JESUS OF NAZARETH

From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration

by

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CHAPTER ONE

The Baptism of Jesus

Jesus' public activity begins with his Baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist. While Matthew merely gives a formulaic indication of the date of this event—"in those days"—Luke very deliberately puts it in the larger context of secular history, which enables us to assign it a very precise date. That said, Matthew does provide a dating of a sort, in that he places Jesus' family tree at the beginning of his Gospel. This genealogy is arranged to show lineal descent from Abraham and David, and it presents Jesus as the inheritor both of the promise made to Abraham and of God's pledges to David, to whom God had promised—through all of Israel's sins and all of God's chastisements—an eternal kingdom. As this family tree presents it, history is divided into three groups of fourteen generations, fourteen being the numerical value of the name David. The history it recounts breaks down into the period from Abraham to David, the period from David to the Babylonian Exile, and an additional period of fourteen generations. The very fact that yet another fourteen generations have

elapsed is an indication that the hour of the definitive David, of the renewal of the kingdom of David that is the establishment of the Kingdom of God himself, has now come.

As one would expect from the Jewish-Christian Evangelist Matthew, this family tree is also a genealogy of Jewish salvation history, which at most offers an oblique perspective on secular history, insofar as the kingdom of the definitive David, being the Kingdom of God, obviously concerns the world as a whole. The actual dating remains therefore vague. This also has to do, of course, with the fact that reckoning of the generations depends less on any historical scheme than on the triple phasing of the promise and so is not intended to establish a precise chronology.

Let us observe here at the outset that Luke does not place his genealogy of Jesus at the beginning of the Gospel, but connects it with the story of Jesus' Baptism, to which it forms a conclusion. He tells us that at this point in time Jesus was about thirty years old, which means he had attained the age that conferred a right to public activity. In contrast to Matthew, Luke uses his genealogy to journey from Jesus back into past history. Abraham and David make their appearance, but without any particular emphasis. The family tree goes back to Adam, and so to creation, for once Luke comes to the name Adam, he adds: "of God." This is a way of underscoring the universal scope of Jesus' mission. He is the son of Adam—the son of man. Because he is man, all of us belong to him and he to us; in him humanity starts anew and reaches its destiny.

Let us return to John the Baptist. Luke has already supplied two important time references in the infancy narratives.

Recounting the beginning of the Baptist's life, Luke tells us that it took place "in the days of Herod, king of Judea" (Lk 1:5). The time reference in the Baptist's case thus remains within the bounds of Jewish history. By contrast, the story of Jesus' infancy begins with the words "in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus" (Lk 2:1). The wider history of the world, represented by the Roman Empire, forms the backdrop.

Luke picks up this thread again when he introduces the story of the Baptist, which marks the beginning of Jesus' public activity. At this point he tells us both solemnly and precisely that it was "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas" (Lk 3:1–2). Once again the mention of the Roman emperor serves to indicate Jesus' chronological place in world history. We are not meant to regard Jesus' activity as taking place in some sort of mythical "anytime," which can mean always or never. It is a precisely datable historical event having the full weight that real historical happenings have; like them, too, it happens once only; it is contemporary with all times, but not in the way that a timeless myth would be.

But the point is not just the chronology: The emperor and Jesus represent two different orders of reality. They are by no means mutually exclusive, but their encounter does have the potential to spark a conflict that has implications for the basic questions facing humanity and human existence. Jesus will later say "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,

and to God the things that are God's" (Mk 12:17), which is a way of expressing the essential compatibility of the two spheres. But when the imperial power interprets itself as divine, as Augustus' claim to be the bringer of world peace and the savior of humanity already implicitly does, then the Christian has to "obey God more than men" (Acts 5:29). It is then that Christians become "martyrs," witnesses of Christ, who himself was "the faithful witness" who died on the Cross under Pontius Pilate (Rev 1:5). Luke's mention of Pontius Pilate casts the shadow of the Cross over the beginning of Jesus' public activity. The names Herod, Annas, and Caiaphas also foreshadow the Cross.

But a further point comes to light in the fact that Luke lists side by side the emperor and the princes among whom the Holy Land is divided. All these princedoms are dependencies of pagan Rome. The kingdom of David lies broken in pieces, his "hut" in ruins (cf. Amos 9:11f.). His descendant, Jesus' legal father, is a carpenter in the half-paganized province of Galilee. Israel is living once more in the darkness of divine absence; God is silent, seemingly forgetful of the promises to Abraham and David. The old lament is heard once more: We no longer have any prophets, God seems to have abandoned his people. For that very reason, though, the land was full of unrest.

Conflicting movements, hopes, and expectations shaped the religious and political climate. At around the time of Jesus' birth Judas the Galilean had called for an uprising, which was put down by the Romans with a great deal of bloodshed. Judas left behind a party, the Zealots, who were prepared to resort to terror and violence in order to restore Israel's freedom. It

is even possible that one or two of Jesus' twelve Apostles—Simon the Zealot and perhaps Judas Iscariot as well—had been partisans of this movement. The Pharisees, whom we are constantly meeting in the Gospels, endeavored to live with the greatest possible exactness according to the instructions of the Torah. They also refused conformity to the hegemony of Hellenistic-Roman culture, which naturally imposed itself throughout the Roman Empire, and was now threatening to force Israel's assimilation to the pagan peoples' way of life. The Sadducees, most of whom belonged to the aristocracy and the priestly class, attempted to practice an enlightened Judaism, intellectually suited to the times, and so also to come to terms with Roman domination. The Sadducees disappeared after the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70), whereas the pattern of life practiced by the Pharisees found an enduring form in the sort of Judaism shaped by the Mishnah and the Talmud. Although we observe sharp antagonism between Jesus and the Pharisees in the Gospels, and although his death on the Cross was the very antithesis of the Zealot program, we must not forget that people came to Christ from every kind of background and that the early Christian community included more than a few priests and former Pharisees.

An accidental discovery after the Second World War led to excavations at Qumran, which brought to light texts that some scholars have associated with yet another movement known until then only from literary references: the so-called Essenes. This group had turned its back on the Herodian temple and its worship to withdraw to the Judean desert. There it created monastic-style communities, but also a religiously motivated common life for families. It also

established a productive literary center and instituted distinctive rituals, which included liturgical ablutions and common prayers. The earnest religiosity of the Qumran writings is moving; it appears that not only John the Baptist, but possibly Jesus and his family as well, were close to the Qumran community. At any rate, there are numerous points of contact with the Christian message in the Qumran writings. It is a reasonable hypothesis that John the Baptist lived for some time in this community and received part of his religious formation from it.

And yet the Baptist's appearance on the scene was something completely new. The Baptism that he enjoined is different from the usual religious ablutions. It cannot be repeated, and it is meant to be the concrete enactment of a conversion that gives the whole of life a new direction forever. It is connected with an ardent call to a new way of thinking and acting, but above all with the proclamation of God's judgment and with the announcement that one greater than John is to come. The Fourth Gospel tells us that the Baptist "did not know" (cf. Jn 1:30–33) this greater personage whose way he was to prepare. But he does know that his own role is to prepare a path for this mysterious Other, that his whole mission is directed toward him.

All four Gospels describe this mission using a passage from Isaiah: "A voice cries in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God'" (Is 40:3). Mark adds a compilation of Malachi 3:1 and Exodus 23:20, which recurs at another point in Matthew (Mt 11:10) and Luke (Lk 1:76, 7:27) as well: "Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way" (Mk

1:2). All of these Old Testament texts envisage a saving intervention of God, who emerges from his hiddenness to judge and to save; it is for this God that the door is to be opened and the way made ready. These ancient words of hope were brought into the present with the Baptist's preaching: Great things are about to unfold.

We can imagine the extraordinary impression that the figure and message of John the Baptist must have produced in the highly charged atmosphere of Jerusalem at that particular moment of history. At last there was a prophet again, and his life marked him out as such. God's hand was at last plainly acting in history again. John baptizes with water, but one even greater, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, is already at the door. Given all this, there is absolutely no reason to suppose that Mark is exaggerating when he reports that "there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mk 1:5). John's baptism includes the confession of sins. The Judaism of the day was familiar both with more generally formulaic confessions of sin and with a highly personalized confessional practice in which an enumeration of individual sinful deeds was expected (Gnilka, *Matthäusevangelium* I, p. 68). The goal is truly to leave behind the sinful life one has led until now and to start out on the path to a new, changed life.

The actual ritual of Baptism symbolizes this. On one hand, immersion into the waters is a symbol of death, which recalls the death symbolism of the annihilating, destructive power of the ocean flood. The ancient mind perceived the ocean as a permanent threat to the cosmos, to the earth; it

was the primeval flood that might submerge all life. The river (Jordan) could also assume this symbolic value for those who were immersed in it. But the flowing waters of the river are above all a symbol of life. The great rivers—the Nile, the Euphrates, the Tigris—are the great givers of life. The Jordan, too, is—even today—a source of life for the surrounding region. Immersion in the water is about purification, about liberation from the filth of the past that burdens and distorts life—it is about beginning again, and that means it is about death and resurrection, about starting life over again anew. So we could say that it is about rebirth. All of this will have to wait for Christian baptismal theology to be worked out explicitly, but the act of descending into the Jordan and coming up again out of the waters already implicitly contains this later development.

The whole of Judea and Jerusalem were making the pilgrimage to be baptized, as we just heard. But now something new happens: "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan" (Mk 1:9). So far, nothing has been said about pilgrims from Galilee; the action seemed limited to the region of Judea. But the real novelty here is not the fact that Jesus comes from another geographical area, from a distant country, as it were. The real novelty is the fact that he—Jesus—wants to be baptized, that he blends into the gray mass of sinners waiting on the banks of the Jordan. We have just heard that the confession of sins is a component of Baptism. Baptism itself was a confession of sins and the attempt to put off an old, failed life and to receive a new one. Is that something Jesus could do? How could he confess sins? How could he separate himself from his previ-

ous life in order to start a new one? This is a question that Christians could not avoid asking. The dispute between the Baptist and Jesus that Matthew recounts for us was also an expression of the early Christians' own question to Jesus: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Mt 3:14). Matthew goes on to report for us that "Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented" (Mt 3:15).

It is not easy to decode the sense of this enigmatic-sounding answer. At any rate, the Greek word for "now"—*árti*—implies a certain reservation: This is a specific, temporary situation that calls for a specific way of acting. The key to interpreting Jesus' answer is how we understand the word *righteousness:* The whole of righteousness must be fulfilled. In Jesus' world, righteousness is man's answer to the Torah, acceptance of the whole of God's will, the bearing of the "yoke of God's kingdom," as one formulation had it. There is no provision for John's baptism in the Torah, but this reply of Jesus is his way of acknowledging it as an expression of an unrestricted Yes to God's will, as an obedient acceptance of his yoke.

The act of descending into the waters of this Baptism implies a confession of guilt and a plea for forgiveness in order to make a new beginning. In a world marked by sin, then, this Yes to the entire will of God also expresses solidarity with men, who have incurred guilt but yearn for righteousness. The significance of this event could not fully emerge until it was seen in light of the Cross and Resurrection. Descending into the water, the candidates for Baptism confess their sin and seek to be rid of their burden of guilt. What did

Jesus do in this same situation? Luke, who throughout his Gospel is keenly attentive to Jesus' prayer, and portrays him again and again at prayer—in conversation with the Father—tells us that Jesus was praying while he received Baptism (cf. Lk 3:21). Looking at the events in light of the Cross and Resurrection, the Christian people realized what happened: Jesus loaded the burden of all mankind's guilt upon his shoulders; he bore it down into the depths of the Jordan. He inaugurated his public activity by stepping into the place of sinners. His inaugural gesture is an anticipation of the Cross. He is, as it were, the true Jonah who said to the crew of the ship, "Take me and throw me into the sea" (Jon 1:12). The whole significance of Jesus' Baptism, the fact that he bears "all righteousness," first comes to light on the Cross: The Baptism is an acceptance of death for the sins of humanity, and the voice that calls out "This is my beloved Son" over the baptismal waters is an anticipatory reference to the Resurrection. This also explains why, in his own discourses, Jesus uses the word *baptism* to refer to his death (cf. Mk 10:38; Lk 12:50).

Only from this starting point can we understand Christian Baptism. Jesus' Baptism anticipated his death on the Cross, and the heavenly voice proclaimed an anticipation of the Resurrection. These anticipations have now become reality. John's baptism with water has received its full meaning through the Baptism of Jesus' own life and death. To accept the invitation to be baptized now means to go to the place of Jesus' Baptism. It is to go where he identifies himself with us and to receive there our identification with him. The point where he anticipates death has now become the point where we anticipate rising again with him. Paul develops this inner connection in his

theology of Baptism (cf. Rom 6), though without explicitly mentioning Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan.

The Eastern Church has further developed and deepened this understanding of Jesus' Baptism in her liturgy and in her theology of icons. She sees a deep connection between the content of the feast of Epiphany (the heavenly voice proclaiming Jesus to be the Son of God: for the East the Epiphany is the day of the Baptism) and Easter. She sees Jesus' remark to John that "it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt 3:15) as the anticipation of his prayer to the Father in Gethsemane: "My Father . . . not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Mt 26:39). The liturgical hymns for January 3 correspond to those for Wednesday in Holy Week; the hymns for January 4 to those for Holy Thursday; the hymns for January 5 to those for Good Friday and Holy Saturday.

These correspondences are picked up by the iconographic tradition. The icon of Jesus' Baptism depicts the water as a liquid tomb having the form of a dark cavern, which is in turn the iconographic sign of Hades, the underworld, or hell. Jesus' descent into this watery tomb, into this inferno that envelops him from every side, is thus an anticipation of his act of descending into the underworld: "When he went down into the waters, he bound the strong man" (cf. Lk 11:22), says Cyril of Jerusalem. John Chrysostom writes: "Going down into the water and emerging again are the image of the descent into hell and the Resurrection." The troparia of the Byzantine Liturgy add yet another symbolic connection: "The Jordan was turned back by Elisha's coat, and the waters were divided leaving a dry path. This is a true image of Baptism by which we pass through life" (Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon*, p. 296).

Jesus' Baptism, then, is understood as a repetition of the whole of history, which both recapitulates the past and anticipates the future. His entering into the sin of others is a descent into the "inferno." But he does not descend merely in the role of a spectator, as in Dante's *Inferno*. Rather, he goes down in the role of one whose suffering-with-others is a transforming suffering that turns the underworld around, knocking down and flinging open the gates of the abyss. His Baptism is a descent into the house of the evil one, combat with the "strong man" (cf. Lk 11:22) who holds men captive (and the truth is that we are all very much captive to powers that anonymously manipulate us!). Throughout all its history, the world is powerless to defeat the "strong man"; he is overcome and bound by one yet stronger, who, because of his equality with God, can take upon himself all the sin of the world and then suffers it through to the end—omitting nothing on the downward path into identity with the fallen. This struggle is the "conversion" of being that brings it into a new condition, that prepares a new heaven and a new earth. Looked at from this angle, the sacrament of Baptism appears as the gift of participation in Jesus' world-transforming struggle in the conversion of life that took place in his descent and ascent.

Has this ecclesiastical interpretation and rereading of the event of Jesus' Baptism taken us too far away from the Bible? It will be helpful to listen to the Fourth Gospel in this context. According to John, when the Baptist first sees Jesus, he says, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). These words, which are spoken before the distribution of Communion in the Roman Liturgy, have been the occasion of much puzzlement. What does "Lamb

of God" mean? Why is Jesus called the Lamb, and why does this Lamb take away the sins of the world, so thoroughly vanquishing them as to rob them of any substance or reality?

Thanks to the work of Joachim Jeremias, we have the key to understand these words correctly and to regard them—even from the historical point of view—as genuine words of the Baptist himself. First of all, they contain two identifiable Old Testament allusions. The Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah compares the suffering servant of God with the lamb that is led to the slaughter: "Like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth" (Is 53:7). Even more importantly, Jesus was crucified on the feast of the Passover, and from that moment on could only appear as the true Passover lamb, in whom is fulfilled the significance of the Passover lamb at the time of the Exodus from Egypt: liberation from the dominion of death in Egypt and release for the Exodus, for the journey into the freedom of the promise. In light of Easter, this lamb symbolism takes on a fundamental importance for understanding Christ. We find it in Paul (cf. 1 Cor 5:7), in John (cf. Jn 19:36), in the First Letter of Peter (cf. 1 Pet 1:19), and in the Book of Revelation (for example, Rev 5:6).

Jeremias makes the further observation that the Hebrew word *talia* means both "lamb" and "boy" or "servant" (*TDNT*, I, p. 339). In the first instance, then, the Baptist may have meant his words as a reference to the Servant of God who bears the sins of the world by his vicarious atonement. But this reference also identifies him as the true Passover lamb who expiates and wipes away the sin of the world: "The Savior, dying on the Cross, went to his vicarious death patiently like a sacrificial

lamb. By the expiatory power of his innocent death he blotted out . . . the guilt of all mankind" (*TDNT*, I, p. 340). If at the extreme hour of Israel's oppression in Egypt, the blood of the Paschal lamb had been the key to its liberation, now the Son who became a servant—the shepherd who became a sheep—no longer stands just for Israel, but for the liberation of the world—for mankind as a whole.

This brings us to the great theme of Jesus' universal mission. Israel does not exist for itself; its election is rather the path by which God intends to come to all men. This idea of universality will turn up again and again as the real core of Jesus' mission. By referring to the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world, the Fourth Gospel places this idea right at the beginning of Jesus' journey.

The reference to the Lamb of God interprets Jesus' Baptism, his descent into the abyss of death, as a theology of the Cross, if we may so express it. All four Gospels recount in their different ways that, as Jesus came up from the water, heaven was "torn open" (Mk 1:10) or "was opened" (Mt 3:16; Lk 3:21); that the Spirit came down upon him "like a dove"; and that in the midst of all this a voice from heaven resounded. According to Mark and Luke, the voice addresses Jesus with the words "Thou art . . ."; according to Matthew, the voice speaks about him in the third person, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17). The image of the dove may be a reminiscence of what the creation account says about the Spirit brooding over the waters (Gen 1:2); the word *like* ("like a dove") suggests that it is "a simile for something that ultimately cannot be described" (Gnilka, *Matthäusevangelium*, I, p. 78). The same heavenly voice

sounds out again at the Transfiguration of Jesus, though with the addition of the imperative to "listen to him." When we come to the Transfiguration, we will have to consider the meaning of these words more closely.

At this point I would merely like to underscore briefly three aspects of the scene. The first one is the image of heaven torn open: Heaven stands open above Jesus. His communion of will with the Father, his fulfillment of "all righteousness," opens heaven, which is essentially the place where God's will is perfectly fulfilled. The next aspect is the proclamation of Jesus' mission by God, by the Father. This proclamation interprets not what Jesus does, but who he is: He *is* the beloved Son on whom God's good pleasure rests. Finally, I would like to point out that in this scene, together with the Son, we encounter the Father and the Holy Spirit. The mystery of the Trinitarian God is beginning to emerge, even though its depths can be fully revealed only when Jesus' journey is complete. For this very reason, though, there is an arc joining this beginning of Jesus' journey and the words with which he sends his disciples into the world after his Resurrection: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19). The Baptism that Jesus' disciples have been administering since he spoke those words is an entrance into the Master's own Baptism—into the reality that he anticipated by means of it. That is the way to become a Christian.

A broad current of liberal scholarship has interpreted Jesus' Baptism as a vocational experience. After having led a perfectly normal life in the province of Galilee, at the moment of his Baptism he is said to have had an earth-shattering

experience. It was then, we are told, that he became aware of his special relationship to God and his religious mission. This mission, moreover, supposedly originated from the expectation motif then dominant in Israel, creatively reshaped by John, and from the emotional upheaval that the event of his Baptism brought about in Jesus' life. But none of this can be found in the texts. However much scholarly erudition goes into the presentation of this reading, it has to be seen as more akin to a "Jesus novel" than as an actual interpretation of the texts. The texts give us no window into Jesus' inner life—Jesus stands above our psychologizing (Guardini, *Das Wesen des Christentums*). But they do enable us to ascertain how Jesus is connected with "Moses and the Prophets"; they do enable us to recognize the intrinsic unity of the trajectory stretching from the first moment of his life to the Cross and the Resurrection. Jesus does not appear in the role of a human genius subject to emotional upheavals, who sometimes fails and sometimes succeeds. If that were the case, he would remain just an individual who lived long ago and so would ultimately be separated from us by an unbridgeable gulf. Instead, he stands before us as the "beloved Son." He is, on one hand, the Wholly Other, but by the same token he can also become a contemporary of us all, "more interior" to each one of us "than we are to ourselves" (Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, III, 6, 11).

CHAPTER TWO

The Temptations of Jesus

The descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus, which concludes the baptismal scene, is to be understood as a kind of formal investiture with the messianic office. The Fathers of the Church therefore rightly saw this event as analogous to the anointing by which kings and priests in Israel were installed in office. The words *Messiah* and *Christ* mean "the Anointed": In the Old Testament, anointing was regarded as the visible sign that the person anointed was being invested with the gifts of office, with the Spirit of God. Isaiah 11:1f. develops this theme into a hope for the true "Anointed One," whose "anointing" consists precisely in the fact that the Spirit of the Lord comes down to rest on him: "The spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD" (Is 11:2). According to Saint Luke's account, Jesus presented himself and his mission in the synagogue at Nazareth citing a related passage from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me" (Lk 4:18; cf. Is 61:1). The conclusion of the

baptismal scene tells us that Jesus has received this true "anointing," that he is the awaited Anointed One—that at that moment kingly and priestly dignity were formally bestowed on him for all time in the presence of Israel.

From now on he is charged with this commission. The three Synoptic Gospels tell us, much to our surprise, that the Spirit's first command leads him into the desert "to be tempted by the devil" (Mt 4:1). The action is prefaced by interior recollection, and this recollection is also, inevitably, an inner struggle for fidelity to the task, a struggle against all the distortions of the task that claim to be its true fulfillment. It is a descent into the perils besetting mankind, for there is no other way to lift up fallen humanity. Jesus has to enter into the drama of human existence, for that belongs to the core of his mission; he has to penetrate it completely, down to its uttermost depths, in order to find the "lost sheep," to bear it on his shoulders, and to bring it home.

The Apostles' Creed speaks of Jesus' descent "into hell." This descent not only took place in and after his death, but accompanies him along his entire journey. He must recapitulate the whole of history from its beginnings—from Adam on; he must go through, suffer through, the whole of it, in order to transform it. The Letter to the Hebrews is particularly eloquent in stressing that Jesus' mission, the solidarity with all of us that he manifested beforehand in his Baptism, includes exposure to the risks and perils of human existence: "Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered and been

tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted" (Heb 2:17–18). "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). The story of the temptations is thus intimately connected with the story of the Baptism, for it is there that Jesus enters into solidarity with sinners. We will see Jesus wrestling once again with his mission during his agony on the Mount of Olives. But the "temptations" are with him every step of the way. In this sense, we can see the story of the temptations—just like the Baptism—as an anticipation that condenses into a single expression the struggle he endured at every step of his mission.

In his short account of the temptations (Mk 1:13), Mark brings into relief the parallels between Adam and Jesus, stressing how Jesus "suffers through" the quintessential human drama. Jesus, we read, "was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him" (Mk 1:13). The desert—the opposite image of the garden—becomes the place of reconciliation and healing. Wild beasts are the most concrete threat that the rebellion of creation and the power of death posed to man. But here they become man's friends, as they once were in paradise. Peace is restored, the peace that Isaiah proclaims for the days of the Messiah: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid" (Is 11:6). Once sin has been overcome and man's harmony with God restored, creation is reconciled, too. Creation, torn asunder by strife, once more becomes the dwelling place of peace, as Paul expresses it when he speaks of the groaning of creation, which "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom 8:19).

Are not the oases of creation that sprang up, say, around the Benedictine monasteries in the West foreshadowings of this reconciliation of creation brought about by the children of God—just as, conversely, something like Chernobyl is a shocking expression of creation's enslavement in the darkness of God's absence? Mark concludes his brief account of the temptations with a phrase that can be taken as an allusion to Psalm 91:11: "And the angels ministered to him." These words also occur at the close of Matthew's detailed narrative of the temptations, and it is only in that larger context that they can be fully understood.

Matthew and Luke recount three temptations of Jesus that reflect the inner struggle over his own particular mission and, at the same time, address the question as to what truly matters in human life. At the heart of all temptations, as we see here, is the act of pushing God aside because we perceive him as secondary, if not actually superfluous and annoying, in comparison with all the apparently far more urgent matters that fill our lives. Constructing a world by our own lights, without reference to God, building on our own foundation; refusing to acknowledge the reality of anything beyond the political and material, while setting God aside as an illusion—that is the temptation that threatens us in many varied forms.

Moral posturing is part and parcel of temptation. It does not invite us directly to do evil—no, that would be far too blatant. It pretends to show us a better way, where we finally abandon our illusions and throw ourselves into the work of actually making the world a better place. It claims, moreover, to speak for true realism: What's real is what is right there in front of us—power and bread. By comparison, the things of

God fade into unreality, into a secondary world that no one really needs.

God is the issue: Is he real, reality itself, or isn't he? Is he good, or do we have to invent the good ourselves? The God question is the fundamental question, and it sets us down right at the crossroads of human existence. What must the Savior of the world do or not do? That is the question the temptations of Jesus are about. The three temptations are identical in Matthew and Luke, but the sequence is different. We will follow Matthew's sequence, because his arrangement reflects the logic that intensifies from temptation to temptation.

Jesus "fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry" (Mt 4:2). In Jesus' day the number forty was already filled with rich symbolism for Israel. First of all, it recalls Israel's forty years' wandering in the desert, a period in which the people were both tempted and enjoyed a special closeness to God. The forty days and nights also remind us of the forty days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai before he was privileged to receive the word of God, the sacred tablets of the Covenant. They may also serve as a reminder of the rabbinic tale of how Abraham spent forty days and forty nights on the way to Mount Horeb, where he was to sacrifice his son, how during that time he neither ate nor drank anything and nourished himself on the vision and words of the angel who accompanied him.

The Fathers of the Church, stretching number symbolism in an admittedly slightly playful way, regarded forty as a cosmic number, as the numerical sign for this world. The four "corners" encompass the whole world, and ten is the number of the commandments. The number of the cosmos multiplied

by the number of the commandments becomes a symbolic statement about the history of this world as a whole. It is as if Jesus were reliving Israel's Exodus, and then reliving the chaotic meanderings of history in general; the forty days of fasting embrace the drama of history, which Jesus takes into himself and bears all the way through to the end.

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Mt 4:3)—so the first temptation goes. "If you are the Son of God"—we will hear these words again in the mouths of the mocking bystanders at the foot of the Cross—"If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross" (Mt 27:40). The Book of Wisdom already foresaw this situation: "If the righteous man is God's son, he will help him" (Wis 2:18). Mockery and temptation blend into each other here: Christ is being challenged to establish his credibility by offering evidence for his claims. This demand for proof is a constantly recurring theme in the story of Jesus' life; again and again he is reproached for having failed to prove himself sufficiently, for having hitherto failed to work that great miracle that will remove all ambiguity and every contradiction, so as to make it indisputably clear for everyone who and what he is or is not.

And we make this same demand of God and Christ and his Church throughout the whole of history. "If you exist, God," we say, "then you'll just have to show yourself. You'll have to part the clouds that conceal you and give us the clarity that we deserve. If you, Christ, are really the Son of God, and not just another one of the enlightened individuals who keep appearing in the course of history, then you'll just have to prove it more clearly than you are doing now. And if the

Church is really supposed to be yours, you'll have to make that much more obvious than it is at present."

We will return to this point in connection with the second temptation, where it is in fact the central issue. The proof of divinity that the tempter proposes at the first temptation consists in changing the stones of the desert into bread. At first it is a question of Jesus' own hunger, which is how Luke sees it: "Command this stone to become bread" (Lk 4:3). Matthew, however, understands the temptation in broader terms, as it would later confront Jesus even during his earthly life and then throughout all of history.

Is there anything more tragic, is there anything more opposed to belief in the existence of a good God and a Redeemer of mankind, than world hunger? Shouldn't it be the first test of the Redeemer, before the world's gaze and on the world's behalf, to give it bread and to end all hunger? During their wandering through the desert, God fed the people of Israel with bread from heaven, with manna. This seemed to offer a privileged glimpse into how things would look when the Messiah came: Did not, and does not, the Redeemer of the world have to prove his credentials by feeding everyone? Isn't the problem of feeding the world—and, more generally, are not social problems—the primary, true yardstick by which redemption has to be measured? Does someone who fails to measure up to this standard have any right to be called a redeemer? Marxism—quite understandably—made this very point the core of its promise of salvation: It would see to it that no one went hungry anymore and that the "desert would become bread."

"If you are the Son of God"—what a challenge! And

should we not say the same thing to the Church? If you claim to be the Church of God, then start by making sure the world has bread—the rest comes later. It is hard to answer this challenge, precisely because the cry of the hungry penetrates so deeply into the ears and into the soul—as well it should. Jesus' answer cannot be understood in light of the temptation story alone. The bread motif pervades the entire Gospel and has to be looked at in its full breadth.

There are two other great narratives concerning bread in Jesus' life. The first is the multiplication of loaves for the thousands who followed the Lord when he withdrew to a lonely place. Why does Christ now do the very thing he had rejected as a temptation before? The crowds had left everything in order to come hear God's word. They are people who have opened their heart to God and to one another; they are therefore ready to receive the bread with the proper disposition. This miracle of the loaves has three aspects, then. It is preceded by the search for God, for his word, for the teaching that sets the whole of life on the right path. Furthermore, God is asked to supply the bread. Finally, readiness to share with one another is an essential element of the miracle. Listening to God becomes living with God, and leads from faith to love, to the discovery of the other. Jesus is not indifferent toward men's hunger, their bodily needs, but he places these things in the proper context and the proper order.

This second narrative concerning bread thus points ahead to, and prepares for, the third: the Last Supper, which becomes the Eucharist of the Church and Jesus' perpetual miracle of bread. Jesus himself has become the grain of wheat that died and brought forth much fruit (cf. Jn 12:24).

He himself has become bread for us, and *this* multiplication of the loaves endures to the end of time, without ever being depleted. This gives us the background we need if we are to understand what Jesus means when he cites the Old Testament in order to repel the tempter: "Man does not live by bread alone, but . . . by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD" (Deut 8:3). The German Jesuit Alfred Delp, who was executed by the Nazis, once wrote: "Bread is important, freedom is more important, but most important of all is unbroken fidelity and faithful adoration."

When this ordering of goods is no longer respected, but turned on its head, the result is not justice or concern for human suffering. The result is rather ruin and destruction even of material goods themselves. When God is regarded as a secondary matter that can be set aside temporarily or permanently on account of more important things, it is precisely these supposedly more important things that come to nothing. It is not just the negative outcome of the Marxist experiment that proves this.

The aid offered by the West to developing countries has been purely technically and materially based, and not only has left God out of the picture, but has driven men away from God. And this aid, proudly claiming to "know better," is itself what first turned the "third world" into what we mean today by that term. It has thrust aside indigenous religious, ethical, and social structures and filled the resulting vacuum with its technocratic mind-set. The idea was that we could turn stones into bread; instead, our "aid" has only given stones in place of bread. The issue is the primacy of God. The issue is acknowledging that he is a reality, that he is the

reality without which nothing else can be good. History cannot be detached from God and then run smoothly on purely material lines. If man's heart is not good, then nothing else can turn out good, either. And the goodness of the human heart can ultimately come only from the One who is goodness, who is the Good itself.

Of course, one can still ask why God did not make a world in which his presence is more evident—why Christ did not leave the world with another sign of his presence so radiant that no one could resist it. This is the mystery of God and man, which we find so inscrutable. We live in this world, where God is not so manifest as tangible things are, but can be sought and found only when the heart sets out on the "exodus" from "Egypt." It is in *this* world that we are obliged to resist the delusions of false philosophies and to recognize that we do not live by bread alone, but first and foremost by obedience to God's word. Only when this obedience is put into practice does the attitude develop that is also capable of providing bread for all.

Let us move on to Jesus' second temptation; of the three it is in many ways the most difficult to understand in terms of the lessons it holds for us. This second temptation has to be interpreted as a sort of vision, which once again represents something real, something that poses a particular threat to the man Jesus and his mission. The first point is the striking fact that the devil cites Holy Scripture in order to lure Jesus into his trap. He quotes Psalm 91:11f., which speaks of the protection God grants to the man who believes: "For he will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot

against a stone." These words acquire a special significance by virtue of the fact that they are spoken in the holy city and in the holy place. Indeed, the psalm cited here is connected with the Temple; to pray it is to hope for protection in the Temple, since God's dwelling place necessarily means a special place of divine protection. Where should the man who believes in God feel safer than in the sacred precincts of the Temple? (Further details are given in Gnilka, *Matthäusevangelium*, I, p. 88.) The devil proves to be a Bible expert who can quote the Psalm exactly. The whole conversation of the second temptation takes the form of a dispute between two Bible scholars. Remarking on this passage, Joachim Gnilka says that the devil presents himself here as a theologian. The Russian writer Vladimir Soloviev took up this motif in his short story "The Antichrist." The Antichrist receives an honorary doctorate in theology from the University of Tübingen and is a great Scripture scholar. Soloviev's portrayal of the Antichrist forcefully expresses his skepticism regarding a certain type of scholarly exegesis current at the time. This is not a rejection of scholarly biblical interpretation as such, but an eminently salutary and necessary warning against its possible aberrations. The fact is that scriptural exegesis can become a tool of the Antichrist. Soloviev is not the first person to tell us that; it is the deeper point of the temptation story itself. The alleged findings of scholarly exegesis have been used to put together the most dreadful books that destroy the figure of Jesus and dismantle the faith.

The common practice today is to measure the Bible against the so-called modern worldview, whose fundamental dogma is that God cannot act in history—that everything to do with God is to be relegated to the domain of subjectivity.

And so the Bible no longer speaks of God, the living God; no, now *we* alone speak and decide what God can do and what we will and should do. And the Antichrist, with an air of scholarly excellence, tells us that any exegesis that reads the Bible from the perspective of faith in the living God, in order to listen to what God has to say, is fundamentalism; he wants to convince us that only *his* kind of exegesis, the supposedly purely scientific kind, in which God says nothing and has nothing to say, is able to keep abreast of the times.

The theological debate between Jesus and the devil is a dispute over the correct interpretation of Scripture, and it is relevant to every period of history. The hermeneutical question lying at the basis of proper scriptural exegesis is this: What picture of God are we working with? The dispute about interpretation is ultimately a dispute about who God is. Yet in practice, the struggle over the image of God, which underlies the debate about valid biblical interpretation, is decided by the picture we form of Christ: Is he, who remained without worldly power, really the Son of the living God?

The structural question concerning the remarkable scriptural discussion between Christ and the tempter thus leads directly to the question about its content. What is this dispute about? The issue at stake in this second temptation has been summed up under the motif of "bread and circuses." The idea is that after bread has been provided, a spectacle has to be offered, too. Since mere bodily satisfaction is obviously not enough for man, so this interpretation goes, those who refuse to let God have anything to do with the world and with man are forced to provide the titillation of exciting stimuli, the thrill of which replaces religious awe and drives it away.

But that cannot be the point of this passage, since the temptation apparently does not presuppose any spectators.

The point at issue is revealed in Jesus' answer, which is also taken from Deuteronomy: "You shall not put the LORD your God to the test" (Deut 6:16). This passage from Deuteronomy alludes to the story of how Israel almost perished of thirst in the desert. Israel rebels against Moses, and in so doing rebels against God. God has to prove that he is God. The Bible describes this rebellion against God as follows: "They put the LORD to the proof by saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'" (Ex 17:7). The issue, then, is the one we have already encountered: God has to submit to experiment. He is "tested," just as products are tested. He must submit to the conditions that we say are necessary if we are to reach certainty. If he doesn't grant us now the protection he promises in Psalm 91, then he is simply not God. He will have shown his own word, and himself too, to be false.

We are dealing here with the vast question as to how we can and cannot know God, how we are related to God and how we can lose him. The arrogance that would make God an object and impose our laboratory conditions upon him is incapable of finding him. For it already implies that we deny God as God by placing ourselves above him, by discarding the whole dimension of love, of interior listening; by no longer acknowledging as real anything but what we can experimentally test and grasp. To think like that is to make oneself God. And to do that is to abase not only God, but the world and oneself, too.

From this scene on the pinnacle of the Temple, though, we can look out and see the Cross. Christ did not cast himself

down from the pinnacle of the Temple. He did not leap into the abyss. He did not tempt God. But he did descend into the abyss of death, into the night of abandonment, and into the desolation of the defenseless. He ventured *this* leap as an act of God's love for men. And so he knew that, ultimately, when he leaped he could only fall into the kindly hands of the Father. This brings to light the real meaning of Psalm 91, which has to do with the right to the ultimate and unlimited trust of which the Psalm speaks: If you follow the will of God, you know that in spite of all the terrible things that happen to you, you will never lose a final refuge. You know that the foundation of the world is love, so that even when no human being can or will help you, you may go on, trusting in the One who loves you. Yet this trust, which we cultivate on the authority of Scripture and at the invitation of the risen Lord, is something quite different from the reckless defiance of God that would make God our servant.

We come now to the third and last temptation, which is the climax of the whole story. The devil takes the Lord in a vision onto a high mountain. He shows him all the kingdoms of the earth and their splendor and offers him kingship over the world. Isn't that precisely the mission of the Messiah? Isn't he supposed to be the king of the world who unifies the whole earth in one great kingdom of peace and well-being? We saw that the temptation to turn stones into bread has two remarkable counterparts later on in Jesus' story: the multiplication of the loaves and the Last Supper. The same thing is true here.

The risen Lord gathers his followers "on the mountain" (cf. Mt 28:16). And on this mountain he does indeed say

"all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Mt 28:18). Two details here are new and different. The Lord has power *in heaven* and on earth. And only someone who has this fullness of authority has the real, saving power. Without heaven, earthly power is always ambiguous and fragile. Only when power submits to the measure and the judgment of heaven—of God, in other words—can it become power for good. And only when power stands under God's blessing can it be trusted.

This is where the second element comes in: Jesus has this power in virtue of his Resurrection. This means that it presupposes the Cross, his death. It presupposes that other mountain—Golgotha, where he hangs on the Cross and dies, mocked by men and forsaken by his disciples. The Kingdom of Christ is different from the kingdoms of the earth and their splendor, which Satan parades before him. This splendor, as the Greek word *doxa* indicates, is an illusory appearance that disintegrates. This is not the sort of splendor that belongs to the Kingdom of Christ. His Kingdom grows through the humility of the proclamation in those who agree to become his disciples, who are baptized in the name of the triune God, and who keep his commandments (cf. Mt 28:19f.).

But let us return to the third temptation. Its true content becomes apparent when we realize that throughout history it is constantly taking on new forms. The Christian empire attempted at an early stage to use the faith in order to cement political unity. The Kingdom of Christ was now expected to take the form of a political kingdom and its splendor. The powerlessness of faith, the earthly powerlessness of Jesus Christ, was to be given the helping hand of political and

military might. This temptation to use power to secure the faith has arisen again and again in varied forms throughout the centuries, and again and again faith has risked being suffocated in the embrace of power. The struggle for the freedom of the Church, the struggle to avoid identifying Jesus' Kingdom with any political structure, is one that has to be fought century after century. For the fusion of faith and political power always comes at a price: faith becomes the servant of power and must bend to its criteria.

The alternative that is at stake here appears in a dramatic form in the narrative of the Lord's Passion. At the culmination of Jesus' trial, Pilate presents the people with a choice between Jesus and Barabbas. One of the two will be released. But who was Barabbas? It is usually the words of John's Gospel that come to mind here: "Barabbas was a robber" (Jn 18:40). But the Greek word for "robber" had acquired a specific meaning in the political situation that obtained at the time in Palestine. It had become a synonym for "resistance fighter." Barabbas had taken part in an uprising (cf. Mk 15:7), and furthermore—in that context—had been accused of murder (cf. Lk 23:19, 25). When Matthew remarks that Barabbas was "a notorious prisoner" (Mt 27:16), this is evidence that he was one of the prominent resistance fighters, in fact probably the actual leader of that particular uprising.

In other words, Barabbas was a messianic figure. The choice of Jesus versus Barabbas is not accidental; two messiah figures, two forms of messianic belief stand in opposition. This becomes even clearer when we consider that the name Bar-Abbas means "son of the father." This is a typically messianic appellation, the cultic name of a prominent leader of

the messianic movement. The last great Jewish messianic war was fought in the year 132 by Bar-Kokhba, "son of the star." The form of the name is the same, and it stands for the same intention.

Origen, a Father of the Church, provides us with another interesting detail. Up until the third century, many manuscripts of the Gospels referred to the man in question here as "Jesus Barabbas"—"Jesus son of the father." Barabbas figures here as a sort of alter ego of Jesus, who makes the same claim but understands it in a completely different way. So the choice is between a Messiah who leads an armed struggle, promises freedom and a kingdom of one's own, and this mysterious Jesus who proclaims that losing oneself is the way to life. Is it any wonder that the crowds prefer Barabbas? (For a fuller discussion of this point, see Vittorio Messori's important book *Patì sotto Ponzio Pilato?* [Turin, 1992], pp. 52–62.)

If we had to choose today, would Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, the Son of the Father, have a chance? Do we really know Jesus at all? Do we understand him? Do we not perhaps have to make an effort, today as always, to get to know him all over again? The tempter is not so crude as to suggest to us directly that we should worship the devil. He merely suggests that we opt for the reasonable decision, that we choose to give priority to a planned and thoroughly organized world, where God may have his place as a private concern but must not interfere in our essential purposes. Soloviev attributes to the Antichrist a book entitled *The Open Way to World Peace and Welfare.* This book becomes something of a new Bible, whose real message is the worship of well-being and rational planning.

Jesus' third temptation proves, then, to be the fundamental one, because it concerns the question as to what sort of action is expected of a Savior of the world. It pervades the entire life of Jesus. It manifests itself openly again at a decisive turning point along his path. Peter, speaking in the name of the disciples, has confessed that Jesus is the Messiah-Christ, the Son of the Living God. In doing so, he has expressed in words the faith that builds up the Church and inaugurates the new community of faith based on Christ. At this crucial moment, where distinctive and decisive knowledge of Jesus separates his followers from public opinion and begins to constitute them as his new family, the tempter appears—threatening to turn everything into its opposite. The Lord immediately declares that the concept of the Messiah has to be understood in terms of the entirety of the message of the Prophets—it means not worldly power, but the Cross, and the radically different community that comes into being through the Cross.

But that is not what Peter has understood: "Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you'" (Mt 16:22). Only when we read these words against the backdrop of the temptation scene—as its recurrence at the decisive moment—do we understand Jesus' unbelievably harsh answer: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men" (Mt 16:23).

But don't we all repeatedly tell Jesus that his message leads to conflict with the prevailing opinions, so that there is always a looming threat of failure, suffering, and persecution? The Christian empire or the secular power of the papacy is no longer a temptation today, but the interpretation of Christianity as a recipe for progress and the proclamation of universal prosperity as the real goal of all religions, including Christianity—this is the modern form of the same temptation. It appears in the guise of a question: "What did Jesus bring, then, if he didn't usher in a better world? How can that not be the content of messianic hope?"

In the Old Testament, two strands of that hope are still intertwined without distinction. The first one is the expectation of a worldly paradise in which the wolf lies down with the lamb (cf. Is 11:6), the peoples of the world make their way to Mount Zion, and the prophecy "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" comes true (Is 2:4; Mic 4:1–3). Alongside this expectation, however, is the prospect of the suffering servant of God, of a Messiah who brings salvation through contempt and suffering. Throughout his public ministry, and again in his discourses after Easter, Jesus had to show his disciples that Moses and the Prophets were speaking of him, the seemingly powerless one, who suffered, was crucified, and rose again. He had to show that in *this* way, and no other, the promises were fulfilled. "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" (Lk 24:25). That is what the Lord said to the disciples on the road to Emmaus and he has to say the same to us repeatedly throughout the centuries, because we too are constantly presuming that in order to make good on his claim to be a Messiah, he ought to have ushered in the golden age.

Jesus, however, repeats to us what he said in reply to Satan, what he said to Peter, and what he explained further to the disciples of Emmaus: No kingdom of this world is the

Kingdom of God, the total condition of mankind's salvation. Earthly kingdoms remain earthly human kingdoms, and anyone who claims to be able to establish the perfect world is the willing dupe of Satan and plays the world right into his hands.

Now, it is true that this leads to the great question that will be with us throughout this entire book: What did Jesus actually bring, if not world peace, universal prosperity, and a better world? What has he brought?

The answer is very simple: God. He has brought God. He has brought the God who formerly unveiled his countenance gradually, first to Abraham, then to Moses and the Prophets, and then in the Wisdom Literature—the God who revealed his face only in Israel, even though he was also honored among the pagans in various shadowy guises. It is this God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the true God, whom he has brought to the nations of the earth.

He has brought God, and now we know his face, now we can call upon him. Now we know the path that we human beings have to take in this world. Jesus has brought God and with God the truth about our origin and destiny: faith, hope, and love. It is only because of our hardness of heart that we think this is too little. Yes indeed, God's power works quietly in this world, but it is the true and lasting power. Again and again, God's cause seems to be in its death throes. Yet over and over again it proves to be the thing that truly endures and saves. The earthly kingdoms that Satan was able to put before the Lord at that time have all passed away. Their glory, their *doxa,* has proven to be a mere semblance. But the glory of Christ, the humble, self-sacrificing glory of his love, has not passed away, nor will it ever do so.

Jesus has emerged victorious from his battle with Satan. To the tempter's lying divinization of power and prosperity, to his lying promise of a future that offers all things to all men through power and through wealth—he responds with the fact that God is God, that God is man's true Good. To the invitation to worship power, the Lord answers with a passage from Deuteronomy, the same book that the devil himself had cited: "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (Mt 4:10; cf. Deut 6:13). The fundamental commandment of Israel is also the fundamental commandment for Christians: God alone is to be worshiped. When we come to consider the Sermon on the Mount, we will see that precisely this unconditional Yes to the first tablet of the Ten Commandments also includes the Yes to the second tablet—reverence for man, love of neighbor. Matthew, like Mark, concludes the narrative of the temptations with the statement that "angels came and ministered to him" (Mt 4:11; Mk 1:13). Psalm 91:11 now comes to fulfillment: The angels serve him, he has proven himself to be the Son, and heaven therefore stands open above him, the new Jacob, the Patriarch of a universalized Israel (cf. Jn 1:51; Gen 28:12).