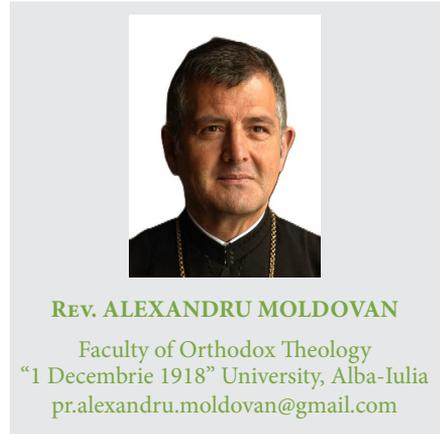


## ABRAHAM'S SON AND SONS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

### Abstract

The present study refers, first of all, to the Savior Jesus Christ, Who, according to the human nature He assumed through the Incarnation, was the “son of Abraham” (*υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ*), submitting Himself, like His ancestor of old, to the ritual of circumcision (Mt 1:1; Lk 2:21), but also to all the descendants according to the flesh of the patriarch Abraham, who are “according to the nature” (*κατὰ φύσιν*) “sons of Abraham” (Jn 8:33; Rom 11:21). There is, however, another category of “sons of Abraham”: those “of faith” (*ἐκπίστεως*) that is, “those who do the works of Abraham” or “those who imitate his example” (Jn 8:39), considered by God Himself “righteous” and “father of the righteous” (Rom 4:17; Gen 17:4-5).



### Keywords

Abraham, Abrahamic lineage, Faith, Descent, Prototype

### A typical scenario

When we began to study the Book of Genesis, the reference point for the story of the patriarch Abraham was, without a doubt, the text of Gen 12:1-3 (the classic episode of the “call of Abraham”). That was considered the “starting point” of the story of the patriarch Abram or the “initial point” of a long pilgrimage that continued in the space of the “Fertile Crescent” or the “Horn of Plenty” through Mesopotamia, made a short stop at Haran, then continued along the Jordan Valley to Shechem, arrived in Egypt, and then, after a brief stay in Egypt, returned to Shechem (at the Oak of Mamre). The text of Gen 12:1-3 was also a reference because it was seen or interpreted as a messianic prophecy, the second after that of Gen 3:15, known as the “Protoevangelium”.

Contrary to what we have known for a long time, the story of Abram does not begin with the text of Gen 12:1-3, but with a brief evocation of his family’s genealogy, an

evocation contained in the previous chapter of the book (Gen 11:27-32), which presents us with the genealogy of one of Noah's sons (Shem), presented first in Gen 10:21-31, and then resumed in Gen 11:10-26.

The few references these texts provide regarding the family of Terah (Abram's father) paint a grim picture. This Chaldean nomad from the land of Ur has three children: Abram, Nahor, and Haran. The latter also bears a child (Lot) and then dies before Terah, his father (Gen 11:27-28).

Abram, in turn, takes Sarai as his wife, of whom the hagiographer says that "she was barren and bore no children" (Gen 11:30). This is also a kind of "death", presented as the impossibility of having children. Following these heavy blows of fate, Terah leaves Ur of the Chaldeans together with those struck by misfortune: Abram and Sarai, the childless family, and Lot, who was left fatherless (Wénin 2019, 13).

The evocation of this departure (in Gen 11:31) is characterized by the insistent indication of the kinship ties that exist between these characters: "And Terah took Abraham his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his nephew, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, the wife of Abram his son, and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldees..." (Gen 11:31). In a few words, verse 31 includes six terms that indicate the degree of kinship that existed between them, terms that have the possessive adjective "his" next to them. The previous verses (Gen 11:27-29), in which the kinship ties between these characters have already been indicated, show, at first glance, that this repetition of them is unnecessary, which is why it should have a logic or a specific reason behind it, beyond being a simple biographical information offered to the reader. All these repetitions serve to characterize the kinship ties within this family, already touched by the shadow of death. The author clearly indicates the relationship of this group of people, a group dominated by the paternal figure of Terah, whose power or authority over his family is indicated by the expression: "And Terah took..." (Gen 11:31a).

However, from the original Hebrew text it is not very clear who and with whom comes out or leaves Ur of the Chaldeans; given that Terah is the subject of the verb "to take", we would expect that he is the one who "goes out" together with his son (Abraham), his grandson (Lot) and his daughter-in-law (Sarai); or he (Terah) is the one who took them out of Ur of the Chaldeans (as appears from the Septuagint and the Vulgate). However, the Masoretic tradition unanimously supports this curious variant, according to which they all came out together, or each with each, as a whole not very clearly specified; another indication – consider the exegetes – which shows us that this

family was marked by the confusion in which humanity found itself immediately after the well-known episode of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11).

Terah intended to reach Canaan, but they only went halfway (to Haran), for there Terah died. The name of this city, where Terah died, reminds us of the name of his third son (Haran), who had died before him.

So, what we consider as the “beginning” of the story of the patriarch Abraham (the text of Gen 12:1-3) is, in fact, a continuation of a narrative that began earlier. The well-known text of Gen 12:1-3 is followed by a story that, in fact, continues the tale interrupted in Haran with the mention of Terah's death.

From now on, Abram will be the one who will take on the active role of family leader: “And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all the substance that they had gathered, and all the souls that they had gotten in Haran, and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and they came into the land of Canaan” (Gen 12:5). The similarity with the text of Gen 11:31 is obvious; Abram, as the leader of his family, imitates his father; taking his own (who were already quite numerous) he seduces into the land to which his father had gone initially.

Now God intervenes and commands His servant Abram to leave his land, his people, and his father's house (Gen 12:1). After spending some time in Shechem (at the oak of Mamre), “there was a famine in the land” (where he was) and “Abram went down to Egypt” (Gen 12:10).

The famous Rabbi Moshè ben Nahman Gerondi (1194-1270) (also known by the acronym “RaMBaN”, and in medieval literature as “Nahmanides”), commenting on Abram's departure to Egypt, made this statement: “Whatever happens to the father, happens to his children.” He meant that Abram's departure to Egypt and his stay there for a specific period were an anticipation of what would later happen to his descendants.

Nachmanides, citing a midrashic commentary on the Book of Genesis – Genesi Rabba 40, 6 – comments on the text of Gen 12:10-20 as follows:

“Rabbi Phineas ben Yair, in the time of Rabbi Oshaiah, said: ‘God said to Abram, our father: Go and prepare the way for your children.’ Indeed, you can clearly see that everything that was written about Abraham, our father, was also written about his children. Of Abraham it is written: ‘There was a famine in the land’ (Gen 12:10); of Israel it is written: ‘For behold, the famine has been in the land for two years’ (Gen 45:6); of Abraham it is said: ‘Abram went down to Egypt’; of our ancestors it is written:

‘Our fathers went down to Egypt’ (Num 20:15); of Abraham it is written: ‘to sojourn there’ (Gen 12:10); of Israel it is said: ‘We have come to sojourn in this land’ (Gen 47:4).’

It was certainly tempting for Israel to read and interpret its own history through the lens of its ancestors’ stories, and this was the most appropriate (and most effective) way to give new meaning to its later experiences. Israel’s history was not the result of chance but was part of a foreknown plan. The figure of Abram has a unique importance in this plan, because he was the first of all the ancestors. His experiences, the events of his life, are “founding events” and have a perpetual significance. His sojourn in Egypt, the inherent dangers to which he was exposed, the intervention of the Lord in his favor, and his return to the Promised Land are not ordinary events; they contain, as in a nucleus, the promise of the future liberation that God would later bring about in favor of his people <sup>[1]</sup>. More than any other personality in the history of these people, Patriarch Abraham was destined to become a “model” or “prototype” for his descendants.

Now, the idea of making Abraham a model or paradigm has led biblical theologians to radical conclusions: one of them would be that this biblical character would be a legendary figure (Wénin 2019, 7); the intention of biblical scholars to identify a precise historical character, starting from the biblical stories and the texts we have, was an attempt doomed to failure.

But who is Abraham? Did he exist or not? We could discuss the historicity of this biblical character endlessly – whether he existed or not. Still, we are interested in something else: what we know about him from the biblical tradition. It is clear from the biblical texts that Abraham is not just a single figure, but a “prototype”. The Patriarch Abraham is the man to whom the Lord reveals Himself and, at the same time, the man who seeks God; Abraham – like Adam – is one and many, because many seek God (Martini 2022, 16).

In rabbinic literature, the phrase “Abraham our father” is used very frequently, but what does it mean, and to whom does this “our” refer? What group of people or what community are we talking about when we say “our”? First of all, we think of the Hebrew community; in this community we should also look for our roots (Pontificia Commissione Biblica 2001, 46-8); but this “our” could very well mean the Islamic community (because Muslim believers also claim it) and, of course, the Christian community, because the apostle Paul states that Patriarch Abraham is “our father by faith” (Gal 3 and Rom 4) (Martini 1983, 24).

In what sense is Abraham the “ancestor” or “father” of Christians? Saint Matthew gives a first answer to this question in chapter 1 of his Gospel: “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Mt 1:1). Here we find our Abrahamic paternity: Christ the Savior is a descendant of King David and of Abraham, and we are “incorporated” in Christ. We live our Christian existence to the extent that we are “incorporated” (ontologically) in Christ, and, as such, we are also “sons of Abraham”. More than the descendants “according to the flesh” of Abraham (the Jews), we – Christians – are the true sons of Abraham, for to us God has fulfilled the promise made to the Patriarch Abraham: “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3).

When we affirm that the Patriarch Abraham is “our father by faith,” we go beyond a genealogical lineage and affirm that he precedes us in the act of faith or shows us what faith is (or what it means); indicates to us the way or path to God; Abraham teaches us obedience to the word of God <sup>[2]</sup>; he teaches us availability to God’s commandments and total surrender into God’s hands.

The life of Abraham – as presented to us in the Book of Genesis – meant a permanent pilgrimage (in the space of the Fertile Crescent) – from a precise and well-defined point to an equally well-defined “target” or “arrival point”, a journey that went through several stages. If we read carefully the thirteen chapters dedicated to the patriarch Abraham in the Book of Genesis, we will notice that these chapters appear as a unit, as a pilgrimage, as a story that knows a particular path and an inevitable progress (an ascending development), with certain well-defined stages (Wénin 2019, 8).

The sources or wellsprings that tell us about Abraham are found in the Book of Genesis (but these are not the only ones). Old Testament biblical scholars generally speak of five sources: the Book of Genesis tells us about Abraham (starting with chapter 12, up to chapter 25), and among the New Testament authors, Saint Paul in several texts from the epistles to the Galatians, to the Romans, Second Corinthians, and to the Hebrews. Now, in addition to these texts (let’s call them “classics”), we also have other texts in which direct or indirect allusions are made to the patriarch Abraham.

In the pages of the Old Testament, the name of Abraham is cited in the short form “Abram” 60 times, and in the long form “Abraham” 174 times. So, more than 230 citations, and in the pages of the New Testament, we have approximately 306 citations. However, the books of the Old Testament that mention Abraham are much fewer than we might think: the figure of Abraham, although important in Jewish theology, is not so

popular. It seems that later or post-exilic Judaism <sup>[3]</sup> is the one that brought the patriarch Abraham back into the focus of theological reflection. The ancient wisdom tradition <sup>[4]</sup> does not mention Abraham. He is noted, however, in the more recent wisdom tradition – the one known as the “deuterocanonical” – that is, in those books that belong to the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, but which are not also found in the Hebrew Bible, since they were written in Greek; it is clear that we are talking about more recent books (that is, written closer to the period of the New Testament). The Book of Wisdom of Solomon and the Book of Wisdom of Jesus Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus) allude to the figure of the patriarch Abraham, the latter (Ecclesiastes) in the so-called “Praise to the Fathers” or “Praise to the enlightened men” (Sir 44:20-24 – it is the text dedicated to Abraham).

Only two psalms mention the name of Abraham (Ps 46 and Ps 104). In the books of the Prophets, we have seven mentions (i.e., very few), and in late texts. Very likely, the pre-exilic prophets (Hosea, Amos, Isaiah 1-39, and Micah) were not inspired by Abraham, as the prophets who followed them did. In addition, we have 18 mentions in the books of the Pentateuch. The name of the patriarch Abraham appears quite frequently in the phrase “God of Abraham”, which, in fact, tells us nothing about him. It is then mentioned 15 times in historical books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Kings, 3 and 4 Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Tobit, Judith, Esther, and 1 and 2 Maccabees). It could be said that the figure of the patriarch Abraham gained greater importance in the pages of Holy Scripture with the Babylonian exile (Martini 2022, 22).

In the New Testament, the patriarch Abraham is mentioned 72 times (and in the Quran, 69 times), while the great Moses is mentioned 80 times. Abraham and Moses are the biblical figures most frequently mentioned in the New Testament.

Among the mentions of Abraham in the New Testament, we will refer to those in the Gospel of the “infancy” (Mt 1:1 and Lk 1:55 and 1:73): “Jesus Christ is the son of Abraham”; “as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed, forever” and “... to remember his holy covenant, the oath which he swore to Abraham, our father”. Other places where the name of the patriarch Abraham appears are in the Gospel of John, in the well-known controversies between Jesus and the spiritual leaders of the Jews (Jn 8).

The Jewish sources that mention Abraham are numerous. As we have already mentioned, since the Babylonian exile, the Jews have reflected a lot on the figure of the biblical patriarch: Who was he? What did he do? What was his role in the history of the biblical people? These late reflections (6th century BC) lack the historical value of tradition, but they have undeniable value for the religious interpretation of the figure of

Abraham; the repatriated Jews who participated in the reconstruction of their religion felt close to Abraham and made frequent references to him. These mentions represent “first-hand testimonies”, even if, sometimes, as we will see, they seem quite simplistic (almost puerile), but, in their apparent naivety, the rabbis said amazing things, because they mastered very well the art of saying profound things with the help of short stories, in little stories; they proposed a brief statement and said things that invited reflection.

Two reference names of Hellenistic Judaism: firstly, Philo of Alexandria who has many treatises on Abraham: “De Abrahamo”, “De migratione Abrahami”, “Quis rerum divinarum heres sit” (Who is the heir of the divine promises?), “De congressuquærendæ eruditionis gratia” (On meeting for the sake of seeking and learning), “De fuga et invention” (On search and discovery) and “De mutatione nominum” (On the change of names), and secondly, the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius, who in his best-known and most voluminous work – Jewish Antiquities – tells, in his own way, the entire history of Abraham.

In these Jewish sources, we can see how ancient authors related to this biblical figure, doing what we today, after 2000 years, try to do: we try to understand Abraham starting from our own religious situation (from our concrete faith). This is what Philo of Alexandria did: he made a hermeneutic of the stories about Abraham, trying to answer the question: “What exactly is the patriarch Abraham telling me?”; “In reality, I am Abraham!”. Philo of Alexandria read the story of Abraham from a religious perspective. Josephus did the same, and in a much more determined manner, rabbinical Judaism did the same, in a fundamental text called “Haggadot”, but also the rabbinical stories about Abraham’s childhood and deeds.

Islamic sources that speak of Abraham are also quite numerous, because the Islamic religion takes the figure of Abraham very seriously.

We also have, as is known, Christian literature that refers to the figure of the biblical patriarch: first, patristic literature. Even if it did not produce treatises on Abraham, as it did for Moses, through Saint Gregory of Nyssa, it nevertheless makes many references to the patriarch Abraham.

In addition to the works of the Holy Fathers, the figure of the patriarch Abraham is as present as possible in spiritual reflection on Abraham, in worship, in sacred art, in iconography, and in modern literature.

Finally, I think we can add here – although it may seem a bit haphazard – our own or personal reflection on this biblical character; without claiming to give this

reflection an exegetical value, I could ask myself: “How do I read (or see) the experience of this biblical character?”; each of us – if we claim to have faith in God – experiences Abraham: the experience of his calling, the experience of his pilgrimage, the experience of his God, the harrowing experiences of his existence: hasn't God asked me too to leave some things behind? Doesn't he ask me, sometimes, to believe and hope against all hope and despite everything I see happening around me? Has he never asked us to sacrifice what we had most dear and precious? Doesn't he ask us to be faithful to the covenant made with Him?

### **Struggle with God, and He will bless you**

Before analyzing the New Testament texts that describe Christ the Savior as “son of Abraham” and us, Christians, as “sons of Abraham by faith,” I would like to analyze how the patriarch Abraham encountered God, because this man – with the help of the Most High – broke the string of misfortunes that befell him and his family, becoming for many a “source of blessing” (Gen 12:3).

The Book of Genesis presents Abraham as a prophet and a man open to the sacred. Still, he had no children and no hope of ever having any: “Behold, I die childless, and the steward of my house is Eliezer of Damascus” (Gen 15:2). Thus began his pilgrimage or journey through the Fertile Crescent, accompanied only by a promise that seemed rhetorical and unlikely: “Look up to heaven and count the stars, if you can count them! [...] So many will be your descendants” (Gen 15:5).

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews states that Abraham showed faith in God because, when he was called, he obeyed and “went out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance, and he went out not knowing whither he went” (Heb 11:8).

The author of Genesis states that “Abram believed the Lord” and “it was counted to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6). This is the well-known verse so highly regarded by the Apostle Paul, who saw in it the core or essence of his theology of justification by faith, a theology that he would develop in the Epistles to the Galatians and to the Romans (Dizionario di Paolo edelle sue Lettere 1999, 2).

Faith is an act of courage and an act of trust; the Hebrew verb that expresses this act of trust, which has become our “Amen”, conveys stability, the act of relying on someone or something, and the complete entrustment of a person or a project. Therefore, believing is also a risky act of trust, because the one in whom you have put your trust (man, not God) can disappoint you <sup>[5]</sup>.

Therefore, faith can also be seen as a risky act because God escapes our senses and powers; for this reason, faith is not entirely free from the threat of fear and suspicion. The glimmers of light of faith are always accompanied (like a shadow) by darkness in an uninterrupted counterpoint.

In a famous work entitled “Does God Exist?” (*Existiert Gott?*), its author, Hans Küng, stated that faith:

“Does not guarantee absolute certainty: in the act of faith, one does not start from a demonstration or a logical explanation of the existence of God to then arrive at a firm conviction. A trusting attitude is not preceded by rational knowledge. The reality of God’s presence is not proposed to our reason with indisputable authority. We are talking, rather, about an inner rationality that legitimizes certainty.”

The statement that “Abram believed the Lord” (Gen 15:6) is followed by an interesting and suggestive episode that shows us that Abram, however, needed more than a word – be it from the Lord – to be convinced that he had not followed sick imaginations. Abram dared to ask the Lord: “Lord God, (after) how will I know that I will inherit this land (of the Promise)?” (Gen 15:8). Other questions raised by some protagonists of the history of salvation in the Law of Grace come to mind: “How will I know this? For I am old and my wife is well advanced in years” (Lk 1:18) or “How will this be, since I do not know man?” (Lk 1:34).

And the Lord offers his servant a test after, beforehand, asking him for a truculent ritual (a kind of oath or covenant). At sunset, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, darkness and fear seized him (Gen 15:12). The theophany of the Lord involves bringing man into contact with that “*mistero tremendum*”, and sleep (dream) and night vision are the symbolic representation of the need for a different way to meet the Most High (Ravasi 2020, 68-69.).

It seems that the Lord accepted the challenge of His servant and committed Himself to a unilateral and gratuitous covenant (Moldovan 2019, 204-12); the time had not yet come for the Lord to ask something of His servant, but this will happen soon (Gen 17 – circumcision). Man has no choice but to accept the Lord’s covenant (and His promise) through faith or to reject it through distrust and unbelief. The reasons for faith are ultimately based on the Lord’s faithfulness to His word and to His promises.

We often hear God – in the pages of Holy Scripture – swearing by Himself (Gen 22:16; Ps 109:4; Jer 51:14; Am 6:8; Heb 7:21).

At that time, numerous lineages and the inheritance of a land were only “promises” or “promises” that were anchored exclusively in the word (oath) of the Lord: “To your descendants I will give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates” (Gen 15:18).

Abram had before him a distant horizon to which he would head, traveling a long and tiring itinerary that represents a paradigm of the act of faith. This act depends exclusively on the promise of the Lord.

The French theologian Oscar Cullmann said that “to believe is to abstract from myself and contemplate an event that does not require my collaboration”. Abram collaborated with God: the ritual he prepared (described in detail in chapter 15 of the Book of Genesis) would represent the occasion of the divine theophany. The act of faith does not mean “sacred magic”, and man is not a puppet moved by an implacable destiny. There is a famous phrase attributed to the Sufi Muslim mystic Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273): “We, O Lord, are the lutes; You are the singer. Are you not the One Who sighs while singing? We are the flutes, but the breath in them is Yours, O God! We are the mountains, but the echo that is heard in the valleys is Yours, O Lord!”. This oriental vision of Rumi is rejected by the authors of Holy Scripture, who describe man as an active partner of the Lord in the act of faith.

In the life of the patriarch Abraham, the act of faith managed to reach the deepest, absolute and tragic stage, being devoid of any human, rational or religious support: his son by promise (Isaac), the one who represented the tangible proof of the possibility of a numerous lineage, had to be sacrificed, so that the biblical patriarch could give up even the support of paternity and no longer have even the reasons of flesh and blood to believe in the fulfillment of the promise that the Lord had made to him (Gen 12:1-3), but only those of the divine word. This, according to biblical scholars, is the reason God asked His servant to destroy the human bond “father-son”. After the test was over, Abraham would receive Isaac back not as a son, but as a divine “promise,” as a free and absolute grace; this was also earlier (son of a promise), but now (after the test of Abraham’s faith) this fact is as evident as can be. It is no coincidence that the biblical author of the book of Genesis, at the end of this dramatic episode that took place on Mount Moriah, will resume the blessing that the Lord gave to the patriarch Abraham at the beginning: “I will bless you with my blessing and multiply your descendants as the stars of the sky

and as the sand on the seashore [...] and through your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice” (Gen 22:17-18).

### **The Son and Sons of Abraham in the Law of Grace**

As we have seen, the name and figure of the patriarch Abraham appear in several places in the New Testament writings. The first texts to which I will refer are contained in the Gospel of the “infancy” of Jesus, in both its variants (Mt 1-2 and Lk 1-2).

The first New Testament text that makes a precise reference to the patriarch Abraham is the very text that opens the collection of books of the New Testament (the Gospel according to Matthew): it is the text from Matthew 1:1: “The book of the generation (of the birth) of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

The title “son of Abraham” appears only here in the Gospel of Matthew. Its meaning is not primarily a Christological one, unlike the other title with which the Savior Christ is indicated, that of “son of David” (from the same verse), which clearly has a Christological meaning; “Son of David” is a Christological title frequently used in the pages of the Holy Gospel (Mt 9:27; 15:22; 20:30; 21:9). “Son of Abraham” indicates, primarily, Christ’s belonging to the people of Israel, according to the prophetic texts evoked above in Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-6 and 17:1-21. However, we cannot wholly exclude the messianic dimension implicit in the promise that God made to the patriarch Abraham. This promise would be fulfilled within his lineage, as it appears in apocryphal literature (despite later Christian interventions on these texts) <sup>[6]</sup>.

To understand the importance of a genealogy in ancient societies, we should leave aside our modern mentality a little, because today we have multiple possibilities to find out the identity of a person, to know their roots, their social and family traditions, and try to think about the condition in which the people of that time were, deprived of modern means, people who entrusted their past, family affairs or the ties of the clan to which they belonged to memory and tradition. In such a cultural and religious context, genealogy had a decisive and indispensable importance. It had a mnemonic function, but also an ethno-legal purpose, which allowed the preservation (or conservation) of the memory of the nation or tribe to which someone belonged, to demonstrate someone’s belonging to a particular family or social group, or when it came to claiming the right to a territory or property.

As it is an instrument based on orality, we should not expect historical accuracy from a genealogy, especially since those historical circumstances “generally preferred a

qualitative history to a statistical or documentary history” (Ramlot 1964, 53). Biblical genealogy represents a special literary genre that must be understood and respected, avoiding recourse to criteria that are foreign to it and that hinder the understanding of its message: “Biblical genealogy lives in symbiosis with history: it is not conceived as the main means of historical transmission; in fact, however, it could be one of its vehicles. Historical reliability must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis” (Orsatti 1980, 30-3).

To correctly understand a biblical genealogy, it is imperative to determine the purpose for which it was developed and transmitted to posterity. Its form also depends on its purpose or finality. The main characteristic of biblical genealogy, unlike that found in ancient cultures and even in biblical Judaism, is theological finality. In the pages of Holy Scripture, genealogy is at the service of God’s plan of salvation and the transmission of His blessing from generation to generation: “Thus, each generation of people bears the seal of the blessing of God, who is present in history and Who travels alongside them” (Kazhuthadiyil 2009, 92), as he once traveled with Patriarch Abraham.

For our study, it is of particular importance that the biblical story about Noah is introduced with a genealogy of Adam: “The Book of the Names of Adam” (Gen 5:1); the story about Abraham is also preceded by a genealogy: “Now this is the history of the family of Shem” (Gen 11:10-26); The Books of Chronicles or Paralipomena present us with genealogies of the kings of Israel and Judah (1 Chr 1-2).

These genealogies indeed served Saint Matthew when he considered presenting the Savior’s human origins; moreover, we could say that, by beginning his Gospel with a genealogy, the evangelist sought to place his story within the continuity of the cycles of biblical history. The same phenomenon can be observed in Hellenistic and Roman biographies, which, in most cases, begin with the presentation of the ancestors of the story’s main character (Davies and Allison 1988, 187).

In a very special way, the “header” of the Gospel of Matthew – *Βίβλος γενέσεως* [Heb. *sēfer tôledôt*], placed emphatically at the beginning of the writing, and which marks a new start by telling the story of the birth of the Savior, refers to the text in Gn 2:4: “*Βίβλος γενέσεως* [Heb. *sēfer tôledôt*] of the heavens and the earth from their creation...” and to that in Gen 5:1: “*Βίβλος γενέσεως* of Adam.” The Savior Christ appears as a “point of arrival,” but also as a “recapitulation” of world history. Professor Ulrich Luz called the genealogy of the Savior a “stenogram of the history of Israel” (Luz 2006, I, 148); moreover, the genealogy is a “theology of history” that found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

If in the old genealogies the ancestor was the one who conferred prestige and importance on his descendants, in the Matthewian genealogy of the Savior, the emphasis is placed, at its beginning and at its end, on the Descendant who confers theological meaning and finality on His ancestors and the entire history of the biblical people. Not only do the patriarch Abraham and King David derive their importance from Christ, but all the patriarchal and royal generations, as well as the post-exilic ones (Mt 1:17).

In this way, the evangelist showed us that Christ represents the fulfillment of the Lord's promises made to His chosen ones, starting with the patriarch Abraham. With Christ and with His incarnation in history, eternity flows into time, the last phase of history (eschatology) begins: Jesus Christ is the "arrival point" of the messianic expectation; He is "Immanuel," the One who is with us and remains with us until the end of the ages. Christ came for all the descendants of Abraham, but not only for them (that is, not only for those who are of his seed), but also for those born "of his faith," given that God has power to raise "children of Abraham even from stones" (Mt 3:9).

The genealogy of the Savior, placed by Saint Matthew as the "incipit" of his Gospel, is not only intentional but also has overwhelming theological importance. Every ancient writer tried to express, from the very beginning of his work, his intentions and the purpose pursued <sup>[7]</sup>, to direct the readers' attention to that purpose.

Perhaps some exegetes exaggerated when they said that the Matthewic genealogy was "a miniature Gospel," but we cannot deny its importance compared to the rest of the Gospel.

The formula at the beginning of the Gospel – *Βίβλος γενέσεως* (Heb. *sēfer tôledôt*) has been much discussed among exegetes, who have interpreted it in different ways. The most obvious and straightforward meaning of the word *Βίβλος* is that of "book" (translation adopted by most exegetes). Still, there is no shortage of those who translate the word *Βίβλος* with the "document" of the birth, emphasizing the connection intended by Saint Matthew between the genealogy and the pericope that relates how Christ was conceived and born (Brown 1981, 76-8).

Joachim Gnilka translated the term *Βίβλος* with "certificate" or "attestation" of the origin of Jesus Christ, linking verse 1 to the genealogy and the two introductory chapters (Gnilka 1990, 29-30). Ulrich Luz reaffirms the usual or ordinary meaning of "book", being, in his opinion, "almost impossible to have at the beginning of a book a word or expression whose meaning is that of "writing", "document" or "testimony", even if we are talking about a text with a Hebrew background.

Even the second term of the expression *γενέσεως* has been translated in several ways: “origin,” “genesis,” “generation,” “genealogy,” “birth,” but always with strict reference to the genealogy that follows.

The first direct reference to the phrase *Βίβλος γενέσεως* “Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” refers to genealogy; the reference of the first verse to genealogy is confirmed by v. 18, which repeats the words of verse 1.

Starting from this observation, we can develop or amplify the meaning of the expression *Βίβλος γενέσεως*, seeing in Mt 1:1 the “beginning” (incipit) of the first two chapters of the Gospel, but also of the initial section: Mt 1:1 – 4:12, but also of the entire Matthewic work, and – why not? – of the new creation inaugurated by Christ the Savior. We need to consider the fact that every writer is meticulous about how he begins his work, showing – right from its first lines – its density and scope.

The center of gravity of the first verse (Mt 1:1) and of the entire genealogy is the Savior Christ: He is the object and protagonist of *Βίβλος γενέσεως*; all the previous blessings of God and all His promises are directed to Christ; to Christ all attention is directed, and to Him all the previous blessings are directed.

Verse 1, therefore, Christologically orients the entire genealogy, the “infancy” Gospel, and the whole of the Matthew Gospel.

For the Savior Christ, having His human origin in Abraham represents the sign of His belonging to the community or people of the Covenant and the condition for being recognized as “Savior of His people” (Mt 1:21; Lk 1:31-33; Jn 4:22; Heb 2:16-17). Thus, the title “son of Abraham” indicates the Savior Christ as “son and savior of Israel.” Still, the same title lends itself to a broader interpretation, since it is in God’s power to raise children of Abraham even from stones (Mt 3:9).

The Evangelist Matthew emphasizes through the expression “son of Abraham” the universality of salvation and the entry into the promise made to the biblical patriarch of all peoples: “And I say to you that many from the east and the west will come and sit down at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 8:11-12). At the end of the first Gospel, as a seal, Christ the Savior will command His apostles to make disciples in all nations (Mt 28:18-20). God calls all people to salvation, a fact indicated by Saint Matthew and the episode of the Magi from the East (Valentini 2013, 51).

Saint Matthew's vision is much broader than that expressed in the genealogy of the Savior. Still, it is necessary to emphasize the fact that, through Matthew's narration of the "Christ event, "we are dealing with a deepening, a development, and an essential change in the significance of the Abrahamic lineage of Jesus" (Luz 2006, 151). Although the "header" of the Gospel is closely linked to the genealogy of the Savior, it has an overwhelming importance – both in perspective and in retrospect – being a kind of "summary" of the entire Matthewian theology (Gnilka 1990, 30).

If, in the Gospel heading, Abraham is the last name, the same name will be the first at the beginning of the Savior's genealogical tree, serving as a kind of "linking word" between the Gospel title and the genealogical list of Jesus. Abraham is at the origin of the Jewish nation and of the biblical people, and, as such, he is the ancestor of both David and Christ. I do not think it is unimportant to recall here that, according to a tradition, Abraham was a king <sup>[8]</sup>, and this fact could have suggested to Saint Matthew the idea of starting the royal genealogy of the Savior precisely with the patriarch Abraham, in whose lineage King David would later be found (Valentini 2013, 53).

As I have already said, in the pages of the Old Testament – without considering the texts of the Book of Genesis – the patriarch Abraham is rarely mentioned. When this happens, the biblical patriarch is discussed together with his descendants: Isaac and Jacob/Israel (Wénin 2015, 69). The figure of the patriarch Abraham acquires greater importance in the sacred texts written during the Babylonian exile and in the post-exilic period, when an attempt was made to restore Judaism after the tragic event of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and after the return from Babylon. The recourse to Abraham was necessary because it highlighted the gratuitousness of Israel's choice and, consequently, laid the foundations for a new beginning, despite the loss of the Promised Land and national identity.

The great Moses, being a prophet, foresaw the infidelity that the people of Israel would show to their God and its consequence: the loss of the land and the holy place (Deut 4:23-32). If the Covenant of Mount Sinai, repeatedly broken, did not seem to give Israel the feeling of a lasting bond with its God, the covenant concluded by the Lord with the patriarch Abraham (Gen. ch. 15), since it was a unilateral oath of God, acquired an overwhelming importance; This explains the more frequent references to this biblical figure in the second part of the book of the prophet Isaiah: Israel is "the servant of the Lord" (Ebed-Yahweh), chosen by the Lord and "the seed of Abraham, My beloved. I have taken you (a clear reference to the text in Gen 12:1-3) from the farthest

ends of the earth, and called you from its remotest corners, and said to you: You are My servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off” (Is 41:8-9) or “Look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who bore you in pain. For I called him alone, I blessed him and multiplied him” (Is 51:2).

The song of the Virgin Mary (Lk 1:46-55) also follows this line, presenting the patriarch Abraham to us in the context of the history of salvation (which began precisely with the choice of this Aramaean) and continued with all the subsequent interventions of God in favor of the people born from Abraham’s loins (Valentini 2017, 199). Like Saint Matthew (1:1), Saint Luke – in the song of the Virgin Mary – mentions two prominent personalities of biblical history: “He has supported Jacob/Israel, his servant (here we have a communal sense, indicating the entire people), to remember his mercy. As he spoke to our fathers – and here the ancestor of all is mentioned -, to Abraham <sup>[9]</sup> and to his seed (descendant) forever” (Lk 1:54-55). The connection with the patriarch Abraham, the friend and servant of God, uniquely qualifies his seed (or offspring), which was born from his loins and belongs to him, as appears in the use of the possessive pronoun *αὐτοῦ*. This belonging represents the essential and identifying element of the people of the Covenant in relation to God, to whom Abraham showed faith, and, precisely because of his faith, he was ordained “father of a numerous offspring”. We cannot think of Abraham and the promise that the Lord made to him, without thinking of the offspring of the biblical patriarch, who is the object of divine blessing.

### **Jesus’ Controversies with the Jews at the Feast of Tabernacles**

Chapter 8 of the Gospel of John presents the teaching shared by Christ the Savior to the Jews at the Feast of Tabernacles: “And about the middle of the feast, Jesus went up into the temple and taught” (Jn 7:14). In the second part of His discourse, the patriarch Abraham is the reference character, from beginning to end. However, his role in the history of salvation is framed in a broader picture, dominated by the “paternal” figure, not so much as a “father”, but as an “ancestor”, from whom his descendants could learn how to be and behave (Dufour 2007, 577).

The Evangelist John first states that “many of the Jews believed in Jesus” (Jn 8:30), and it seems that what Jesus says next is addressed precisely to those Jews who believed in Him. However, this group of Jews favorable to the Savior does not seem to be very clearly distinguished from His declared opponents. When He told them that “the knowledge of the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:32), they replied: “We are Abraham’s

seed and have never been slaves to anyone” (Jn 8:33). We do not know precisely to which group of Jews the Lord is addressing His words, given that His audience has not changed. The misunderstanding on this point is further accentuated because, in v. 45, Jesus states (with a hint of reproach): “You do not believe Me.”

Thus, from v. 31 to v. 45, we have the first development of the theme, starting with the expression “to believe in.” Verse 46 takes up this expression (in a negative sense) and serves as a transition to a second argument (Jn 8:46-59), centered on the person of the Savior Christ.

Thus, the text begins (in v. 31) with an invitation addressed to Jesus’ disciple: “he who follows me” (Jn 8:12), who is now invited to “remain in his word.” The disciple of Christ must “keep his word” (Jn 8:51), just as Christ Himself “keeps the word of the Father who sent him into the world” (Jn 8:55).

The question implied in the passage we are considering (Jn 8:31-58) is the following: “Who can claim divine filiation?” or “Who can call himself a son of God?” If in the famous hymnic Prologue, the evangelist affirmed that “to those who received Christ and believed in his name, the Lord gave power to become children of God” (Jn 1:12) – to those who were “born of God” –, in chapter 8, the theme of birth from God is resumed. Along with the blessing and promise the Lord shared with the patriarch Abraham, the Lord showed His people (descendants of Abraham) that He is the only true God and that, precisely in this capacity, He proposes a covenant to the descendants of the biblical patriarch. The bond that the Lord wants to propose to Israel is often framed in the binomial “father/son” or “parent/child,” language that denotes closeness and intimacy in a mutual relationship of love. For the Jews who listen to the word of Christ and who “believe in Him,” the word that He addresses to them obliges them to fulfill the truth, a service on which their eternal destiny depends. But did they understand this?

According to the theology of the biblical prophets, the “full” or “perfect” knowledge of God will be the gift par excellence that the Lord will offer to the world in the “fullness of time” <sup>[10]</sup>. Jesus announces in the future: “If you remain in my word, you will know the truth” (Jn 8:31-32a).

Since the Old Testament – starting with the patriarch Abraham – God has addressed the people of the Covenant, and now Christ reveals to the Jews what form of communion the Lord has called the descendants of Abraham to; not receiving (or accepting) Christ is equivalent to belonging only in an illusory manner to the seed of

Abraham: to be the sons or seed of Abraham is comparable to living as Abraham lived, following him in his example of faith.

“We have one Father, God” – The Jews said to Christ (Jn 8:41); in fact, the Savior knowingly led them to this statement, which represents the core or center of His debate or controversy with the Jews. In reality, the attitude towards Christ represents the test or proof of divine filiation: although you are “Abraham’s seed” – Christ tells the Jews – yet “you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you” (Jn 8:37); although you claim Abrahamic descent, yet you do not do the deeds of your ancestor, Abraham (Jn 8:39). In this way, by presenting to us the attitude and teaching of Christ, an expectation is created in His audience, and what He is about to say to the Jews will obviously shock them: “You are of your father the devil” (Jn 8:44). The accusation is terrible, but it is also motivated: “Because you cannot obey My word” and “Now you seek to kill Me.”

After this terrible statement that certainly shocked and angered them, only Jesus remains on the scene of the story: “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it and was glad” (Jn 8:56).

The biblical prophets drew the attention of the people of Israel that the promises that the Lord had made to them in the past and the Holy Place in Jerusalem had become for them a kind of “talismán” that protected them – supposedly – from any danger or threat from the Lord (Jer 7); the Abrahamic lineage, in the ethnic sense, ended up bitterly deceiving the Jews, instilling in their minds a kind of deceptive security and a foolish sense of superiority (Moldovan 2018, 47). The fracture between faith and deeds is a theme dear to the biblical prophets <sup>[11]</sup>. Even the rabbinical texts of the first century denounce the same incoherence among Abraham’s descendants, who lack the humble heart of their ancestor (Strack and Billerbeck 1924, 523). The unbelieving generation of Jews contemporary with the Savior has nothing to do with the posterity of the biblical patriarch, even if, ethnically, they are the “seed of Abraham.”

The issue of Abraham’s true lineage was discussed at length in early Christianity: the call to repentance addressed by the Forerunner of the Lord to his contemporaries – and especially to the leaders of the people (the Pharisees and Sadducees) bears witness to this: “Therefore bear fruit worthy of repentance. And do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you that God is able from these stones to raise children to Abraham” (Mt 3:8-9). If the unbelieving generation contemporary to the Savior boasts of their Abrahamic lineage, the Lord denounces the inconsistency of the

sons of the biblical patriarch: “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham” (Jn 8:39).

In His discussion with the religious leaders of the Jews, Jesus wants to show them that the real problem is not their descent from Abraham; in fact, the Lord does not deny this aspect: “I know that you are Abraham’s seed” (Jn 8:37), but the problem is their relationship with God and with His Messenger: the refusal or rejection of Christ, Who “came forth from God” (Jn 16:30), clearly shows that their relationship with God is compromised.

By faith, Abraham rejoiced fully because he contemplated the fulfillment of the promise that the Lord had made to him: the salvation itself, the prefiguration of which was the birth of Isaac (the son according to the promise). The words: “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it (by faith) and was glad” (Jn 8:56) represent a splendid affirmation of the unity of divine Revelation that culminated in Christ, for the fulfillment of the promise was already contained in its formulation (Gn 12:1-3).

### **Patriarch Abraham – the father of those who are saved by faith**

The Holy Apostle Paul will clearly and unequivocally state that the divine filiation that Christ procured for us through His saving work fulfilled and perfected the choice of Abraham and the promise that the Lord made to him (Gal 3:16): the disciple of Christ (the Christian), whatever his origin (Jewish or pagan) is the beneficiary of the blessing granted by God to Abraham, the father of those who are saved through faith (Dufour 2007, 579-80).

Saint Paul, who was “a Jew by nature” (Gal 2:15), had received rabbinical training, being a disciple of the famous rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 5:34). Although this training sometimes shines through in his exegesis of Old Testament texts, his interpretation is nevertheless entirely new, since he reads and explains the Holy Scriptures from a Christian perspective (Mihoc 1983, 267). Christ the Savior is the center of his theology and the permanent point of reference of his exegesis.

The text of Gal 3:6-18 provides one of the most interesting examples of Pauline exegesis or interpretation of the Old Testament (Davies 1980). The scriptural argument for the Pauline principle of justification by faith revolves around the figure of the patriarch Abraham, whose name appears seven times in this passage. This biblical figure is essential to St. Paul’s argument as the father of Israel (Schreiner 2022, 193).

According to the book of Genesis, Abraham is the first Jew (Gen 14:13) and the father of the Jews (Is 51:2; 3 Mc 6:3), that is, of the circumcised. Saint Paul's argument proves that, from a spiritual point of view, the patriarch Abraham is the father of all those saved by faith, regardless of their religious background (whether Jewish or pagan). Abraham received God's blessing before the Law was given (in the time of Moses); Abraham showed faith in the Lord, and his faith was counted to him as righteousness. Therefore, Saint Paul states, the true sons of Abraham receive God's blessing as the biblical patriarch received it, not from the works of the Law (which was not in force at that time), but through faith in Jesus Christ.

The patriarch Abraham was blessed by faith, and the Scripture says that in Abraham all nations will be blessed. The Pauline principle of justification by faith thus finds its verification and confirmation in the Old Testament itself (Mihoc 1983, 268). Abraham preceded the Christian believers in the "obedience of faith." The apostle Paul quotes word for word the text of Gen 15:6 (according to the Septuagint): "And Abram believed the Lord; and it was counted to him for righteousness." Abraham's faith was based on the conviction that God was powerful enough to fulfill what he had promised. In fact, what had the Lord pledged to him? That He would raise numerous offspring for him, even though he was old and his wife was barren. Abram believed God at his word—against all hope—and, as a result, he was declared or counted righteous before God. Thus, the conclusion cannot be other than that formulated by Saint Paul in Gal 3:6-7: "Just as Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, know therefore that those who are of faith, the same are children of Abraham." Since Abraham was justified by faith, it follows that those who believe, those who have faith, are members of Abraham's family.

However, the apostle Paul also presents a biblical argument, citing Gen 12:3 and Gen 18:18, which state that, through Abraham, all the families of the earth will be blessed. It is important to emphasize that Saint Paul quotes the text of Gen 12:3 after quoting the text of Gen 15:6. Therefore, the text of Gen 15:6 functions as a lens through which the text of Gen 12:3 is interpreted. Indeed, in Gal 3:8 the apostle Paul considers the promise of universal blessing (of all the families of the earth) to be the gospel, and he interprets this blessing in terms of justification by faith. The blessing that the Lord granted to the patriarch Abraham cannot be separated from those who are the children of Abraham. For this reason, in the next verse, Saint Paul draws the natural conclusion: "Those who

are of faith – Christian believers – are blessed together with faithful Abraham” (Gal 3:9) (Schreiner 2022, 194).

The statement in Gal 3:7 appears to be a thesis: those who believe are sons of Abraham. Perhaps, through this statement, Saint Paul is combating the claim of the Judaizers who preached in Galatia: that Christians from among the pagans could enter the “seed” or “descendants” of the patriarch Abraham by practicing circumcision and observing the Law of Moses. The Apostle Paul is categorical: the only way to become a son of Abraham is the way of faith in Christ, because salvation in Christ, heralded by the Holy Gospel, is the very fulfillment of the promises made by God to Abraham and his offspring (Gal 3:16), the “Descendant” being Christ, the son of Abraham (Mt 1:1) (Mihoc 1983, 270).

The Savior Christ is the descendant par excellence of Abraham (Gal 3:16), and faith is the criterion of belonging to the lineage of Abraham; “those of faith” are “the seed of Abraham” (Gal 3:29; Rom 4:13.16.18). Even in the pages of the Old Testament, the term “son” was used not only in a natural (genetic) sense, but also in a spiritual sense (Ps 34:12; Pr 1:10; 2:1; 3:1). The quality of “son” is intrinsically linked to the idea of inheritance (Gn 15:2-3; 21:10). Therefore, Saint Paul will continue to show that the sons of faith (Christian believers) are the heirs of the blessing that God gave to the patriarch Abraham.

The apostle Paul identifies God’s blessing to the patriarch Abraham with justification by faith. The blessing the Lord once gave to the biblical patriarch was fulfilled at the coming of faith, for through faith, Christian believers receive “the promise of the Spirit” (Gal 3:14).

What is the connection between faith and the blessing promised by God to Abraham? Saint Paul’s argument is based on the faith of the biblical patriarch. Abraham’s condition, justified before God by faith, did not depend on the covenant concluded later (Gen 17) or on the observance of the Law (which was not given at that time). As such, the promise made by God to Abraham does not depend on the Law: the promise that Abraham would have numerous offspring in the future is not limited to his physical offspring (according to the flesh). Still, it is extended to his spiritual offspring (that is, to those who believe or are saved by faith). The transmission of the effects of the divine promise to Abraham’s descendants could not depend on the Mosaic Law, and Saint Paul was convinced – although he was “a Jew by nature” – that the Law of Moses could not be the norm or condition for the justification of people. If the Law were enough, then what

would have been the role of faith? The Mosaic Law could not determine who would be the heir of God's promise (Fitzmyer 1999, 458).

The justification of people by the grace of God and by faith in Jesus Christ does not abrogate the Mosaic Law. Still, it validates it because, for Saint Paul, the principle of justification by faith has a solid foundation in the Old Testament. The Pauline argument is based exclusively on Scripture (especially the Book of Genesis). The Apostle Paul appeals to the inspired word of God, accepted as such by both Jews and Christians, as a formulation of divine truth.

Abraham was found righteous because of his faith and considered by God Himself as "the father of many nations"; not even his advanced age and Sarah's sterility constituted an obstacle to Abraham's faith, and when the Lord God asked him for a radical act of faith (the sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah) he knew how to hope in the word of the Lord and not to waver in his faith. Abraham's example shows us how we should interpret what God accomplished in His Son, Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul extracts the following message from these examples: God's words preserved in the Book of Genesis about Abraham's faith and his righteousness were written for the believers of future generations: Christian believers are those who put their hope in God Who brought the world into existence and Who redeemed it through His Son, raising Him from the dead and making Him "the beginning of the resurrection of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:20, 23).

The classic texts of the Pauline argument for justification by faith—Gal 3 and Rom 4—are not the only ones in which the patriarch Abraham is mentioned. In other texts, the apostle Paul presents himself as "a descendant of Abraham." When God asked him to listen to Sarah's advice and cast out Hagar and her son, he added these words: "... listen to her [Sarah's] voice; for it is through Isaac (the son of promise) that your descendants will be called" (Gen 21:12).

Starting from the idea that the word of God remains forever, Saint Paul argues – in chapters 9-11 of the Epistle to the Romans – that "not all who are of Israel are Israelites" and that "not all because they are descendants of Abraham are they children", for "it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants" (Rom 9:6-8). Through Isaac, the patriarch Abraham was given a numerous lineage, as promised (Dizionario di Paolo edelle sue Lettere 1999, 13).

In Rom 11:1, Saint Paul defines (or presents) himself as an “Israelite” and as a “seed of Abraham.” If we consider the previous argument (Rom 9-10), we can believe and affirm that the apostle is not referring here to his Jewish heritage in an ethnic sense. The hardening of Israel made possible the salvation of the Gentiles. The mistake of the Jews represented “the wealth of the world and of the Gentiles” (Rom 11:12), who were “grafted” into the natural olive tree, because of faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 11:20). In the Pauline argument the “hardening” of the Jews occurred in the case of the majority of them, but not in the case of all the Jews; quoting the text from 1Kgs 19:18 “I have reserved for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal,” the apostle Paul states that “a remnant chosen by grace” or “a faithful remnant” (Rom 11:5) received Christ and the salvation brought by Him to the whole world, so that, “as regards the Gospel [most Jews] are enemies, but as regards the [divine] election they are beloved for the fathers’ sake, for the gifts (divine promises) and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:28-29).

According to Pauline theology, Jews in the ethnic sense – although they were cut off from the natural olive tree – will be reinstated among the descendants of Abraham, not because of their fidelity to the Mosaic Law but through their coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

### **Instead of conclusions**

It is interesting and suggestive that Saint Paul – “a Jew by nature” –, responding to his opponents (the Judaizers), defines himself as “the seed of Abraham”: “Are they Jews? I am a Jew too. Are they Israelites? I am an Israelite too. Are they the seed of Abraham? I am too” (2 Cor 11:22). However, in this self-characterization the apostle is not thinking only of his ethnic descent, but especially of his belonging to Christ. Professor Ralph P. Martin believes that Saint Paul applies this term and this status to himself “as an honorific sign with which he emphasizes his new Christian identity before his opponents” (Martin 1986, 375). Not coincidentally, in the following passage<sup>[12]</sup> (2 Cor 11:22-28), the apostle will present to us his sufferings or tribulations in the service of the Gospel of Christ. These sufferings represent “the seal of his apostleship in the Lord” (1 Cor 9:2).

Our faith is a perpetual conquest; we must work on its construction every day. Faith indicates the permanent status of the authentic Christian and of any person who has a creed. Faith is not a reality acquired once and for all, but a fragile conquest that

must always be protected or defended, because it is constantly threatened by doubt and skepticism, but also by superficiality; our faith is always “in the works” or “in the making”; it is always “under construction”, both at the personal and community levels (Moldovan 2022, 15).

Faith must be modeled after the example of Abraham, “the father of the faithful”; it is and will remain, until “the vision as in a mirror or in a riddle” (1 Cor 13:12) passes, an act of courage rooted or grounded, from the beginning, in the word of God, and “in the fullness of time” (Gal 4:4) in the word of Christ.

### Notes

[1] The first Christians interpreted the Old Testament texts or stories “in a Christological key”. It is very likely that the “Magnificat”, for example, the song of the Holy Virgin (Lk 1:46-55) was originally a Judeo-Christian song of praise and thanksgiving for the salvation achieved by the Lord in favor of “His poor” who represented the “rest” or “remnant” of faithful “chosen by grace” of Israel (Rom 11:5). It is possible that this hymn – put by Saint Luke into the mouth of the Mother of God – was born and sung within the community of the “Poor of Yahweh” (Anawim). Several indications lead us to this hypothesis: the hymn speaks of a salvation already achieved; it pays special attention to the figure of the patriarch Abraham and his descendants, using the expression “our fathers”. All this indicates the Judeo-Christian origin of this song (George 1978, 442-5).

[2] From the perspective of the New Testament authors – especially Saint Luke – the promise that God once made to the patriarch Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) goes beyond the borders of Israel. Saint John the Baptist will speak in a new way about the lineage of the patriarch Abraham: “Therefore, produce fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father!’ For I tell you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Lk 3:8) (Moldovan 2011, 229).

[3] This term refers to a phenomenon that emerged in the 6th century BC – more precisely, after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile (538/536 BC) – also known as the “Second Temple era”. Other specialists date the birth of this phenomenon to the beginning of the Christian era, or even to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD (Martini 2022, 21).

[4] The wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible (Book of Job, Book of Psalms, Book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs) does not speak of Abraham.

[5] In the pulpit prayer, speaking to God, we ask Him not to abandon those who have put their hope in Him.

[6] See, for example, Testament of Levi 8, 15. The text of Jer 33:21-22 and the Targum

on Ps 88:4 associate the promise made to the patriarch Abraham and his descendants (Gen 17:7) with the promise made by the Lord to King David and his seed (2 Sam 7:12). The presentation of Jesus as “son of David” and as “son of Abraham” (from Mt 1:1) could indicate the traditional equation: seed of Abraham–seed of David–Messiah. (Davies and Allison 1988, 159.)

[7] The other evangelists did the same (each in their own way): Mk 1:1; Lk 1:1-4 and Jn 1:1-18.

[8] Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 108b; Gen. Rab at Gn 22:1; The Greek historian Nicolaus of Damascus, in the fourth book of his Histories, speaks of Abraham as follows: „Abraham reigned in Damascus, who is said to have come here with a foreign army from the land of the Chaldeans, located above Babylon” (Josephus Flavius 2000, 31).

[9] In Judaism, the patriarch Abraham became a national hero, and apocryphal literature associated extraordinary stories with his name (Book of Jubilees 11,18-22; Pesach 118a; Sanhedrin 108b). For the place and importance of Abraham in Judaism and the New Testament, see Jeremias (1968, 23-6).

[10] See the texts in Jer 31:34; Is 54:13; Sol 3:8-9.

[11] See the following texts: Am 9:10; Jer 9:24; Mic 3:11; Ezk 22:28.

[12] Called by exegetes “Saint Paul’s palmares”.

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