IN PRAISE OF LIMITS: A READING OF THE CREATION ACCOUNTS

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Introduction

We increasingly live in a world where everyone is encouraged to prevail, to dominate, and to become "stronger" and more "competitive" than others, both on a personal level and among states and nations. On a personal level, we see someone as powerful if they can do whatever they want, with seemingly infinite possibilities and no limits. Similarly, on a broader scale, we view countries that act without restriction as more powerful than those that are not. Our culture is one of omnipotence that rejects all forms of limitation. Limits are viewed as negative, obstacles to be eliminated at any cost. This attitude may even stem, in part, from a misinterpretation of the omnipotence attributed to the Judeo-Christian God. Judeo-Christian religion has profoundly influenced modern culture, especially the Western one. The traditional understanding of the creation account often emphasizes the image of an omnipotent deity. However, as André Wénin[1], to whom I owe many of the insights for this paper, insightfully describes with the expression "the

1. André Wénin, *L'uomo biblico : letture nel Primo Testamento*, Epifania della Parola. N. S. Testi ermeneutici; 8 (Bologna: EDB, 2005); André Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo o l'errare dell'uomo. Lettura narrativa e antropologica della Genesi. I. Gen 1,1-12,4*, Testi e commenti (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 2008).

I make extensive use of these texts, of which – whenever I quote – I will provide my own English translation/s, as there is no translated version available.

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dominated domain:"[2] the depiction of God's power in Genesis is different. It is not that of a super-powerful deity reflecting our projections and dreams of superpower[3]. Instead, the Genesis account reveals the image of a meek and restrained God.

In this paper, I will explore the concept of limits and how they form the foundation of life. Indeed, limits are the *conditio sine qua non* for life to flourish. I will trace a unifying thread through the biblical narrative, revealing how limitations are present from the creation account, through the story of Adam and Eve, to the *Debarim YHWH* (the words of the Lord). In particular, I will examine it in the creation account, focusing both on the boundaries imposed upon the elements of primordial chaos and on God's self-imposed limitation. This second aspect becomes strikingly evident in the institution of Shabbat. Furthermore, interpreting the text through this lens offers a fresh perspective on the so-called "original sin." Finally, I will briefly analyze how limits are integral to the *Debarim YHWH*—limits provided to enable human beings to realize their full potential and achieve fulfillment.

Limits are a harbinger of life. I hope that these pages will help readers uncover the profound richness embedded in the concept of limitation and appreciate the invaluable insights offered by the Judeo-Christian tradition, beginning with the reading and interpretation of the indispensable *Bereshit*.

The Seven Days of Creation

Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim ve'et ha'aretz

Thus begins the *Torah*, the first five books—Pentateuch—of the Bible, in its original language, Hebrew. Analyzing the

2. Wénin, *L'uomo biblico : letture nel Primo Testamento*, 33.

3. Paul Beauchamp, *Testamento biblico* (Magnano (BI): Edizioni Qiqajon, 2007), 21.

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first chapter of Genesis, we may be surprised to discover how God created the world, because—if we read attentively and with a "new gaze," free from the influence of what we think we already know—it presents an unusual image of His power. Since childhood, we have been taught that God is omnipotent, and this is true: we find confirmation of this in the Biblical accounts. But what kind of power are we talking about? How is this power expressed in the Bible? I believe we often understand power through models we find in the world, both from personal and collective perspectives. Someone or something is powerful if it does not have limitations or restraints, having the possibility to do whatever he/she desire. However, these ideas do not correspond to the biblical concept of power, at least as conveyed in the creation account.

Who is speaking? The authorship of the first creation account

First of all, it is important to remember that the author of the first chapter of Genesis belongs to the "priestly" tradition, which focuses its entire message on the presence of the divine word in Moses and, through him, in Aaron (cf. Ex. 7:1-2)"[4]. The creation account "is the work of a man who does not speak at the time of creation, but at a specific time in history"[5]: it is the work of a "school of temple scribes, of the priestly order,"[6] inspired by the experience of exile following the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. This context led them to outline a vision of universal history and divine judgments through the framework of the seven days of creation, "sustained by the

4. Beauchamp, *Testamento biblico*, 13. Translation mine. I made my own translation, as there is no English translation available.

5. Beauchamp, *Testamento biblico*, 12.

6. Beauchamp, *Testamento biblico*, 24.

expectation of universal salvation."[7] Indeed, as Karl Löning and Erich Zenger observe, biblical figures, in moments of their greatest existential crises, refer to and appeal to the good order of creation. The narrative of origins expresses "the good beginning of their own experience,"[8] contrasting sharply with the painful and contradictory reality they were facing. Such an account reflects a distinct theological perspective, fitting into the dialectic between death and life, chaos and cosmos. "To use theological terminology, creation theology's particular '*Sitz im Leben*' is theodicy. It attained its first 'great' epoch in Israel during the crisis of the exile, when both Deutero-Isaiah and the Priestly document composed their versions of creation theology."[9] I believe this brief introduction allows us to appreciate the creation account more fully and deeply. It does not describe a beginning in a chronological or causal sense but presents a narrative that conveys theological, rather than historical or scientific, truths, through myths.[10]

Harmonious World – Harmonious Text

The first chapter of Genesis describes an orderly, harmonious world that comes into being as God speaks. And this harmonious universe is imitated by an equally harmonious ordering of the text.[11] It is first necessary to read the text. If

7. Beauchamp, *Testamento biblico*, 24.

8. Karl Löning and Erich Zenger, *To Begin with, God Created..: Biblical Theologies of Creation* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2000), 27.

9. Löning and Zenger, 27.

10. Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York : Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966), 1–3, 6-7; Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 9–11; Löning and Zenger, *To Begin with, God Created..*, 9–10. Sarna is very forthright and resolute on this point, going so far as to state: "Hence, it is a naive and futile exercise to attempt to reconcile the biblical accounts of creation with the findings of modern science." Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 3.

11. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 13.

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we read the text carefully, we can notice many repetitions that give this composition a regular rhythm. I would like to focus on how God works, in particular, until the fourth day. In addition, it is helpful to know that the abyss (*the deep*) mentioned in verse 2 refers to an immense mass of water, which the Creator divides in two through a vault, thereby creating space within. This space will be progressively ordered and prepared to sustain life.

> [1] In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, [2] the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. [3] Then God said, "Let there be light" and there was light. [4] And God saw that the light was good; and God *separated* the light from the darkness. [5] God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.
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> [6] And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it *separate* the waters from the waters." [7] So God made the dome and *separated* the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. [8] God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.
>
> [9] And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be *gathered together into one place*, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. [10] God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. [11] Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. [12] The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. [13] And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

> [14] And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to *separate* the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, [15] and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. [16] God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. [17] God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, [18] to rule over the day and over the night, and to *separate* the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. [19] And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day. (*Emphasis added*.)[12]

We can observe that God works primarily through acts of separation: in the first four days of creation, the verb *to separate* is repeated five times. Additionally, if we consider the expression *"gathered together into one place,"* which implicitly presupposes a separation, the count rises to six repetitions. He separates light from darkness, then divides space both vertically (separating the waters above the dome from those below) and horizontally (gathering the waters into one place so that dry land can appear). Notably, these separations address the chaotic elements described in verse 2: "on the first day, it is darkness from which God separates light; on the second day, the vault bisects the abyss of waters; finally, the earth emerges from chaos when it is separated from the waters."[13]

From what has just been said, it emerges that one of the permanent features of the creative action of Elohim of Genesis 1 is to separate, to distinguish, that is, to *set limits.*[14] For the transition from an initial chaotic state, it is necessary to place *limits* on the elements of chaos, not to eliminate them but to

12. For all the Bible quotations I refer to the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE).

13. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 16.

14. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 23.

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confine and separate them, so that an orderly and harmonious universe can emerge[15]. The Hebrew words *tohu va-vohu* describe the initial state of chaos [16]—unformed (or formless) and void. As Sarna points out, the central theme of the narrative is that order is the result of divine action. [17] The *tohu va-vohu* stands in stark contrast to a created world. Without limits, the world would revert into a formless state, that is, a reversal of creation, as we can read in the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 4:23-27). These separations, and thus the limits imposed on the primordial chaotic elements, are essential for establishing things and beings in their identity and in relation to alterity. Moreover, because of these limits and separation of the primordial elements, each distinct thing can find its place in proper relationship with the whole so that the created world is "good" – "*tov*."

Other elements complete the description of the "uncreated" world. First, there is darkness, often associated with chaos (Is 45:19; Jer 4:24). Then there is *thôm*,[18] the abyssal waters of the primordial ocean—waters that, in the Bible, often carry ominous connotations (Jon 2:6; Ps 42:8)[19] and may symbolize the realm of death (Gen 7:11; Ex 15:5)[20]. There is

15. The concept of *creatio ex nihilo* is foreign to the First Testament mentality. "As Ibn Ezra observed, bara' does not itself denote the creation of something out of nothing (creatio ex nihilo). This doctrine seems to have been first articulated in the late Second Temple work, 2 Maccabees." Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Jewish Publ. Soc, 1989), 5. However – according to Löning and Zenger – even the Bible texts, 2 Macc 7:28 and Wis 11:17, which are often adduced to biblically ground creatio ex nihilo, cannot be used for this purpose. Löning and Zenger, *To Begin with, God Created..*, 10.

16. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary*, 6.

17. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary*, 6.

18. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary*, 6.

19. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 21.

20. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 21.

one last element that completes the scene, the *rûaḥ*, although its interpretation is the most delicate and there are multiple possible interpretations[21]. It is translated with "wind", which fits well into the general picture of primordial chaos, and it can be seen – according to Sarna – as "the agent by means of which the water is separated—that is, blown back—as in Genesis 8:1 at the conclusion of the Flood and in Exodus 14:21 at the crossing of the Sea of Reeds."[22] Wénin points out that in Hebrew, the term Elohim is sometimes used to create a form of superlative: in this case, *rûaḥ* Elohim could indicate a powerful storm "sweeping" over the surface of the waters.[23] "The fact remains that this would be the only instance in the Old Testament where the term *e'lohîm*, when associated with *rûaḥ* ('wind, breath, spirit'), would not refer to God Himself. Therefore, many prefer the more common interpretation: 'The wind of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.'"[24] Indeed, other possible interpretations, connecting *rûaḥ* with the next term (the verb *rḥp*, whose meaning is uncertain in Hebrew),[25] read it as divine creative and life-generating energy. Or, as a term "heralding the arrival of God,"[26] thus referring to His presence and immanence.[27] Wénin, in any case, prefers not to rob the text of its imaginative power and richness of meaning, and suggests reading the expression "sweeping over

21. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 21.

22. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary*, 6.

23. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 21.

24. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 21.

25. "The verb *rḥp* is used twice more in the Hebrew Bible. It seems to describe a movement, an agitation. In Jer 23:9, it probably means to agitate, to move; in Deut 32:11, in an active form it describes the movement of an eagle circling above its young in the nest - hence the 'wheeling' usually taken up." Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 21.

26. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary*, 6.

27. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary*, 6.

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the water" as "a quivering power, trembling, restrained as it is, suspended, waiting. As if God were calming his own power, ceasing to amplify the chaos" to the point of "modulating his own breath: 'And Elohim said, *yehî 'ôr*' (v. 3a)."[28]

> The beginning of the creative act for Elohim consists in restraining His own power—which, like any violent wind, could be a devastating, destructive force—and channeling it into a word. Thus, the presence of the 'wind of Elohim' in the prologue of creation implicitly introduces the theme that structures the entire poem: that of the creative word. The psalmist echoes this in his own way when he declares: 'By the word of Adonai, the heavens were made, and by the breath (*rûaḥ*) of His mouth, all their host' (Ps 33:6). The breath from God's mouth, His word, is nothing other than His wind: powerful, certainly, but restrained, calmed, controlled, and articulated. It loses none of the force of the breath that generates it, but transforms it into a creative power.[29]

Summarizing, God utilizes His "wind" as a powerful force, yet He restrains, stills, and modulates it into a creative word. This word does not eliminate the elements of chaos—which are inherently hostile to life—but instead sets limits and boundaries for them, allowing them to find their place in a harmonious world. "Divine power thus appears as a dominion exercised without destruction, without violence."[30] In fact, unlike other Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) narratives, where creation results from a struggle between deities[31], here it is through the word that God exercises dominion over creation, affirming the image of a meek God. A final consideration regarding the power of God's word: the first term used by Elohim is not insignificant.

28. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 22.

29. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 22.

30. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 25.

31. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (London: SPBK Press, 1984), 81; Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 4–6.

It is the verb "to be," specifically conjugated in a form that expresses will: "Let there be!" (*yehi*)[32]. The interesting thing to note is that this verb, *hyh* (to be), is closely related to the name YHWH[33], which God will later reveal to Moses as His own name (Ex 3:14). This connection suggests that the creative word "flows from the divine name itself. It constitutes God's enactment of his own name, that is, of his own divine essence."[34]

The *Shabbat*[35]

An important point to highlight is that God, with each act of creation, pauses to stand at a distance and recognizes its beauty before proceeding to the next phase of His work. Indeed, seven times, we read "And God saw that it was good."

> This astonished pause is far from insignificant; on the contrary, it reveals something essential. In His creative act, Elohim is not merely content to deploy His power to bring order, transform, produce, and give life. He also knows how to suspend His power to behold—more precisely, to allow that which He has created to *be*, regarding it with a gaze that opens a space for its existence. This attitude, once again, carefully calibrates the dominion exercised elsewhere in the creative act.[36]

This aspect of distancing and wonder becomes even more evident at the culmination of the sixth day. The seventh day,

32. "IsraelBiblicalStudies.Com," https://lp.israelbiblicalstudies.com/lp_iibs_biblical_hebrew_let_there_be_light-en.html (accessed November 22, 2024).

33. "IsraelBiblicalStudies.Com;" Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 22.

34. P. Beauchamp, *Etudes Sur La Genèse: L'Eden, Les Sept Jours, Les Patriarches*, Cours Travaux et Conférences (Faculté de théologie de Fourvière, 1971), 56–57. (my translation).

35. Due to the brevity of this paper, I cannot fully elaborate on the profound richness of Shabbat. Here, I will focus solely on the aspect of Shabbat that supports my thesis: namely, that Shabbat reveals the meekness of the divine omnipotence.

36. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 25.

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Shabbat, is a day set apart and consecrated, during which Elohim—issuing no commands and producing nothing—completes creation. The seventh day appears as a "superfluous" day, as "it brings neither new works nor any chronological extension and yet it is this day that concludes the work of creation and that paradoxically – in that it does so again and thus 'superfluously' – completes the completed world."[37] The idea that this day represents the fulfillment of creation is underscored by a close parallelism in Genesis 2:2, where the verbs "to rest" (*shabat*) and "to fulfill" or "to accomplish" (*kalah*) correspond, functioning as synonyms, "according to the rule of the Hebrew parallelism."[38]

And on the seventh day	God *accomplished*	the work that he had done
on the seventh day	he *rested*	from all the work that he had done.[39]

According to the creation narrative, it is precisely the withdrawal of Elohim—the cessation of His work—that brings creation to its completion. Without this divine self-restraint, creation would remain unfinished. He thus demonstrates that God imposes a limit on His own ability to dominate, showing Himself to be "stronger than His own strength, master of His own dominion."[40] Through *Shabbat*, God distances Himself from creation, opening a space for what is not Him—a space of life and autonomy for His creatures; hence His delegation of power to the stars and humanity. As Paul Beauchamp – a French Jesuit, theologian, and exegete – superbly and uniquely describes, "The Sabbath once again emphasizes the gentleness

37. Kurt Appel, ed., *In Praise of Mortality: Christianity and New Humanism* (Paderborn, Germany: Brill | Schöningh, 2022), 3, https://doi.org/10.30965/9783657791248.

38. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 26.

39. I just changed the order of the verbs in order to show this parallelism more clearly.

40. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 26.

at the heart of God's image. A law of gentleness that corrects the projections of an all-powerful God, confused with our dream of superpower, that is, a God made in our image."[41] In this sense, the omnipotence of God is nothing but the meekness of one who remains master even of His own power. Not the meekness of the weak, who have no other choice, but the meekness that is a "strength stronger than strength."[42] To better appreciate the kind of meekness being discussed, we can turn to Mary Karr's wonderful poem, *"Who the Meek Are Not."*

Not the bristle-bearded Igors bent
under burlap sacks, not peasants knee-deep
in the rice-paddy muck,
nor the serfs whose quarter-moon sickles
make the wheat fall in waves
they don't get to eat. My friend the Franciscan
nun says we misread
that word meek in the Bible verse that blesses them.
To understand the meek
(she says) picture a great stallion at full gallop
in a meadow, who—
at his master's voice— seizes up to a stunned
but instant halt.
So with the strain of holding that great power
in check, the muscles
along the arched neck keep eddying,
and only the velvet ears
prick forward, awaiting the next order.[43]

41. Beauchamp, *Testamento biblico*, 21.

42. "But a definition of gentleness, of meekness, as a strength stronger than strength is, at the same time, necessary to reject a preferential option for weakness, dictated by the resentment of those who lack strength." Beauchamp, *Testamento biblico*, 21.

43. Kerr, Mary. "Who the meek are not" in *The Turning aside: The Kingdom Poets Book of Contemporary Christian Poetry*, The Poiema Poetry Series, edited by D. S. Martin (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016), Kindle.

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So the Bible, particularly through the principle of Shabbat, appeals for intentional self-restraint—"a call for an intentional self-limiting of human striving and ambition."[44] To better illustrate this appeal, I will briefly introduce the concept of *tzimtzum*, strictly connected to the *Shabbat* theology.

TzimTzum

I connect my reflection to the Jewish mystical approach to interpreting and reading the Bible. I feel reassured that I am not straying far from Jewish tradition by using this particular lens, as Gershom Scholem, known for his work on Kabbalah, wrote that mysticism is "a legitimate form that Jews have resorted to understand themselves and the external world, a form that expresses their religious experiences and historical transformations, but also their mortal or life-bearing crises."[45]

Tzimtzum is a term from Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition, that plays a central role in the work of Isaac Luria, one of the leading figures of the Kabbalistic school of Safed. The term literally means "contraction," and it refers to God's act of withdrawing to create space—making room for His creation. [46] "According to Torah, before the creation of the world as we know it, everything was filled with *Ohr Ein Sof*. [...] But if God

44. Kathryn Schifferdecker, "Sabbath and Creation," *Word & World* 36, no. 3 (July 1, 2016): 210.

45. Luca Miele, "Quando Dio trattenne il fiato - La creazione secondo la mistica ebraica," *L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO*, January 16, 2010, https://www.vatican.va/news_services/or/or_quo/cultura/2010/012q04a1.html (*my translation*).

46. Sanford Drob, "Tzimtzum: A Kabbalistic Theory of Creation," *The Jewish Review*, 3, no. 5 (April 1990), https://thejewishreview.org/articles/?id=121; Miele, "Quando Dio trattenne il fiato."

fills everything and is Himself everything, if all space is filled with the *Ohr Ein Sof*, how could He create something new?"[47]

Without delving into Isaac Ben Luria's intricate and complex theory, the concept of *tzimtzum* can serve as a fascinating and inspiring key to understanding our own presence. We must also dispel a common historical misunderstanding: the idea that *tzimtzum* is a cosmogonic concept, akin to describing how the universe was formed, as in the Big Bang theory. This misconception partly arises from the profound interactions between Kabbalah and humanistic-Renaissance culture[48]. Think, for example, of figures like Pico della Mirandola, Giordano Bruno, and Copernicus, who initiated cosmogonic reflections, often drawing on Kabbalistic thought. In doing so, however, they transformed Luria's vision into a cosmogony[49]. According to Davide Assael, a Jewish-born Italian philosopher and theologian, this retraction of God can be understood as an interpretation of the first verse of the Torah—though not within the Brunian and cosmological-Renaissance framework[50]. Drawing on the insights of the great medieval biblical commentator Rashi, Assael asserts that the Torah is fundamentally a book of ethics[51]. Rashi even suggests that the Torah could have started with Exodus 12:2: "This month shall be unto you the first of the months" [52]—the first commandment given to Israel—marking

47. Michal Osham, "*Tzimtzum*: The Jewish Practice of Making Space," *RealClear Religion*, May 4, 2021, https://www.realclearreligion.org/articles/2021/05/04/tzimtzum_the_jewish_practice_of_making_space_775643.html.

48. Davide Assael, "Tzimtzum (the Withdrawal of God)," Jan 17, 2023, Video of lecture https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4ZjeQ1LOOo.

49. Assael, "Tzimtzum (the Withdrawal of God)."

50. Assael, "Tzimtzum (the Withdrawal of God)."

51. Assael, "Tzimtzum (the Withdrawal of God)."

52. Rashi, "Genesis 1:3," Sefaria, accessed November 11, 2024, https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.1.3?lang=bi&with=Rashi&lang2=en.

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the Exodus from Egypt, the ethical foundation of Jewish identity.

From this perspective, *tzimtzum* is not merely an account of creation, but rather it applies to every generative process. The Torah, then, is describing a process akin to when parents step back to make room for their child's growth and development, or when a teacher withdraws to allow space for the student's learning and progress. Every act of generation necessitates a moment of retraction. This withdrawal is not only foundational to creation, but it also exemplifies Jewish ethics better than any other concept. *Tzimtzum*, indeed, can be taken as a paradigm to understand Jewish ethics, which is an "ethics of freedom"[53]—an ethics grounded in the withdrawal of the creator to make space for the autonomy of the other. This is also an indication for us: every time we step back, exercise our self-restraint, we create space for something else to grow and flourish in the emptiness we leave behind. "*Tzimtzum* shows us that, if we learn how to take up less space for ourselves and make more space for others, our sense of fulfillment, joy, and meaning doesn't diminish—it increases."[54]

God Delegates His Power

Shabbat also has a connection with what precedes it in the narrative, namely, with the mission God entrusts to human beings. Indeed, Shabbat opens a "space of freedom"[55] for humanity, for man and woman, where they can act responsibly and be, in turn, "creators, exercising effective dominion."[56] This

53. Assael, "Tzimtzum (the Withdrawal of God)."

54. Osham, "Tzimtzum."

55. Wénin, *L'uomo biblico : letture nel Primo Testamento*, 15.

56. Wénin, *L'uomo biblico*, 15.

is our calling: to be co-creators! In this way, we can become who we are: the image and likeness of God.

A second[57] aspect of divine power is the gift of life, evident in the teeming, life-filled creation of plants and living beings. God makes plants fruitful and blesses the animals of the sky, sea, and land, including humanity, to multiply and flourish. In this way, God acts as a "generous creator, who does not try to keep fruitfulness under control, so that life can develop without him."[58] Furthermore, He does not hesitate to delegate His power to certain creatures: the stars are entrusted with the task of marking time, and human beings are entrusted with the care of the earth's space. Once again, we see how God's power manifests as restrained and unobtrusive.[59]

The Likeness of God: A Vocation

Regarding the creation of the human being, certain peculiarities stand out.[60] When the narrator describes what Elohim does (Gen 1:27), he uses the verb "to create" – *bara'* – three times instead of the verb, in its plural form, "to make" – *'asah* –, which was used in the previous verse (Gen 1:26)[61]. The verb *bara'*, "in the Hebrew Bible, does not mean 'to make out of nothing' but rather 'to bring forth something new, unseen, or unheard of,' and it is distinctive in that its subject is always and exclusively God."[62]. On the other hand, the verb *'asah* has

57. In addition to what we analyzed above—namely, the ability to bring forth a harmonious and orderly cosmos by placing limits and separations on the elements of chaos.

58. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 25.

59. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 25.

60. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 27–29.

61. "Genesis 1 Interlinear Bible," https://biblehub.com/interlinear/genesis/1.htm (accessed November 21, 2024).

62. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 28.

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a much broader meaning. Why, then, does the text switch verbs, and why does it shift to the singular? Wénin highlights three additional differences between God's announcement of the "plan" (Gen 1:26) and its "execution" as reported by the narrator (Gen 1:27).[63]

[26] Then Elohim said,

"Let us make (הֶעֱשֶׂה נ)
humankind in our *image*,
according to our *likeness*;

and let them have
dominion over the fish
of the sea, and over the
birds of the air, and over
the cattle, and over all
the wild animals of the
earth, and over every
creeping thing that
creeps upon the earth."

[27] So Elohim created (אֶת־בָּ)
humankind in his *image*,
in the *image* of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

[28] God blessed them, and God
said to them, "Be fruitful and
multiply, and fill the earth and
subdue it; and have dominion
over the fish of the sea and over
the birds of the air and over
every living thing that moves
upon the earth."

In Gen 1:26, Elohim mentions both image (*tselem*) and likeness (*demut*) to describe the relationship between Him and the human being, but in Gen 1:27, the term *likeness* is omitted. The narrator repeats the term *image* twice but does not mention *likeness.* Moreover, another notable difference is the introduction of the phrase *"male and female"* by the narrator, which was absent from the original announcement. Finally, the creation of the human being is not followed by the usual refrain, *"And God saw that it was good."*

63. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 27–29. These differences become more apparent when we analyze the verses in parallel.

Wénin argues that these subtle differences are deliberate literary devices used by the author to suggest that the human being is created unfinished.[64] He notes that the refrain formula is also absent at the end of the second day of creation, where the work remains incomplete: separating the waters is not enough to make the space habitable; *"the dry land"* must also appear (Gen 1:9) before the refrain *"tov"* is appropriate. This notion of incompleteness could also explain the omission of *likeness.* According to Wénin, "The human certainly bears within itself the image of God, but it is not (yet) resembling, as the human also shares a crude sexuality ('male and female') with the animals.[65] It is as if the human being is positioned in a median state between divinity and animality."[66] Starting from what has just been said—namely, the incompleteness of the human—one could understand the difference between the verbs used for the project and the execution.

> When, in verse 27, the text recounts that God *creates* humanity, it precisely indicates that He fulfills His part, as He alone is capable of '*creating*.' However, after accomplishing this 'creation,' not everything is yet *'done*.' On the contrary, once God has completed His part, there is still work to be done.[67]

What is missing is precisely what the human being has to "do" to bring his or her being to completion, to make the image become likeness. Elohim points out that, immediately

64. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 27–29.

65. On this point, Sarna disagrees: "No such sexual differentiation is noted in regard to animals. Human sexuality is of a wholly different order from that of the beast." Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary*, 13.

66. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 29. On this, however, Sarna agrees with this reading: "[T]he dual nature of humankind, the creatureliness and earthiness as well as the Godlike qualities." Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary*, 11.

67. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 29.

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after the creation of humanity, a way to work out one's incompleteness. He called humanity to "be fruitful and multiply," to "subdue" (*kavash*) the earth, and to "have dominion" (*radah*) over other creatures. That is, he commands them to act like him, whose dominion—however—is not manifested in exploiting the creation at will and without regard, but in caring for it. Indeed, we have argued that divine power is deeply inhabited by meekness. This mandate involves a responsibility to "subdue" so that creation flourishes. It also calls us to "rule" with care, not severity. Humanity is to oversee creation as God would, embodying His stewardship and exercising power in the way God exercises His own power.[68] In essence, this means serving as God's representative on earth—His co-regent and co-creator—acting in harmony with His purposes and ensuring creation thrives under their care. An indication of this invitation to exercise one's dominion without violence, that is, to limit one's power over the animal, is the gift of plant food:[69] to mankind, every plant yielding seed and the fruits of the trees, while to the animals, every green plant (Gn 1:29-30).

> With the words of Paul Beauchamp: "What qualifies the image [of God] is not only supremacy but, equally, the manner in which this dominion is exercised. It is the dietary regime that presupposes precisely a peaceful form of this exercise." This implies that man, like God, knows how to give himself a *limit*: that of respect for the life and place of the animal. [70]

There is more: the animality that Elohim entrusts to humanity to dominate is not only external but also internal. According to Wénin, as we have already mentioned, "male and female"

68. Maurizio Teani, "Il vangelo della creazione," *Aggiornamenti Sociali*, February 2016, https://www.aggiornamentisociali.it/articoli/il-vangelo-della-creazione/.

69. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 30.

70. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 30–31.

are an indication of our proximity to the animal, and such animality could be related to sexuality and desire[71]. Therefore, if we consider such speculations reliable, Elohim's invitation would also be to learn to master the life force in us, to *set a limit* to desire. The risk otherwise is that it will result in violence. It appears, then, that becoming human perhaps means learning to master, to tame animality with its potentials that we have in us. "Making humanity appear is then tantamount to becoming the 'shepherd of one's own animality.'"[72]

Indeed, if we have said that God-likeness is not already given to man but is a vocation we are called to undertake, then we must turn toward Him. If He rules with meekness, with His word, then perhaps we too must learn to rule the forces of our inner chaos not with violence, but through the meek power of his word.

Was the serpent right or wrong?

Generally, the representation of salvation history that seems to emerge from the biblical account is a linear narrative with causal links. In the beginning, God created a perfect universe—Eden, the earthly paradise—where humanity could lead a happy and peaceful life. Then comes the transgression of the divine command, which is punished by suffering, arduous labor, and death. To remedy this situation, God sends the Savior, who restores the original condition and opens the way to life for those who believe in Him.

Wénin argues that this linear representation of salvation history too easily and superficially adopts the serpent's assumptions.[73] The serpent presents a God who is superior to

71. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 31.

72. Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo*, 32.

73. Wénin, *L'uomo biblico*, 13, 19–22.

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human beings, jealous of this superiority, and thus frames the relationship between God and humanity as one of competition. We can also find this idea in the work of the well-known Italian biblical scholar and cardinal, Carlo Maria Martini,

> Humanity has not trusted in God's plan of love since Adam, because Adam's sin arose from the profound suspicion that God, at heart, issued the prohibition out of jealousy toward humanity. This suspicion of God as a competitor, a rival to humanity, lies at the root of many forms of atheism: the belief that God must die so that humanity can truly live![74]

The second creation account and the so-called "fall" account[75] (Gen. 2:4–3:24) plays a central role in shaping and understanding this linear representation.[76] God creates man and provides everything for his happiness: life, a garden, animals, and a woman. Yet, all of this seems contingent on obedience to a prohibition. If the man transgresses this command, he will die (Gen. 2:17). The serpent, skillfully and cunningly, focuses attention on the law, presenting it as a "frustrating prohibition"[77] (Gen. 3:1), thereby diminishing the significance of all the gifts God has given. It is the serpent, in fact, who insinuates that God possesses knowledge, presenting this as an enviable superiority, saying: "For God *knows* that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, *knowing* good and evil" (Gen. 3:5).

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74. Carlo Maria Martini, "Due pellegrini per la giustizia: Giuseppe d'Egitto e Ignazio di Loyola," in *I grandi della Bibbia : esercizi spirituali con l'Antico Testamento*, ed. Laura Invernizzi, vol. 7, Opere (Firenze: Bompiani, 2022), chap. 3, sec. 6, Kindle. (*my translation*).

75. Calling Gen 3 the "fall" is an inaccuracy derived from the concept of the fall of the soul in Platonic philosophy, which viewed material existence negatively in contrast to the soul's existence.

76. Wénin, *L'uomo biblico*, 15.

77. Wénin, *L'uomo biblico*, 16.

Wénin suggests an alternative reading of the text: considering all the gifts God bestows on man for his flourishing, the divine order—this "word that puts order,"[78] which he proposes should be understood as a "friend's advice"[79] rather than a prohibition born of God's jealousy, it becomes a *limit* that defines a space for the other. The desire to suppress this limit originates from a "totalizing will,"[80] which inevitably disrupts relational harmony and leads to death. Death, in this reading, is not a divine punishment but the natural consequence of this totalizing desire that allows no room for alterity—whether the others or the Other—thereby denying it. Indeed, "to deny the other is to die."[81]

> In this sense, God seeks to protect humanity from death, which consists in wanting to hoard everything for oneself. To want to hoard everything is to close oneself to the relationship. Now, it is precisely the relationship that is vital, in the Bible as in life. Like the gift, the limit would, therefore, also be for life since it is openness to the relationship.[82]

The limit, therefore, becomes the *conditio* of possibility for happiness and life. So, it follows from all of this that if one rejects one's limitations and tries to be everything, one endangers relationships. Since we are fundamentally relational beings, this also endangers one's own existence. The fault of Adam and Eve, through this lens, would be their belief in the serpent's portrayal of limitation as a lack, a deficiency, something negative that prevents one from living life to the fullest. This is the exact opposite of what we are attempting

78. Wénin, *L'uomo biblico*, 16.

79. Wénin, *L'uomo biblico*, 41–42.

80. Wénin, *L'uomo biblico*, 16.

81. Wénin, *L'uomo biblico*, 39.

82. Wénin, *L'uomo biblico*, 42.

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to demonstrate here. "The error is not to take the limit as a possibility of life and fulfillment in fullness [...] the fault is to give in to the fear of losing, of not having everything; to give in to the fear of lacking."[83]

A similar, albeit more philosophically developed, perspective is articulated by Kurt Appel, professor of Fundamental Theology and Philosophy of Religion at the University of Vienna. He argues that the serpent's insidious question (Gen. 3:3-4) effectively displaces the forbidden tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—to the center stage, taking the place of the tree of life.[84] In the first passage (Gen. 2:8-9), where the tree of life and the tree of knowledge are mentioned, it is explicitly stated that the tree of life is in the middle of the garden, while the tree of knowledge is not clearly located. It is, so to speak, an addition, something that resists precise placement. In the second passage, where the tree of knowledge is mentioned (Gen. 2:15-17), it assumes a more central position: "This is its first displacement from the 'placeless place' to a (negative) place of prohibition. Still, the tree is not localized any further and thus remains apart from man."[85] With the serpent's question, the tree of knowledge takes center stage and is thus placed at the heart of human desire. In this sense, the snake is already the embodiment of desire, that is, the projection of desire, not just an external tempter."[86] Therefore, the tree of knowledge from its "placeless place" now moves to the center of desire, stimulating an attempt at appropriation. Until then, the tree of knowledge in its extraterritoriality represented a protective layer through which the human being

83. Wénin, *L'uomo biblico*, 43.

84. Appel, *In Praise of Mortality*, 7.

85. Appel, *In Praise of Mortality*, 7.

86. Appel, *In Praise of Mortality*, 7.

was, in a sense, reclothed. Man did not have to be ashamed of his nakedness because the *self-decentering* gap in his field of vision, bestowed by this tree, prevented him from creating an absolute projection for his self."[87]

For Appel, when the tree of knowledge remains in its extra-territoriality, it symbolizes self-deprivation—that is, the process through which the ego moves from the center of life to its margins, a necessary condition for opening oneself to the other. As the tree of knowledge advances toward the center, it becomes part of humanity and symbolizes "[t]he projection of one's own desire (and self-oriented desire)."[88] This projection

> then takes the form of the tempting snake before finally, at the moment of absolute assimilation, morphing into the terror of absolute nothingness, the knowledge of one's own nakedness—in other words, the void associated with unmediated presence and loss of detachment (we might compare this to the meaninglessness of pornographic presence).[89]

In other words, the tree of knowledge, in its non-localizability, represented a protective layer that safeguarded man's unavailability. His desire could not become all-encompassing because of this layer, which thus served as a limit in relation to everything else given by God ("you may freely eat of every tree of the garden"). This limit was not imposed out of jealousy but rather to protect man from his own desire. The moment this protective layer moves within the human horizon, becoming "manageable" (i.e., "eatable"), it is lost. "Hence the divine measures (distance from the tree of life and from paradise,

87. Appel, *In Praise of Mortality*, 8.

88. Appel, *In Praise of Mortality*, 8.

89. Appel, *In Praise of Mortality*, 8.

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imposing mortality over man) seem like restitution measures, *simulacra* of the original protection."[90]

This is a brilliant insight, in my opinion: to consider death a gift—albeit an extreme one—that God gives to human beings. Death becomes the extreme attempt of a God who wants to protect us "from the annihilating emptiness of the totality of our desiring gaze, insofar as we are detached from ourselves and each other in death. [...] In this sense, death becomes the last tragic safeguard, separating the human subject from his own gaze—that is, from total self-objectification as his own double, which would confront us with the ultimate horror."[91]

Re-reading salvation history in a way that moves beyond a simplistic and linear perspective,[92] the Incarnation is not—first of all—a consequence of sin but rather the expression of God's love and His desire for communion with us. "God and man are so little competitors that in Jesus they live together in communion. In him the serpent's lie is radically and decisively exposed."[93]

The Law

When someone refuses to accept limits and leave her own desires uncontrolled, relationships degenerate into violence, destruction, and death. This violence must be restrained, and this is where the law comes in. "By placing a limit on the

90. Appel, *In Praise of Mortality*, 9.

91. Appel, *In Praise of Mortality*, 9.

92. This perspective views the necessity of redemption—the saving act of Jesus Christ—as a consequence of original sin. We can refer to this as the "standard version" of original sin theology, which gained prominence from St. Augustine onward.Lluis Oviedo, "Original Sin: The New Scientific Context as Challenge and Opportunity," *Theology and Science* 20, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 99–118, https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2021.2012926.

93. Wénin, *L'uomo biblico*, 19.

omnipotence of desire, the law opens the individual to the recognition of the other and thus to the relationship that allows one to live."[94]

I am not permitted here, due to brevity, to elaborate on the intriguing theme of the Law, *Debarim YHWH*, as a continuation of this limitation that enables human beings to realize themselves fully.[95] I will, however, briefly mention two aspects that illustrate this point.

First, just consider the words of self-presentation that the Lord provides in both versions of the "Ten Words" (Exo 20:2–17; Deut 5:6–21): "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." In this, He defines and presents Himself as a saving and liberating Lawgiver—oxymoronic as that may sound. Thus, the words, precepts, and laws that the Lord entrusts to the people of Israel—on a deeper reading—"speak of Israel's freedom, freedom that the first word sets as its foundation."[96] This freedom is fundamental for God to establish a covenant with free beings.

Second, we can appreciate this aspect through the Shabbat Law (Exo 20:8-11),

> Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do

94. Wénin, *L'uomo biblico*, 36.

95. I have recently discovered that this understanding of the law is not exclusive to the Judeo-Christian tradition but is also present in the Buddhist tradition. In Buddhism, there are five "precepts." The Sanskrit word for these is *Śīla*, which also means "ethics" in general. "In his Sanskrit dictionary, he specified the concept with an example: 'The Śīla of fire is to burn.' Thus, the guidelines of Buddhist ethics are the true nature, just as the nature of fire is to burn." That is, as we are saying, following the precepts bring to fruition and manifest our true nature within us. Chandra Candiani, *Il silenzio è cosa viva: L'arte della meditazione* (Torino: Einaudi, 2018), 77.

96. Wénin, *L'uomo biblico*, 105.

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> any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

As we have already noted, it calls for voluntary self-restraint and the imposition of limits on human greed. "It is, of course, a word of law. For those who have ears to hear, however, it is also a word of promise,"[97] because it liberates us from the countless bondages we unknowingly bear: "We are laboring under 'the yoke of greed,' and we have put the yoke on our own necks."[98]

Like Father, Like Son

I believe that, in one way or another, we actually become the image of God. The question is: What image of God do I have within me? Adam and Eve desired to become like the God the serpent described to them—a God who is superior, distant, and jealous of His superiority. Yet, they seemed uninterested in becoming like the God who creates through the word, restrains and channels His power, gives everything to human beings, and delegates to them the power to dominate. This is likely because the latter is not the image of God they carried.

Thus, it becomes crucial for each person to ask: *What image of God do I hold?* This image profoundly influences how one behaves, what one aspires to become, and where one directs their desires. When I speak of the idea of God, I refer to what the well-known theologian Paul Tillich articulated: the idea of God represents what is ultimately important or of ultimate

97. Schifferdecker, "Sabbath and Creation," 209.

98. Schifferdecker, "Sabbath and Creation," 216.

concern in one's life—even for an atheist.[99] In his work *Dynamics of Faith*, Tillich defines faith as "the state of being ultimately concerned."[100] This ultimate concern is what fundamentally shapes a person's values and commitments, transcending specific doctrines or religious affiliations. The American writer David Foster Wallace shares a similar perspective,

> [H]ere's something else that's true. In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship – be it J.C. or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother-goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles – is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things – if they are where you tap real meaning in life – then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. On one level, we all know this stuff already – it's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, bromides, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story. The trick is keeping the truth up–front in daily consciousness. Worship power, you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart – you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And so on.[101]

99. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith.*, 1st edition (New York: Harper Colophon, 1978), 1–3.

100. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 1.

101. David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*, 1st edition (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), chap. 1, Kindle.

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From this emerges how deep and incisive the image of God (or idols) we hold within us truly is. This invites us to a profound examination of that image, lest it become an idol—just consider the dangers of religious fundamentalism. On it depends our freedom or our enslavement. Will we, then, follow the demanding path of freedom—suggested to us by God and His *debarim*—or will we choose to surrender to our bondages, afraid to face our "deserts," like the people of Israel when they complained to Moses, "For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?" (Exo 14:12)

Conclusion

The God who emerges from the first pages of Genesis is a God who creates through the word, without violence and without eliminating the elements of chaos, but by separating them and placing a *limit* on them. He is a God, therefore, who is capable of being stronger than his own strength by placing a *limit* on it. He is a God who rejoices in his creation, who delegates—and thus *limits*—his power of dominion to his creatures, particularly to the human being. He is a God who withdraws—that is, *limits* himself—to make space for his creation. This is especially evident in the concepts of Shabbat and *tzimtzum*. In this space inaugurated by God's retreat, the possibility of a covenant emerges—a relationship that, without this retreat, would otherwise amount to mere subjugation.

From all this, we derive that his power is best expressed by the word "meekness," with the cautions and specifications we outlined earlier. Since we are created "in his image and likeness," if we truly wish to exercise dominion over creation, we should do so according to the model of dominion shown to us by God. That is, a dominion capable of limiting its claim to wholeness, making room for the other, allowing it to grow

without seeking to subjugate, conquer, or "consume" ("eat") the other.

This image of God can also help us cultivate healthier relationships among ourselves and with the world. In a time of ecological crisis and of a "World War III in pieces," as Pope Francis calls it, we need more than ever to reassess the values that inspire and guide our daily choices.

In this short paper, I aimed to show that limits, far from being something negative, are a source of life and fullness. I believe that if we embrace what the limit can teach us, we will emerge from this time of global crisis more mature, more fulfilled, and more human (and therefore more divine).