture read in the tradition and in the life of the Church offers. The pandemic crisis has challenged the institutional dimension of Christian proclamation, but at the same time it has opened up huge spaces for a Wisdom and didascalic approach. In short, it can be said that the implosion of institutional structures can in this way be met by an explosion of the interest in the content of the Gospel message. In fact, the fall of idols and the perception of limits has facilitated the perception of the significance of the Christian proclamation.

68 Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *Epistula* XVI,18-21: 46,29-47,29.
69 Cf. *ibidem*, 22-23: 47,30-48,26.