

Marian Studies

Volume 55 *The Immaculate Conception: Calling and Destiny*

Article 10

2004

Kecharitomene (Lk. 1:28) in the Light of Gen. 18:16-33: A Matter of Quantity

François Rossier
University of Dayton

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rossier, François (2004) "Kecharitomene (Lk. 1:28) in the Light of Gen. 18:16-33: A Matter of Quantity," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 55, Article 10.

Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol55/iss1/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marian Library Publications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marian Studies by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

KECHARITOMENE (LK. 1:28)
IN THE LIGHT OF GEN. 18:16–33:
A MATTER OF QUANTITY

*François Rossier, S.M.**

Introduction

In two detailed articles on the meaning of the word κεχαριτωμένη,¹ Ignace de la Potterie studied the implications of the use of this term applied by Luke to Mary in the account of the Annunciation. In a note, he warns his readers against an excessively dogmatic reading of this text, referring to a remark of Joseph Coppens that “Luke 1:28 is a passage that some claim—but wrongly—can be used to support practically all the privileges with which faith and theology adorn Mary.”²

I propose to explore some new ways to understand κεχαριτωμένη based on certain elements in the Book of Genesis, specifically on Genesis 18:17–33, read as a response to Genesis 3–11, in the perspective of an explanation of “original sin” that has been developed in particular by Luis Ladaria.³ We will try to see in what way the possibilities that are opened—and not necessarily imposed—by the text of Genesis 18:17–33 can stimulate or simply accompany reflection about a biblical theology of the Immaculate Conception.

*Father François Rossier, S.M., teaches for the International Marian Research Institute located at the Marian Library and also for the Religious Studies Department of the University of Dayton.

¹ Ignace de la Potterie, “Κεχαριτωμένη εν Λκ 1,28. Étude philologique,” *Biblica* 68 (1987): 357–382, and his “Κεχαριτωμένη εν Λκ 1,28. Étude exégétique et théologique,” *Biblica* 68 (1987): 480–508.

² De la Potterie, “Κεχαριτωμένη εν Λκ 1,28. Étude philologique,” 363, quoting Joseph Coppens, “La définibilité de l’Assomption,” *ETL* 23 (1947): 16–17.

³ Cf. Luis F. Ladaria, *Teología del pecado original y de la gracia: antropología teológica especial* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1993).

Κεχαριτωμένη

Let us recall that κεχαριτωμένη is a perfect passive feminine participle singular of the causative verb χαριτώ, which is itself derived from the noun χάρις. The noun means "favor," "charm," "benevolence," or even "grace." In the Christian context, this last meaning has had a privileged place, and it is the one that we shall use here. Hence, χαριτώ may be translated as "to show benevolence," "to favor," or again, if we admit that verbs ending in -ώ signify a transformation of the subject,⁴ it could mean "to transform by this favor or this grace." As is normal for a denominative verb, the different acceptances of χαριτώ will derive from the different meanings attributed to χάρις.⁵ For the moment, however, let us leave this aside, for there is no consensus about the matter.

De la Potterie remarks, quite correctly, that the discussion about the interpretation of κεχαριτωμένη is marked by the confessional stance of the ones who comment.⁶ Protestant exegetes—and, during the last two or three decades, some Catholic ones also—are inclined to minimize the importance of the term applied to Mary. Before all else, they see in it a reference to Mary's mission, in other words, to the grace that Mary receives at the moment of the Annunciation to become the mother of the Messiah.⁷ They consider the grace considered here more in its source, while the Catholic or "traditional" interpretation considers this grace from the point of view of its effect on Mary.⁸

⁴ René Laurentin, *Les Évangiles de l'enfance du Christ. Vérité de Noël au-delà des mythes* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1982), 29.

⁵ Michel Cambe, "La χάρις chez Saint Luc. Remarques sur quelques textes, notamment le Κεχαριτωμένη," *Revue biblique* 70 (1963): 194, n. 3.

⁶ De la Potterie, "Κεχαριτωμένη en Lc 1,28. Étude philologique," 359.

⁷ William Manson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), 8; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (1-IX): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 28 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1982), 345; Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Luca. Il Vangelo dei poveri* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1986), 70; Hugues Cousin, *L'Évangile de Luc* (Paris: Centurion; Outremont: Novalis, 1993), 27; or Walter Radl, *Der Ursprung Jesu. Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Lukas 1-2* (Freiburg; New York: Herder, 1996), 321.

⁸ De la Potterie, "Κεχαριτωμένη en Lc 1,28. Étude philologique," 362.

Personally, faithful to the Catholic tradition, I will here consider κεχαριτωμένη from the point of view of its effect on Mary, to see if a biblical theology of the Immaculate Conception can be derived therefrom. There are also some good exegetical reasons for this approach. First of all, κεχαριτωμένη is a passive form, and, like every passive, it calls attention to the subject that undergoes some action and not to the one acting, who, in the present case, is passed over in silence.⁹

Some say that the grace alluded to in Luke 1:28 is found explicated in verse 30, just before the announcement of the birth of Jesus in verse 31, and that this birth therefore defines the grace in question: that of Mary's becoming the mother of the Messiah.¹⁰ It is true that the word χάρις appears in that verse, but not in verse 28, where the word κεχαριτωμένη is used. Of course, this participle is derived from the non-verbal χάρις; nevertheless, the turn of phrase is quite different. The word χάρις appears around 150 times in the New Testament with many different connotations, while the verb χαριτόω is found only twice (in Lk. 1:28 and in Eph. 1:6). The word is rare and therefore, in the context of "grace," signals something that is out of the ordinary.

The parallel text, Ephesians 1:6, is clarifying.¹¹ We have two "texts of exceptional importance where the two authors (Luke and Paul) have met to make choice of the same rare term."¹² Now the grace in question in Ephesians 1:6 is found in a solemn hymn and in a context with strong salvific resonances,¹³ where the grace produced (by the verb χαριτόωε, here in the active aorist) is that which makes us adoptive children of the Heavenly Father.

The κεχαριτωμένη addressed to Mary in Luke 1:28 is likewise preceded by the greeting χαῖρε. Now the alliteration or the probably intentional play on words has of course been

⁹ Ibid. 365.

¹⁰ Radl, *Der Ursprung Jesu*, 321; or Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 48.

¹¹ Eph. 1:6 belongs to a solemn hymn, the language of which Luke may therefore even have known.

¹² Cambe, "La χάρις chez Saint Luc," 193-194.

¹³ De la Potterie, "Κεχαριτωμένη en Lc 1,28. Étude exégétique et théologique," 483.

noted,¹⁴ in an attempt to derive an interpretation, at times contested,¹⁵ of χαῖρε as expressing an invitation to a joy, as something that is more than just an ordinary greeting.¹⁶ One author, however, has justly remarked that χαῖρε was chosen in function of the following term, in this circumstance, κεχαριτωμένη.¹⁷ The author did not, however, draw out all the consequences, in particular, that it is perhaps not the first of the two words whose meaning is affected by the alliteration, but the second. Χαῖρε, therefore, would draw the reader's attention to the specific χάρις, contained in κεχαριτωμένη.

This last term is rare. It draws the reader's attention to the person addressed—to Mary. Commentators agree on the fact that κεχαριτωμένη is found in the angel's greeting, where one would expect the name of the person greeted.¹⁸ A parallel has been noted with Judges 6:12, where the angel of Yahweh addresses Gideon as he says to him: "Yahweh is with you, O valiant warrior."¹⁹ In the case of Luke 1:28, the participle κεχαριτωμένη, therefore, functions as a new name, a name proper to Mary,²⁰ and even, in view of the context, a "solemn substitute."²¹ Now in the mentality of the people of the Ancient Near East, and in particular that of the Hebrews, the name expresses who the person is in the strict sense of the term, that

¹⁴ Cf. Alfred Robert C. Leaney, *A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1958), 82; or Walter Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*, Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testamen, vol. 3 (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1981), 55.

¹⁵ Cf., for instance, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I-IX)*, 345.

¹⁶ Stanislas Lyonnet, "χαῖρε κεχαριτωμένη," *Biblica* 20 (1939): 137; or Christopher F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 160.

¹⁷ John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1989), 50.

¹⁸ Cf. Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), 171.

¹⁹ Wilfrid J. Harrington, *The Gospel according to St. Luke: A Commentary* (London: G. Chapman, 1968), 46.

²⁰ Cf. Laurentin, *Les Évangiles de l'enfance*, 30; or Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I-IX)*, 345.

²¹ Josef Dillersberger, *The Gospel of Saint Luke* (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1958), 20.

is to say, that it gives information as to the very essence of the person. As regards Mary, this means that the "grace" expressed in κεχαριτωμένη constitutes an essential element of her being, and that from her very origin.²² There is no question of a "secondary" reality, one that would have touched her only ultimately. Rather, it pertains to the very identity of Mary. Moreover, the appellation κεχαριτωμένη, in all of Scripture, is reserved to Mary, as if it were her special mark.²³

In fact, some have tried to see in the parallel with Gideon, a demonstration that the κεχαριτωμένη would refer only to a grace that is to come, one to follow immediately. For Gideon is called "valiant warrior" at a time when he is not yet such; therefore κεχαριτωμένη would signify a grace that is not present before the angel's greeting.²⁴ However, as contrasted with what concerns Gideon, the angel does not apply to Mary a noun bracketed with an adjective, but a *perfect* participle, a verbal form that refers to a past that is prolonged in the present. Therefore, it is before the angel's greeting, before the Incarnation, that Mary is κεχαριτωμένη.²⁵

Fullness

To sum up, κεχαριτωμένη draws our attention to the fact that Mary received "grace"—let us say it this way for the moment, not yet having the means to be more precise—in a way that affects her identity from the very beginning, and this gift of grace refers to salvation. This having been presented and before seeing in what way Genesis 18 can help us to understand the meaning of κεχαριτωμένη, there is still one or other point to be raised with respect to this term. The translation that the Vulgate makes of the term, namely, "full of grace" (*gratia plena*), has released numerous speculations regarding Mary's particular status with respect to other human beings,²⁶ and, for this reason, is generally rejected by Protestants. Is it therefore

²² Dillersberger, *The Gospel of St. Luke*, 20-21.

²³ De la Potterie, "Κεχαριτωμένη en Lc 1,28. Étude exégétique et théologique," 482.

²⁴ Radl, *Der Ursprung Jesu*, 321.

²⁵ De la Potterie, "Κεχαριτωμένη en Lc 1,28. Étude philologique," 365.

²⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 37.

incorrect for all that? Some authors affirm that the Greek verbs ending in -όω, such as χαριτόω, which are, as we have seen, causative, imply in themselves the idea of fullness: the transformation that they designate is complete.²⁷ Others are of the opinion that we cannot go so far with respect to verbs ending in -όω,²⁸ and add that if Luke wanted to insist on Mary's fullness of grace, he would instead have used, as he did with respect to Stephen in Acts 6:8, πλήρης χάριτος.²⁹ But in this case, we would no longer have a term linked to grace which would be exclusively reserved to Mary. Finally, there are others who, though conceding that the verb χαριτόω does not, in itself, impose a connotation of fullness, hold that this verb can imply such a connotation through its context and that this is the case in Luke 1:28.³⁰ Moreover, some think that the idea of fullness is reinforced by the use of the perfect tense.³¹ Despite the witness in the New Testament of the formula πλήρης χάριτος, the translation "full of grace," even if it is not compelling, does remain legitimate.³²

Another element can help to situate the meaning of κεχαριτωμένη applied to Mary in Luke 1:28. For this we must go beyond verse 30 up to verse 42, where Elizabeth speaks to Mary who has come to visit her. After the angel (Lk. 1:28), this is the first time that anyone speaks to Mary, and the first word—an adjective—that Elizabeth applies to her relative is εὐλογημένη. This is exactly the same verbal form, a perfect

²⁷ Cf. Pierre Médebielle, "Annonciation," in *Dictionnaire de la Bible. Supplément*, ed. Louis Pirot et al. (Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1926-), 1:283.

²⁸ Salvador Muñoz Iglesias, *Los Evangelios de la Infancia (II. Los anuncios angélicos previos en el Evangelio lucano de la Infancia)* (4 vols.; Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1986-1990), 2:157; however, he questions whether Luke is the author of Luke 1-2.

²⁹ Cf. Cambe, "La χάρις chez Saint Luc," 202.

³⁰ Cf. Muñoz Iglesias, *Los Evangelios de la Infancia*, 2:156; or *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars*, ed. Raymond E. Brown et al. (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 127.

³¹ Gianfranco Nolli, *Evangelo secondo Luca. Testo greco, neovolgata latina, analisi filologica, traduzione italiana* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 29.

³² Paul Joüon, *L'Évangile de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ. Traduction et commentaire du texte original grec, compte tenu du substrat sémitique* (Paris: G. Beauchesne, 1930), 283; or Cambe, "La χάρις chez Saint Luc," 202.

passive feminine participle in the singular, as κεχαριτωμένη—except that here we have the verb εὐλογέω, “to bless.” We may note that the perfect passive masculine participle in the singular, εὐλογημένος, is, in the same verse, also applied to “the fruit of [Mary’s] womb.” In this case, it is clear that the perfect participle refers to a situation that existed before Elizabeth had spoken. We shall return to this point later on.

Finally, we must keep in mind that the account of the Annunciation in Luke 1, taken as a whole, echoes numerous texts of the Old Testament with which it presents some parallels. Among these texts we can mention Genesis 18, whose verses 9-15 also recount the announcement of a birth.³³

“In the beginning”: Genesis 3-11

Before coming to Genesis 18, we must first consider the texts that precede this chapter. We must begin “in the beginning,” specifically with the account of the fall. This account is not only at the beginning, but it takes place *immediately, right after* the account of Creation. The Hebrew mentality recounts the origin in order to declare the essence or the nature of a being or of some thing. The transgression of the divine command is the first action performed by the man and the woman. There is then no room to imagine that these latter were able to live for a certain time in perfect harmony with the will of God. Even if the initial state of creation—and we must insist on this—is that of peace between the human beings and their Creator, the account of Genesis 2 is already oriented towards the event of the fall.³⁴ The transgression occurs at once, it is immediate: it belongs to the identity of human beings from the very beginning of their history.

In addition, as Ladaria notes, the transgression takes place within a chain of solidarity in and for evil. It is the serpent who incites the woman to commit the transgression, and it is she who then draws along the man. The first sin, the disobedience to the divine command, therefore already takes place collectively. It is a collective fact. The power of sin is already contagious from the

³³ David M. Smith, “Luke 1:26-38,” *Interpretation* 29 (1975): 412.

³⁴ Ladaria, *Teología del pecado original*, 55.

first instant.³⁵ Eventually, the consequence of this first sin is rupture: the man hides himself from God and the man distances himself from the woman. The rupture takes place not only between human beings and God, but between humans themselves.

From these three elements there flows the fact that the history that will follow is the history of a humanity marked collectively by sin³⁶ and one that experiences a growing division. The account which goes from Genesis 3 to 11—which belongs to what is called “primeval” history—illustrates this all too well.

After the history of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, comes that of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4, which tells of the sin of the son, of the descendant, who is at the same time the murderer of his brother. After this follows the long account of the deluge, brought about because Yahweh repents of having made man, whose heart “contrives nothing but wicked schemes all day long” (Gen. 6:5-6). Then, to close the primeval history, we have once again (Gen. 11:1-9) an account of a transgression by humanity in general, the tower of Babel. After the case of Cain, the transgressions are always collective. We are still in the account of origins: the whole world is involved.

This history of sins is nevertheless also an account of the beneficence of God. We can thus bring out from Genesis 3-11 a repetition of the following sequence: the transgression, which brings in its train a divine correction or chastisement, but finally also a blessing.

<i>Transgression</i>	<i>Correction</i>	<i>Blessing</i>
1) Gen. 3:6	Gen. 3:16-19	Gen. 3:21
2) Gen. 4:8	Gen. 4:11-12	Gen. 4:15
3) Gen. 6:5	Gen. 7:17-23	Gen. 9:8-11
4) Gen. 11:4	Gen. 11:7-8	???

Genesis 3 and Genesis 11 thus form an enclosure: in both cases man's ambition is to put himself in place of God (Gen. 3:5 and Gen. 11:4). To desire to surpass or replace God is to desire to annul every relation with him, since it means to refuse to recognize who he is. The accounts of sins directly opposed to God

³⁵ Ladaria, *Teología del pecado original*, 62.

³⁶ Ladaria, *Teología del pecado original*, 58; see note on the term “sin.”

frame accounts of sins committed against man. Again, at one and the same time, sin is both the rupture of communion with God and rupture of communion between human persons.

The account of this history of sins is interspersed with genealogies (Gen. 4:1-2; 4:17-22; 10:17-32; 11:10-32). Each account of sin is followed by a list of descendants. The account of sins which multiply crosses the account of human generations. The two are inseparable. However, we have not concluded that Adam's sin is transmitted through physical generation to all his descendants. This is not the thought of the biblical authors. Among all men there exists a solidarity wider than the purely biological.³⁷ We must understand "human generation" in an integral sense that takes into account a plurality of factors: not only the physical dimension, but also that of entrance into a human cultural milieu, into all of society, into "the world" in general; all these domains are affected by what we may see now as the deprivation of the mediation of grace.³⁸

The full "mediation" of grace that man would have been able to receive by the very fact of coming into the world was lacking. And this mediation, because it was seriously impeded by the sin of Adam and Eve from the very beginning, turned into a negative mediation, into an obstacle for the true development of human beings in relation with God. It became a source of new personal sins. For this reason, the condition of humans coming into the world is marked by the history of sin anterior to themselves, by the lack of the communication of grace which constitutes a true privation of something that belongs to the original design and will of God.³⁹

For in God's design, grace has to reach each human, partly directly and partly indirectly, through the mediation of fellow human beings.⁴⁰ But from the very beginning, from Adam and

³⁷ Ladaria, *Teología del pecado original*, 63.

³⁸ Ladaria, *Teología del pecado original*, 117.

³⁹ Ladaria, *Teología del pecado original*, 113-117.

⁴⁰ Man was never alone: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). This is not contradicted by the second account of the creation of man, which, unlike the first account, does not mean to tell a chronological sequence; moreover, in Genesis 2:18, God says: "It is not good that the man should be alone."

Eve on, the indirect mediation no longer reaches humans fully. This condition of the privation of grace in which all humans find themselves as they come into the world and live therein does not affect them only exteriorly. The mystery of communion with another in the good and, negatively, in what is evil, is the very mystery of being human. We can then affirm that all who arrive in this world find themselves deprived of communion and deprived of the "mediation" of grace, which makes them a "sinner" in a negative solidarity with all other humans, rendering them incapable for the good and leads them through personal sins to the personal ratification of that inherited or received situation.⁴¹

In Genesis 3-11, the biblical account is not concerned to determine the exact relation that exists between the first sin and those that have followed, even though it is clear that in this history there is something more than a simple juxtaposition of sinful acts without any connection between them.⁴² At the same time, we must remember that this progressive generalization of sin does not exclude the benefits of God and of his grace, which, even after the fall, continue to accompany men. This history of blessing appears with the greatest clarity beginning with Abraham.⁴³

In fact, with regard to Genesis 3-11, it is necessary to note that in the "primeval history" there is lacking a blessing following upon the correction inflicted by God on the builders of the tower of Babel. The sequence marked out in Genesis 3-11 is incomplete and therefore calls for a complement. To shed his blessing upon a humanity henceforth divided into many different peoples, God sets in place the following strategy: among all these peoples, he chooses one that which will descend from Abraham, but "in whom all the tribes of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:3).⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ladaria, *Teología del pecado original*, 116.

⁴² Ladaria, *Teología del pecado original*, 63.

⁴³ Ladaria, *Teología del pecado original*, 63.

⁴⁴ Robert Martin-Achard, *Actualité d'Abraham*, Bibliothèque Théologique (Neuchâtel, Suisse: Éditions Delachaux et Niestlé, 1969), 73.

The mediation of blessings becomes apparent or—to anticipate and use the vocabulary of the New Testament—the mediation of graces. Until then, this mediation runs into an obstacle. In the collective history of sins here reviewed, human beings show themselves to be mediators of sin to one another. With the call of Abraham, a new history of salvation begins; it is deliberately placed within the mode of mediation, which it is to recuperate. This then becomes a mediation for salvation and no longer for evil. The “remedy” thus underscores the way that evil and harm function.

The line “in whom all the tribes of the earth will be blessed,” such as it appears in Genesis 12, is nonetheless still vague. Nothing is clarified as to the way in which this salvific mediation will function, even if, as we shall see, the fact that Genesis 12 follows in answer to Genesis 11 already presents some indications in this regard.

Implementation: Genesis 18

The explanation takes place in Genesis 18. Verse 18 of this chapter takes up the key terms of the beginning of the history of Abraham. In Genesis 12:2-3 the reasons for his call are given: “Abraham will become a great and powerful nation and through him all the nations of the earth will be blessed.” The formula is even amplified: the adjective “powerful” is added and the word “tribes” or “families” is replaced by “nations.”⁴⁵ Genesis 18 then appears as a development of Genesis 12. The verse of Genesis 18 that takes up the terms of Genesis 12 acts as a hinge connecting the two panels that make up Genesis 18.⁴⁶ The first half of Chapter 18, verses 1-16, announces the realization of the first part of this promise—the progeny—and shows how this is going to be done. The second panel of this diptych, the second half of the chapter, verses 17-33, announces the realization of the second part of the promise—the blessing of the nations—and explains how this will come about.

⁴⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books Publ., 1994), 50.

⁴⁶ Jean-Paul Klein, “Que se passe-t-il en Genèse 18?,” *Le point théologique* 24 (1977): 97.

Earlier, in Luke 1, we have seen how it was possible to establish a verbal parallel between κεχαριτωμένη (verse 28) and εὐλογημένη (verse 42) applied to Mary. We noted that the masculine equivalent εὐλογημένος is also present in verse 42. Now the Septuagint applies this same εὐλογημένος to Abraham in Genesis 14:19 in a context where, for the first time in Genesis, the city of Sodom appears, which will be at the heart of the debates detailed in Genesis 18. There are, in the Book of Genesis, two other occurrences of the verb εὐλογέω in the passive. These are in Genesis 12:3 and 18:18, where the verb is employed in the future passive in the third person plural, ἐνευλογηθήσονται. The subject in Genesis 12:3 is "all the families [or clans] of the earth" and in Genesis 18:18 "all the nations of the earth," who will be blessed in Abraham. We must again note that, just as in Luke 1:42, each time the verb εὐλογέω appears in the Septuagint, from Genesis 1 up to Genesis 18, with human beings as complements of the direct object when the verb is in the active voice (Gen. 1:28; 5:2; 9:1; 12:2; 17:16 or 17:20) or as subjects when the verb is in the passive voice (Gen. 12:3; 18:18), it is in the immediate context of fecundity, of engendering, of progeny. There is one exception, that of Genesis 14:19, where the more remote context, as we have just seen, is the city of Sodom. In Genesis 18:17-33, as we shall see, the two contexts are joined together: that of the progeny and that of Sodom. They furnish the very occasion for this text. The passage occurs just after the announcement of the birth of Isaac and comes before the account of the destruction of Sodom. Those who, according to verse 18, will be blessed are, however, not as one would expect in view of Genesis 1:28; 5:2; 9:1; 17:16 or 17:20, Abraham and his descendants, nor Sodom; here we have that which is original.

Moreover, there are many commentators who underline the strange character of Genesis 18:17-33. Some speak of a "prayer" without any equivalent in the Old Testament,⁴⁷ that is, of one of the most astonishing conversations which the history of salvation has preserved for us,⁴⁸ of a "very different kind of ques-

⁴⁷ Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 63.

⁴⁸ Joseph Lécuyer, *Abraham, notre père* (Paris: Cerf, 1955), 93.

tioning than we have seen before or will see again in the Book of Genesis" (Sacks 127) or even of an "exemplary piece of biblical literature."⁴⁹ One writer even notes that Genesis 18 in its ensemble presents the "best described 24 hours in the life of Abraham."⁵⁰ Whatever the case may be, the form of Genesis 18:17-33 merits our attention.

The text is crucial. Not only does it go back to Genesis 12:2-3, but it also recalls Genesis 11:1-9, the episode of the tower of Babel, an episode that, as we have seen, gives rise to Genesis 12:2-3. Just as he does in Genesis 11:5, Yahweh, in Genesis 18:21, intends to come down to see what mankind is doing.⁵¹ There are likewise echoes of the episode of the deluge in Genesis 6-9⁵²: the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is total and collective⁵³; it is enormous,⁵⁴ to such an extent that it becomes emblematic of the "general disorder of a society organized against God."⁵⁵ The Bible remembers the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah as a symbol of wickedness (Isa. 1:9-10, 3:9, 13:19; Jer. 23:14, 49:18, 50:40; Ezek. 16:49; Hos. 11:8; Am. 4:11; Zeph. 2:8).⁵⁶ Sodom and Gomorrah appear as the

⁴⁹ Mordecai Roshwald, "A Dialogue between Man and God," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 42 (1989): 145.

⁵⁰ Wenham, *Genesis* 16-50, 62.

⁵¹ Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Abraham and the Righteous of Sodom," *The Journal of Jewish Studies* 33 (1982): 119; idem, "The Judge of All the Earth: Theodicy in the Midrash on Genesis 18:22-33," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 41 (1990): 4; J. Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12-50* (Grand Rapids, Mich.—Edinburgh: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co.—The Handsel Press Ltd., 1993), 57; or Paul-Marie Guillaume, "L'intercession d'Abraham," *Assemblée du Seigneur* 48 (1972): 50.

⁵² W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville—London—Leiden: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 170; or George W. Coats, *Genesis, with an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1983), 140.

⁵³ Blenkinsopp, "Abraham and the Righteous of Sodom," 119.

⁵⁴ Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1977), 228.

⁵⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 164; or Gerhard von Rad, *Das erste Buch Mose. Genesis. Übersetzt und erklärt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 166.

⁵⁶ John J. Scullion, *Genesis: A Commentary for Students, Teachers, and Preachers*, Old Testament Studies, vol. 6 (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 155.

paradigms of the wicked city.⁵⁷ Their case, like those of the deluge and of the tower of Babel in light of which it ought to be read, becomes an example.

One author, even though he recognizes that Genesis 18:17-33 is where it is, is of the opinion that it could have been placed elsewhere in the Bible, for example, before the deluge or the fall of Jerusalem.⁵⁸ Such a remark, however, misses the point. With Sodom and Gomorrah, in fact, we have the *first* time that the problematic of solidarity in evil and the diffusion of sin, the negative mediation which culminated with the deluge, is repeated and is presented *after* Abraham has been introduced into the history of salvation. Now if Abraham has been introduced in this way, it is because he has been chosen by God to give birth to a people in whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Sodom and Gomorrah represent those nations before benefitting from the divine promise and blessing.⁵⁹ It is then with these two cities in Genesis 18 when the first case as symbol is presented,⁶⁰ that the modalities of this mediation can be specified.

For the choice of Abraham does not have its end in itself. It is not an end in itself.⁶¹ It is in view of a mission.⁶² As Genesis 18:18 shows, this mission has as its object and content the blessing of the families and the nations of the earth.⁶³ As one commentator notes, this mission is going to make Abraham with his descendants the mediator of divine blessings for all peoples.⁶⁴ The question now remains as to how this mediation will function.

⁵⁷ Ehud Ben-Zvi, "The Dialogue between Abraham and YHWH in Gen. 18.23-32: A Historical-Critical Analysis," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 53 (1992): 30.

⁵⁸ Roshwald, "A Dialogue," 145.

⁵⁹ Klein, "Que se passe-t-il en Genèse 18?," 94.

⁶⁰ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1995), 18.

⁶¹ Martin-Achard, *Actualité d'Abraham*, 72; or Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary*, 169.

⁶² Robert Davidson, *Genesis 12-50* (Cambridge—London—New York—Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 68; or Walther Zimmerli, *1. Mose 12-25: Abraham*, Zürcher Bibelkommentare AT:1.2 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1976), 82.

⁶³ Martin-Achard, *Actualité d'Abraham*, 72.

⁶⁴ Zimmerli, *1. Mose 12-25: Abraham*, 82.

It is really Genesis 12 that accounts for Genesis 18:17ff.,⁶⁵ just as it is Genesis 18 that explains and makes explicit Genesis 12.⁶⁶ In this regard, commentators make it appear that Genesis 18:17-33 is presented as a lesson given by God to Abraham so that the latter may in his turn transmit it to his descendants. This is set down from the first verses of this passage. If Abraham deserves to learn about the divine plan,⁶⁷ it is so that he may command his descendants to keep the way of Yahweh by doing justice and right (v. 19). The doublet "justice and right" is to be understood as a means of underscoring what is being presented. If God chose Abraham to teach justice to his descendants, if this justice is that of Yahweh, what kind of justice are we dealing with?⁶⁸

A Lesson

Hence, two things must be kept in mind that establish the perspective according to which the second part of Genesis 18 must be read. On the one hand, the content of the lesson that is to come is also the one given at the beginning: this will be justice and right. On the other hand, this lesson will make Abraham a master, an instructor.⁶⁹ If he receives the lesson, it is to be transmitted. The text then presents Abraham as a mediator. That is Yahweh's intention.⁷⁰

The intervention of Abraham, which begins with verse 23, ought therefore to be considered as being willed by God. "There is no room for a real confrontation between Abraham

⁶⁵ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 17; or Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth*, 58.

⁶⁶ Samuel R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis. With Introduction and Notes* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1943 [orig. 1904]), 195.

⁶⁷ *Genesis*, trans. and interpreted by Hermann Gunkel; trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 1997 [orig. 1910]), 201.

⁶⁸ Scullion, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 155.

⁶⁹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 19; Ben-Zvi, "The Dialogue," 30; or Zimmerli, *1. Mose 12-25: Abraham*, 82.

⁷⁰ For Jože Krašovec, "Der Ruf nach Gerechtigkeit in Gen 18,16-33," in *Die Väter Israels. Beiträge zur Theologie der Patriarchenüberlieferungen im Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, 1989), 175, Yahweh acts here as a pedagogue.

and God in the text.”⁷¹ Verse 21—“I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me; and if not I will know”—should be interpreted as a provocation, as a statement that awaits an answer.⁷² In the following verse there is found, moreover, a significant problem for textual criticism in this regard. The present text of the Bible reads: “Abraham stood in Yahweh’s presence,” but a Massoretic note points out that this is a correction. In all probability, the original tradition read: “Yahweh still stood in Abraham’s presence”—take note of the “still”: there is certainly question of an insistence in relation to what precedes, something that would evidently seem to be not very respectful if one considers that to remain in someone’s presence means to put oneself at another’s disposition in order to serve him. So the text was changed to “Abraham remained in God’s presence.” But another reading is possible: to remain in someone’s presence means to place oneself before that person as one making a request. Yahweh standing before Abraham means Yahweh who is waiting for a response from Abraham.⁷³ Similarly, it is also Yahweh who will decide when the lesson will have been learned and who, by leaving (in verse 33), will put an end to the dialogue that will take place between Abraham and himself.

In this perspective, it would be a mistake to consider Abraham’s intervention as an intercession opposing Abraham to his God.⁷⁴ It has been correctly observed that the framework of the conversation is formed not by a plea and the granting of a request (as in Exod. 32:11-14 or Am. 7:16), but by questions and answers.⁷⁵ Contrary to other biblical intercessors who intervene in favor of people who are near to them, Abraham here poses a ques-

⁷¹ Ben-Zvi, “The Dialogue,” 39.

⁷² Guillaume, “L’intercession d’Abraham,” 51.

⁷³ Carlo-Maria Martini, *Abraham notre père dans la foi* (Saint-Maurice: Éditions Saint-Augustin, 1994), 128-129.

⁷⁴ As does for instance Thomas C. Römer, “Qui est Abraham? Les différentes figures du patriarches dans la Bible hébraïque,” in David Banon and Thomas C. Römer, *Abraham. Nouvelle jeunesse d’un ancêtre* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1997), 15.

⁷⁵ Claus Westermann, *Genesis. 2. Teilband, Genesis 12-36*, *Biblicher Kommentar. Altes Testament*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981), 354.

tion with respect to an entity that is foreign to him. Logically one is inclined to see a surfeit of compassion on the part of Abraham in comparison with those other biblical intercessors.⁷⁶ For all that, the question that Abraham poses from the beginning of the contest in verse 23—"Are you really going to destroy the upright with the guilty?"—shows clearly that what preoccupies Abraham primarily is in no way the fate of Sodom,⁷⁷ but rather the way that divine justice functions.⁷⁸ Far from being limited to a clever bargaining in Oriental fashion,⁷⁹ the line of action is rather that of exploring⁸⁰ or of a prayer, in the broad sense of the term, of a theological investigation, of a theological process which, to put it another way, leads to a new knowledge of Yahweh.⁸¹ As one author notes, Abraham will leave the encounter transformed.⁸²

The Number 10

To understand, then, the end to which the dialogue between Abraham and Yahweh is intended to lead, we must consider the end of this dialogue. The last word belongs to Yahweh, who in verse 32 says, "I will not destroy it for the sake of the ten." After this, as we have seen, Yahweh leaves. But in this same verse, Abraham said that his request, "What if there are ten?" will be his last. By a common consent, Abraham and Yahweh stop at the number 10. Abraham has understood the lesson, and Yahweh takes note of that. What Abraham succeeds in doing, what he ends by discovering and understanding was that if 10 just

⁷⁶ Guillaume, "L'intercession d'Abraham," 3; or Julian Morgenstern, *The Book of Genesis: A Jewish Interpretation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 125.

⁷⁷ Cf. J. A. Loader, *A Tale of Two Cities: Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament, Early Jewish and Early Christian Traditions* (Kampen: J. H. Kok Publ. House, 1990), 29.

⁷⁸ Charles T. Fritsch, *Genesis*, The Layman's Bible Commentary (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1960), 67; Michael Maher, *Genesis*, Old Testament Message, 2 (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier Inc., 1982), 116; Rad, *Das erste Buch Mose*, 166; or Scullion, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 156.

⁷⁹ Against Arthur S. Herbert, *Genesis 12-50* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1962), 44.

⁸⁰ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), 133.

⁸¹ 81. Martini, *Abraham notre père dans la foi*, 127 and 133.

⁸² Klein, "Que se passe-t-il en Genèse 18?" 97.

are to be found among the inhabitants of Sodom, God will not destroy the city. Having understood that, Abraham is no longer interested in the fate of Sodom, for, let us repeat, that is not what interests Abraham. He is satisfied to know that the city will not be destroyed if God finds 10 just souls there.

We understand why they are called "the just" in view of the fact that the dialogue had justice as its subject. The reason for the number 10 can be more difficult to understand. We observe, however, that this number confirms the fact that the purpose of the dialogue of Genesis 18:22-32 was not to save Sodom, since only four persons will be sheltered from the punishment (cf. Gen. 19:16). The kind of rescue that sets the just apart from the wicked recalls the past episode of the deluge⁸³; the number 10, however, also announces, and especially to Abraham, that a new way begins for settling the question of the relations between a minority of the just who are inserted in a multitude of the wicked. The deluge had changed nothing of the fact that "the thoughts of the heart of man are evil from his youth" as was stated in Genesis 8:21, God having no illusions in the matter. But henceforth, insofar as a minority of the just reaches the number 10, the multitude of the wicked will be spared. Why the number 10?

Several specialists concur on this point, noting that in the societies of the Ancient Near East, 10 men constituted the smallest social entity that could be autonomous. Thus one speaks of 10 men as being the smallest group constituting a unity within a city,⁸⁴ as the minimum effective social entity,⁸⁵ as the minimal administrative unit for communal organization in later Israelite life.⁸⁶ We note also that the caravans that traveled in the ancient

⁸³ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 41.

⁸⁴ Blenkinsopp, "Abraham and the Righteous of Sodom," 123.

⁸⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 134; or Ludwig Schmidt, "De Deo": *Studien zur Literaturkritik und Theologie des Buches Jona, des Gesprächs zwischen Abraham und Jahwe in Gen 18,22ff. und von Hi 1*, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 143 (Berlin—New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1976), 154-155.

⁸⁶ Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York—London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996), 83.

Near East consisted of at least 10 men.⁸⁷ In short, one could not imagine an independent social group of less than the minimum of 10 men. The number then has a symbolic value. To save Sodom, a group would have been necessary, an autonomous group, at least a people, no matter how small, the smallest number imaginable, but a people all the same. An entity that can be distinguished was necessary; one that was autonomous to follow a distinct way and which would be plural in number. And it is precisely a people which God has chosen in Abraham, and to which Abraham is to give birth. Certainly, according to Genesis 12:2, this people is called to become great and, according to Genesis 15:5, Abraham's posterity is destined to become as numerous as the stars in the sky. This, however, will take time, and in Deuteronomy 7:7, many generations after Abraham, the people in question, whom God has chosen, is still presented as being the least numerous among all the peoples (this will be the case still in Dan. 3:37). This goes back to the symbolism of the number 10 in Genesis 18. For it is in Genesis 18, with the announcement of the approaching birth of Isaac, that the posterity promised takes form.

In this perspective it is natural that Abraham and Yahweh stop at 10.⁸⁸ If God called Abraham, it was, on the one hand, to make of him a people who, on the other hand, practice justice. On this condition, the multitude within which this people will be found, namely all the nations of the earth, will be blessed and therefore saved.⁸⁹ This is what Yahweh wanted Abraham to know in Genesis 18. When the people exist, there will no longer be a question, in the eyes of Yahweh, of distinguishing the just from the unjust, but of taking account of some just, the smallest group or people, much more than of a

⁸⁷ Wolfram Herrmann, "*Mercatores mandate missi*. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der Einheiten 'Fünf' und 'Zehn' in der kanonischen und deuterokanonischen Literatur des Alten Testaments," *Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 91 (1979): 335.

⁸⁸ Cf. Westermann, *Genesis. 2. Teilband, Genesis 12-36*, 356; or Schmidt, "*De Deo*": *Studien*, 154.

⁸⁹ Robert Michaud, *Les patriarches. Histoire et théologie*, Lire la Bible 42 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1975), 104, presents the biblical author as a theologian of universal salvation.

multitude of sinners.⁹⁰ What appears is that in the midst of the wicked, there is a solidarity in the good which tends to preserve them.⁹¹

To allow this interpretation, however, the number 10 could, in theory, have been posed by Abraham from the very beginning.⁹² Therefore, it is also necessary to understand why Abraham arrived there in stages, beginning with 50. It is, of course, possible to see here an expression of deference on the part of Abraham or an expression of oriental politeness. Apart from any question of courtesy, one may, however, admit, as has been noted, that we see in this way of acting the stating of a request. But there is doubtless still something else: the exchange also, and above all, draws attention to the fact that the exercise of divine justice is linked to a question of numbers, therefore, to a question of quantity. This fact is often neglected, but we shall come back to it.

"In him all the nations of the earth will be blessed"

Let us now apply the teachings drawn from Genesis 18:17-33. How do they help us to understand the way in which the statement "All the nations of the earth will be blessed in him" functions? Abraham and his descendants are called to become mediators of divine blessings destined for all the nations of the earth. On this point, all the commentators are in agreement. What gives rise to disagreements are the modalities of this mediation. After reading Genesis 18, certain ones see Abraham's intervention as an intercession and therefore conclude that it is in interceding in favor of other peoples that Abraham and his descendants after him will assure to these same peoples the bestowal of divine blessings.⁹³ In the present case, however, that does not come to pass: Sodom will be destroyed and, so, the lesson fails. If we admit with most authors that the dialogue between Abraham and God in Genesis 18 is a later addition to the account,⁹⁴ the fact that this dialogue stops at the number 10 con-

⁹⁰ Martini, *Abraham notre père dans la foi*, 132.

⁹¹ Joseph Chaine, *Le livre de la Genèse* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1951), 240.

⁹² Cf. Harald Schweizer, "Das seltsame Gespräch von Abraham und Jahwe (Gen 18,22-33)," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 164 (1984): 128.

⁹³ Cf. for instance Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth*, 60.

⁹⁴ Krašovec, "Der Ruf nach Gerechtigkeit in Gen 18,16-33," 169.

firms that the concrete fate of Sodom was not really envisaged. There is no question of saving Sodom, which harbors but 4 just persons. There is no question definitively of interceding in favor of Sodom.

The question lies elsewhere: just as it would require 10 just persons to save Sodom, so too there must be a just people to save the nations on earth. There is no need, in priority, for a people of intercessors, but for a people of just persons who, according to verse 19, follow the way of Yahweh by practicing justice and right. Some have tried to explain the modalities of this mediation of salvation based on the merits of the just in matters that could be ascribed to all nations.⁹⁵ On this matter still others have also spoken, for example, of "a vicarious reality of saving the multitude in consideration of a small minority."⁹⁶ All the same, the text does not speak about this. In Genesis 12:3, where God addresses Abraham, the text says "in you will be blessed . . ." and in Genesis 18:19, where God speaks of Abraham or of his descendants—the text is ambiguous on this point, but the confusion is no doubt deliberate insofar as what follows concerns either Abraham or his descendants inasmuch as Isaac is henceforth announced⁹⁷—the text says "*in* him/it they will be blessed." The Hebrew preposition used, *ב*, can signify either "by" or "in," either "through" or "by means of"; but not, for example, "because of," which is *בגלל* (cf. Gen. 18:26.31-32).⁹⁸ The divine blessings will reach the other nations "*in*" or "*through*" Abraham and his descendants and not "*because of*" Abraham and his descendants. The practice of justice by the chosen people will permit these latter to fulfill this mission.

Channels of Blessings

We must now distance ourselves from the text a little and come back to the fact that Genesis 12 and 18 are presented as a response of reparation, in the technical and not in the

⁹⁵ Maher, *Genests*, 115.

⁹⁶ Martini, *Abraham notre père dans la foi*, 132.

⁹⁷ Roshwald, "A Dialogue," 162.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

theological sense of the term, to Genesis 3-11. There we saw that the first sin (Gen. 3), already collective, is transmitted to descendants (Gen. 4) and then to all of humanity (Gen. 6). The rupture between man and God brought about by this sin, as also between man and his fellows (Gen. 3 and 4), became eventually a rupture between nations (Gen. 11). Genesis 12 and 18 speak again about descendants and nations, all nations. In Genesis 3-11, the refusal of God and his blessings became an obstacle to the diffusion of his blessings. In Genesis 12 and especially in Genesis 18, the welcoming of God (cf. the first part of the chapter) becomes the channel for the diffusion of divine blessings to all nations. The concepts developed by Ladaria help us to understand how Genesis 12 and 18 function with respect to Genesis 3-11. God wills to use human agents in order that his blessings come to men. And so it is. God does not will only a communion between mankind and himself but also a communion of men among themselves. He wills that part of his blessings pass through such channels. When man sins, the channel is clogged up and becomes blocked little-by-little. His fellow beings find themselves deprived of blessings, which weakens them especially in face of temptation. If, on the contrary, man observes the way of the Lord by practicing justice and right, in other words doing what God expects of him, then he becomes a channel of blessings that is fully operative. There is no longer refusal or obstruction, but welcome and diffusion. In Genesis 22:18, God will confirm this to Abraham, once he will have given proof of his total openness to doing the divine will: "In your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

This is why at the very moment of concluding his alliance with the chosen people, in Exodus 19:6, God will say: "I will make you a royal priesthood, a holy nation." God wants to extend his blessings to all of humanity. The gradual progress from 50 to 10 just people needed to form a just people or a holy nation, also serves to demonstrate the salvific will of God. For this, he is ready to be satisfied with the smallest number of people thinkable. But, before the Incarnation, he must have at least a people. In other words, at least an entity able to live and in this way show forth *that* communion with God and with

one's neighbor to which all humanity is called in God's design. In the same way, God will choose from the midst of this people a priestly tribe, that of the Levites, to remind this people of priests of its function as mediator of blessings for all the nations of the earth. While hoping to be able to be satisfied with only one just people—for in Genesis 18 with respect to Sodom, just as in Genesis 6-9 as regards the deluge, there is no question of conversion or repentance⁹⁹—does God show himself too much of an optimist? One is inclined to think so, seeing that in Exodus 32, scarcely has the alliance been concluded that the people—chosen though to warrant the full mediation of the part of grace that was entrusted to man to transmit—turn away from it by making for themselves a golden calf and again in Leviticus 10, scarcely have the Levites been installed than a sacrifice not willed by God is offered. The pattern of the immediate fall, already seen in Genesis 3, where sin is the first thing that the man and the woman do, is repeated. The people of the covenant will not succeed in escaping this, as Yahweh states in Jeremiah 7:25, for example. The channels of blessings are not completely blocked, but original sin has still many a fine day before it. The human channels will never allow the quantity of necessary blessings to flow through.

A Question of Quantity

In this perspective, it is really a matter of quantity that is in question. In the original plan of God, before Genesis 3, the divine blessings, or graces, which were supposed to reach each individual either directly from God or, on the other hand, indirectly through each individual, were to make it possible for each one to live in peace with God and with one's fellow beings. The first sin brought it about that the indirect blessings no longer were able to circulate normally. They no longer came in sufficient quantity. Even worse, humans became, in a way, channels of malediction for their fellows. If the chosen people had practiced justice and right, they would have been able, according to God's design, to become a channel of grace sufficiently powerful to serve as relays of divine blessings so as

⁹⁹ Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text*, 133.

to profit all the nations of the earth. Unfortunately, the chosen people, in the likeness of all humanity reunited in Adam and Eve, showed itself from the very beginning to be incapable of walking fully in the ways of God. The quantity of blessings necessary to radically remedy the original sin continued to be lacking among human beings.

If we accept this way of looking at the matter, the *κεχαριτωμένη* can then be understood in the following way. We have seen that this term designates a reality proper to Mary. It must be considered as one related to her very identity, which is linked with salvation and which is not to be reduced just to the privilege of being the Mother of the Messiah. We have also observed that the translation "full of grace," while it is not imperative, presents an interpretation that remains legitimate. The participle *κεχαριτωμένη* thus comes back to a question of quantity,¹⁰⁰ and would mean that Mary's privilege would not be that of having received a particular or special grace, but quite simply to have received directly from God, and having in that way escaped from original sin, a sufficient quantity—the verbs in *-όω* being able to suggest the idea of fullness—of graces to live and to remain in perfect harmony with God and one's fellow beings. Such an interpretation has the interest of being able to understand the privilege of the Immaculate Conception while remaining within the framework of a theology that is first of all biblical. And, moreover, without having to enter into the problematic of determining the precise or particular type of graces from which Mary benefitted.

For the point, here, is the possibility of understanding, in the light of Luke 1:28 and Genesis 18:17-33, the privilege of the Immaculate Conception as a preservation from all stain of original sin. And it is equally so that the bull *Ineffabilis Deus* of Pius IX of 8 December 1854 defined Mary's Immaculate Conception: *ab omni originalis culpae labe praeservatam immunem*. The reflection starting from Genesis 18:17-33 offers a way to understand how Mary was not marked by original sin at her coming into this world. As for understanding the fact that subsequently Mary had never committed any personal sin—something which no doubt the dogma understands as the

¹⁰⁰ Muñoz Iglesias, *Los Evangelios de la Infancia. II*, 156, to be nuanced.

“stain” of original sin but does not state explicitly—that is another question (is it always a matter of quantity?), leading to further reflection. Not that the idea is alien to the Old Testament, not even to Genesis 18. It is true that the idea of Mary not committing any personal sin seems to make of this last a counter-example to the principle of the “immediate fall” of which there was question above. In this sense, Mary appears as good news insofar as her lone case suffices to invalidate the postulate according to which disobedience to God would be a fatality. However, the idea of the just as exceptions in the midst of a sinful multitude is well represented in the Old Testament, in particular in Genesis with Noah (Gen. 6:9) or Lot (Gen. 19:1-14), but also elsewhere, notably with the special exemplary case of Job, the only person of whom the Old Testament says that he “did not sin” (Job 1:22). In fact, the idea of the just distinguished from sinners is also the very principle that underlies Genesis 18:16-33.