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Florian Wöller • Ueli Zahnd (eds.)

Dominican Culture, Dominican Theology

The Order of Preachers and Its Spheres of Action (1215 – ca. 1600)

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Faith and Natural Philosophy in Albert the Great's Account of the *generatio Christi*[1]

Amalia Cerrito

In his theological and biblical-exegetical works, Albert the Great ponders the possibility of explaining the generation of Jesus via ordinary models of animal generation. The issue at stake is how to combine the embryological doctrine of his natural-philosophical works with the exceptional embryogenesis of Jesus. Unlike any other conception, that of Jesus takes place without carnal union and therefore lacks that paternal seed, whose 'formative power' usually manages the entire embryonic development. Moreover, while human embryos are formed from the matter received from both parents, Jesus's embryo was formed exclusively from the material substance of Mary. For these reasons, Albert wonders to what extent the human generation of Jesus can be explained through comparison with ordinary generations. In the absence of a seed that configures the embryo, a different account is required both for his conception and formation in Mary's womb. To solve this theoretical 'impasse' arising from the seedless generation of Jesus, Albert opts for a parallel with the botanical generative model (*pullulatio floris*).

This article reconstructs Albert's doctrine by analysing passages from theological works (*De incarnatione*, the *Commentary on De divinis nominibus*, and the *Summa theologiae*), and from his biblical commentaries on the Book of Isaiah and on the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. Albert's conceptual analysis of Jesus's generation is grounded in an interdisciplinary approach, where natural-philosophical and medical doctrines on human generation are employed to interpret the dynamics involved in Jesus's conception. Through a detailed comparison with the processes of ordinary generation, Albert clarifies the type of causation at work in the human generation of Jesus. In tune with the anti-heretical mission of the Dominican order, he critically dissects heretical arguments that draw parallels with ordinary human generation.

1. Human and Divine Embryology in Comparison: the Formation and Animation of Jesus

From the Latin translations of Greek and Arabic medical and natural-philosophical works, Christian thinkers had inherited a model that explained embryonic formation as a process of the gradual development of bodily and psychic

[1] This publication is part of the research project "Itineraries of Philosophy and Science from Baghdad to Florence: Albert the Great, his Sources and his Legacies (2023–2025)", funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (PRIN 2022, 20225LFCMZ).

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functions. This model—labelled *epigenesis*—was at variance with the theological assumption that God infuses the rational soul into the embryo when the body is fully formed. What determines the formation and exercise of the vital activities of an embryo before its ensoulment?

Between the 12th and 13th centuries, two opposite positions emerged regarding the formation of the human embryo before it acquires a soul.[2] On the one hand, the *preformists* argued that the male seed contains a miniature version of all the parts of the embryo, which only need to grow.[3] On the other hand, the supporters of the *epigenetic* doctrine claimed that the parts of the embryo gradually form from an undifferentiated substance, developing in successive stages.

Even though between the 12th and 13th centuries, the comparison between divine and ordinary embryology is mostly occasional, theologians resorted to both *epigenesis* and *preformism* in order to explain the formation of Jesus in Mary's womb and maintained two opposite lines of argument: the first posited a gradual formation of Jesus's body, i.e., natural genesis to guarantee his human nature, while the second held that Jesus was completely formed and ensouled from the start.[4]

To account for the formation and vital activities of the human embryo before it acquires its soul, Albert the Great resorts to the medical and philosoph-

[2] For a reconstruction of the medieval models explaining the formation and development of the human embryo, see Demaitre, Anthony / Travill, Luke: "Human Embriology and Development in the Works of Albertus Magnus", in ed. James A. Weisheipl: *Albertus Magnus and the Sciences: Commemorative Essays 1980,* Toronto 1980, 405–440; see also Martorelli Vico, Romana, *Medicina e filosofia. Per una storia dell'embriologia medievale nel XIII e nel XIV secolo,* Milan 2002; and *ead.*: "Introduzione" in *Aegidii Romani Opera Omnia*, vol. II.13, *De formatione humani corporis in utero* (Testi e studi per il Corpus Philosophorum Medii Aevi 12), Florence 2008, pp. 3–48: 24–47.

[3] E.g., the Franciscan masters Alexander of Hales and Bonaventure, taking cues from the Augustinian doctrine of the *rationes seminales*, place in the male seed an active germ (or *ratio seminalis*) from which the vegetative and sensitive souls develop. Created by God, this active germ is enclosed in the matter since the Creation. Cf. Nardi, Bruno: "L'origine dell'anima umana secondo Dante", in *Giornale critico di filosofia italiana* 12 (1931), pp. 433–456 and 13 (1932), pp. 45–56 and 81–102, reprinted in *id.*: *Studi di filosofia medievale* (Storia e Letteratura, Raccolta di studi e testi 78), Rome 1960, ²1979, pp. 9–68: 40–41.

[4] After 1245, the focus of theologians shifted from the formation of Jesus to the virginal conception of Mary. The Dominican master Roland of Cremona was the first theologian to address the issue of Mary's virginal conception by systematically resorting to the toolbox provided by natural philosophy and medicine. In his exegesis of the conception of Jesus, he makes use of the Galenic and Aristotelian theories on embryology. See Van der Lugt, Maaike: *Le ver, le démon et la Vierge. Les théories médiévales de la génération extraordinaire. Une étude sur les rapports entre théologie, philosophie naturelle et médicine (*L'Âne d'Or), Paris 2004, pp. 390–392. For an overview of the medieval debate on divine embryology, see *ibid.*, pp. 462–468. On Roland's biblical exegesis against heresies, see Parmeggiani, Riccardo: "From the University to the Order. Study of the Bible and Preaching Against Heresy in the First Generation of Dominicans at Bologna", in eds. Viliam Š. Dóci, OP / Thomas Prügl: *Bibelstudium und Predigt im Dominikanerorden. Geschichte, Ideal, Praxis* (Dissertationes historicae 36), Rome 2019, pp. 21–38.

ical notion of the 'formative power'.[5] Albert's embryological doctrine aims to combine the medical and natural-philosophical model of *epigenesis* with the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* of the human soul, infused in the embryo only when it is perfectly formed.[6] In Albert's view, animals always require mating, which guarantees the mixture of paternal and maternal contributions. The natural father, i.e., the agent that activates the generative process, transmits his corporeal substance to the embryo through his seed, making it in the image and likeness of himself. In animal embryogenesis, the gestation period is functional to a progressive development led by the 'formative power' of the seed. This formative process is aimed at the configuration of a body to be ensouled by the rational soul, which is created and infused directly by God when the embryo is perfectly formed.

Albert is well aware that none of these dynamics pertain to Jesus's *embryogenesis*. First of all, no emission of paternal seed occurs. Secondly, Jesus lacks the instrumental figure of the natural father who shares his corporeal substance and nature with him. Thirdly, while animal embryos gradually develop their bodily and psychic functions, the development of Jesus's embryo did not happen gradually: through the Holy Spirit, his body was formed, ensouled, and united with the divine nature in a single instant.[7]

In order to account for the formation of Jesus, Albert resorts to a traditional explanation transmitted by Peter Lombard's *Libri Sententiarum*, according to which Jesus's body was formed instantaneously at the moment of conception. At that moment, however, the organs were so small that they were invisible to the naked eye. They became perfectly detectable only after forty-six days.[8] Thus, Albert considers heretical the position of those who deny that Jesus did not grow after conception and holds that Jesus's embryo spent the same amount of time as any other embryo in his mother's uterus:

> [Christus ...] tanto tempore fuit in utero matris, quanto alius homo secundum naturam esse debet. [...] Licet statim perfectus fuerit vir in conceptione, tamen lineamenta corporis tenuia erant et parva magis quam alio sint quadragesimo quinto die. Unde tempus, quod in aliis necessarium est ad conversionem, formationem, consolidationem et incrementum, in Christo ad consolidationem et incrementum necessarium fuit.[9]

5 Cerrito, Amalia: *Albert the Great (c. 1193–1280) and the Configuration of the Embryo. Virtus Formativa* (Palgrave Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Medicine), Cham 2023, pp. 45–88.

6 On Albert's doctrine of human generation see, Demaitre, Anthony/Travill, Luke 1980, pp. 405–440, Krause, Katja: "Albert the Great on Animal and Human Origin in his Early Works", in *Lo sguardo. Rivista di filosofia* 18 (2015), pp. 205–232, and Cerrito 2023, pp. 45–88.

7 Cf. Fries, Albert: "Vom Denken Alberts des Grossen über die Gottesmutter", in *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 5 (1958), pp. 129–155: 132. Cf. also Burger, Maria: "Albert the Great. Mariology", in ed. Irven Resnick: *A Companion to Albert the Great. Theology, Philosophy and Sciences* (Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 38), Leiden/Boston 2013, pp. 105–136.

8 Petrus Lombardus: *Sententiae in IV libris distinctae* III, d. 3, cap. 4, ed. Ignatius Brady (Spicilegium Bonaventurianum 4–5), Grottaferrata 1971–1981, vol. 2, p. 37. Cf. Van der Lugt 2004, p. 405.

9 Albertus Magnus: *De incarnatione* q. 3, a. 1, ed. Ignatius Backes, Alberti Magni Opera

Mary's pregnancy lasted the same amount of time as every natural pregnancy. However, it did not serve to progressively form the body of Jesus, but exclusively to strengthen (*ad consolidationem*) and increase (*ad incrementum*) his already formed body parts. In the exceptional case of Jesus, Albert adopts the preformist explanation, elsewhere repeatedly dismissed in favour of the epigenetic doctrine.[10]

Like any other embryo, Jesus's was ensouled only once his body had been completely formed. However, lacking the formative power of the seed which configures the body to be ensouled by the rational soul, Albert concludes that the formation and animation of Jesus necessarily happened in the same moment:[11]

> Christo in conceptione oportuit statim formatum esse corpus, eo quod in ipso non fuerit sicut in aliis conceptis. In aliis enim est virtus seminis operans, quae similis est virtuti vegetabilis animae patris, et operatione illa fit consolidatio, formatio et incrementum. Quia igitur in Christo non fuit aliquod semen operans, oportuit, ut statim infunderetur anima, virtute cuius infundi non poterat, nisi corpus esset organizatum et formatum. Ideo oportuit, ut etiam corpus in conceptione formatum esset.[12]

In animal embryos, the operative power of the seed (i.e., the formative power) is at work. Performing functions very similar to the vegetative power of the father's soul (*similis est virtutis vegetabilis animae patris*), it strengthens, forms, and increases the body parts of the embryo. It follows that, lacking the formative action of the seed, Jesus's embryo was to be perfectly formed at the time of conception to be ensouled.

2. What About Mary? The Female Contribution to Jesus's Generation

One could wonder if Mary had an active, or at least formative, role in the human generation of Jesus. In his *Commentary on the Sentences* (1243), Albert rejects any such possibility. Like any other mother, Mary provides the material basis for conception, sustaining and nourishing the embryo during its development, but she does not carry out any formative activity in the *generatio Christi*:

> [...] non est matris quod ipsa est conversiva ad speciem, et formativa membrorum conceptus: sed sunt eius operationes ad meliorationem complexionis ex materia, et disponentibus virtutibus ex complexione matricis et nutrimenti.[13]

Omnia, vol. 27, Münster 1958, p. 191.

10 Cf. Cova, Luciano: "Seme e generazione umana nelle opere teologiche di Alberto Magno", in ed. Gabriella Zuccolin: *Summa doctrina et certa experientia: studi su medicina e filosofia per Chiara Crisciani* (Micrologus Library 79), Florence 2017, pp. 237–256: 246; Burger 2013, pp. 123–124; Van der Lugt 2004, pp. 398–401.

11 On the instantaneous formation of Jesus's body, see Van der Lugt 2004, pp. 398–413.

12 Albertus Magnus *De incarnatione* q. 3, art. 1, ed. Backes, p. 191.

13 Albertus Magnus: *Commentarii in IV sententiarum* III, d. 4, a. 45, ed. Augustus Borgnet, *Opera Omnia*, vols. 25–30, Paris 1893–1894, vol. 28, p. 85.

Like every other mother, Mary does not have the power to transmit the specific form (*non est conversiva ad speciem*) to the embryo. However, she prepares the generative material to be informed by the active agent. While in ordinary human generation the active agent is the formative power of the seed acting on the matter provided by the female, in the generation of Jesus the active role is performed by the Holy Spirit. Thus, Mary does not prepare her matter for the action of the formative power, but for the action of the Holy Spirit. This guarantees the *commixtio* of matter and form, without involving carnal union and therefore *concupiscentia*, i.e., the vector of original sin.[14]

The question of the mother's contribution to the generative process is widely addressed by Albert in his natural-philosophical works, where he gives a reconstruction of the so-called 'dispute between philosophers and physicians' on the nature of the female contribution.[15] On the one hand, physicians held that the female emits a seed that is just as formative and operative as the male seed. On the other hand, philosophers maintained that the female does not contribute actively to the generative process. There is just one active agent in this process, the male, who by means of his seed carries out the entire formative process. The female merely offers the material basis for conception and her uterus nourishes the embryo during the developing process. Albert does not explicitly take sides. He prefers to reconcile, as far as possible, these contrary positions.[16]

In the same vein, in his *Super Lucam* (c. 1264–1268), Albert wants to prevent the attribution to Mary of any active role (a possibly heretical argument). So, he stages a *quaestio* of sorts between philosophers and physicians, wondering whether Mary performs an efficient causality in the generation of Jesus:

Quaeritur utrum in conceptione Beata Virgo aliquid efficientis causae contulerit? [...] Et dicunt quidam quod in materia generationis quae fit ex commixtione sexuum, duplex est forma: una quarum dicitur formativa, et haec est de substantia patris: et alia autem est informativa quae est de substantia matris. Et dicunt quod formativa agit et operatur per se,

[14] Cf. Cova 2017, p. 253.

[15] The question of the nature of the female contribution to the generative process engaged medieval Latin authors from both the Arabic and Latin traditions. The natural-philosophical and medical works inherited from the ancient world hand down a series of heterogeneous doctrines, mostly in contrast with each other. In addition to this topic, another major point of contrast between the Aristotelian and Galenic traditions was the question of the 'hegemonic organ'. Cf. Chandelier, Joel: "Medicine and Philosophy", in ed. Henrik Lagerlund: *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy. Philosophy between 500 and 1500,* Dordrecht 2011, pp. 735–742; and also Ottoson, Per Gunnar: *Scholastic Medicine and Philosophy. A Study of Commentaries on Galen's Tegni (c. 1300–1400),* Naples 1984, pp. 219–239.

[16] On Albert's conciliatory approach in the 'dispute between philosophers and physicians', see Siraisi, Nancy: "The Medical Learning of Albertus Magnus", in ed. James A. Weisheipl: *Albertus Magnus and the Sciences: Commemorative Essays 1980,* Toronto 1980, pp. 379–404; de Asúa, Miguel: "War and Peace: Medicine and Natural Philosophy in Albert the Great", in ed. Irven Resnick: *A Companion to Albert the Great. Theology, Philosophy and Sciences* (Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 38), Leiden/Boston 2013, pp. 269–298: 290; Miteva, Evelina: "'Iam patet igitur veritas eius quae dixit Aristoteles et causa deceptionis Galieni'. Philosophers vs. Medics in Albertus Magnus' Account on Conception", in eds. Andreas Speer/Maxime Mauriège: *Irrtum-Error-Erreur* (Miscellanea Mediaevalia 40), Berlin 2018, pp. 107–122; Cova 2017, p. 249.

distinguendo sanguinem, et convertendo, et formando, et figurando: informativa autem subagit et tunc subministrat. Et haec est sententia Galeni.[17]

According to the medical argument, the generative matter comes from the mixture of the male and female seed. The product of this mixture has two forms accomplishing different functions: the *formativa*, derived from the paternal substance, acts and operates upon the menstrual blood, while the *informativa*, derived from the maternal substance, provides the substratum to the action of the male seed (*subagit et tunc subministrat*). In this perspective, Mary's seed, like that of any other female, possesses a formative power, which however is less powerful than that of the male seed and is subordinated and secondary to that of the latter.

By contrast, according to the philosophical argument, Mary's seed—rather than carrying a less powerful formative power—is endowed with the 'beginning of the form' (*inchoatio formae*), i.e., a *subjectum* for the form to be educed from the matter by the male seed:[18]

Non tamen est sententia Aristotelis, et Philosophorum, qui secuti sunt eum in scientia naturali: sed potius quod sola virtus informativa est in gutta patris, nec aliqua vis formativa vel informativa est in gutta matris, nisi forma confusa et indeterminata et indistincta: et ideo nihil agit penitus nec subministrat, sed agitur in eam per guttam viri: gutta enim viri intrat in guttam foeminae, sicut spiritus corpus: quia etiam gutta patris convertitur in spiritum, et intra viscositatem guttae maternae continetur: operans distinguendo, convertendo, formando, figurando, et caeteras operationes in ea faciendo.[19]

In such a view, the male seminal fluid is the sole bearer of any formative power. It penetrates the female seed, much as a spirit entering a body, and operates the distinguishing, converting, forming, and shaping of the obscure (*confusa*), undefined (*indeterminata*), and indistinct (*indistincta*) 'beginning of the form' enclosed in the female seed.[20]

According to Albert, both the medical and the philosophical arguments arrange male and female seeds into a hierarchical order in which the female con-

[17] Albertus Magnus: *Super Lucam* cap. 1, v. 31, ed. Augustus Borgnet, *Opera omnia*, vol. 22, Paris 1894, p. 72b.

[18] On Albert's doctrine of the *inchoatio formae*, see Nardi 1931–1932, Snyder, Steven C.: "Albert the Great, *Inchoatio formae*, and the Pure Potentiality of Matter", in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 70 (1996), pp. 63–82, and Cerrito 2023, pp. 13–44.

[19] Albertus Magnus *Super Lucam* cap. 1, v. 31, ed. Borgnet, p. 72b.

[20] Albert's exegesis echoes the argumentation of his *Ethica* (1268), where he articulates step by step the action of the formative power of the male seed at work in the embryo since conception, see Albertus Magnus: *Ethica* I, tr. 9. cap. 4, ed. Augustus Borgnet, *Opera omnia*, vol. 7, Paris 1891, p. 143: "Embryones vocantur concepta a matricibus semina, in quibus (sicut in libro Animalium determinatum est) gutta masculi intrat in guttam foeminae sicut spiritus in corpus: et per virtutem proprii spiritus qui intrat in viscositatem seminis continetur, dirigit, purgat et purificat guttam foeminae, et ex purgamento pellem circumducit, intra quam semina sic unita concluduntur, ut spiritus resolutus ab unione seminum evaporare non possit, sed veniens ad pellem reflectatur in seipsum, et intra substantiam seminum reversatur."

tribution is subordinated to the male's. For his part, Galen marks the action of the male formative power by the chain of changes (*distinctio*, *conversio*, *formatio*, *figuratio*), while the female power is described by the Latin verbs *subagere* and *subministrare*. The prefix *sub-* clearly indicates an activity which is subordinate to the male power. It follows that, even if Mary's seed were formative or contained the 'beginning of the form', it could not produce any substance by itself. In Albert's view, this entails that no matter the line of argument heretics might take, it would be impossible to attribute to Mary a formative power of any kind.

3. An Alternative Explanatory Strategy: the Botanical Generative Model

Resorting to his natural-philosophical and medical knowledge, Albert clarifies to what extent the dynamics involved in the human generation of Jesus can be explained through a comparison with animal generation. On the one hand, to prove the extraordinary nature of Jesus's embryogenesis, Albert opts for the preformist doctrine, which he rejects to explain human embryogenesis.[21] On the other hand, to demonstrate the ordinary nature of Mary's contribution, he combines medical and natural-philosophical knowledge on the nature of the female seed.

It is clear that the model of causality involved in animal generation cannot be compared tout court to that entailed in the human generation of Jesus. Nevertheless, Albert's botanical generative model (*pullulatio floris*), as developed in his *De vegetabilibus*, comes to the aid as an alternative explanatory strategy:

> Divinae generationi et humanae assimilatur generatio floris. Flos enim pullulat de uno in decore et odore et spe utilitatis in fructu. Et similiter filius secundum divinam generationem pullulat de uno, quia est in caelo sine matre, similiter secundum generationem humanam, quia est in terra sine patre.[22]

According to Albert, the human generation of Jesus mirrors his divine generation. Both generations are made effective by God. As the flower germinates from a single seed (*pullulat de uno*), similarly Jesus was generated (both in his divine and human nature) from one single principle, without involving any emission of paternal seed.

The botanical generative process does not require mating. The seed of plants contains whatever is necessary for germination. However, to start its development it needs the external stimuli of the sun and of atmospheric agents. According to Albert, these are efficient causes of the generative process of plants, since they activate the germination of the seed, but cannot be univocally defined as

[21] Both in his theological and natural philosophical works, Albert resorts to his doctrine of *virtus formativa* as alternative to the doctrine of the preformism and the traducianism of the human soul, providing a coherent definition of the ontological status of the embryo and explaining its formation as a gradual passage from the imperfect to the perfect. See Cerrito 2023, pp. 59–74.

[22] Albertus Magnus *De incarnatione* q. 1, a. 6, ad 4, ed. Backes, p. 178.

'fathers of plants', as they do not share their nature with the latter.[23] The sun and the atmospheric agents are rather equivocal causes of the generation of plants, and they are not embedded in the matter as the formative power of the animal seed is. On the contrary, they act on the seed as instrumental and external efficient causes.[24]

In *De Incarnatione* (c. 1242–1245), q. 3, a. 1 (*De quo conceptus sit Christus per modum efficientis*), Albert devotes a question on the efficient causality involved in the human and divine generation of Jesus. Here, two of the 'opponents' argue in favour of attributing the efficient causality in the human generation of Jesus solely to the Father, and not to the Trinity, as established by the Christian doctrine.[25] Their argumentation relies on the definition of 'natural father' as the efficient, formal and final cause of the generative process. According to the first argument, since the act in charge of 'generating' is specific to the 'father', it follows that Jesus was generated by the 'Father' and not by the Holy Spirit.[26] Albert agrees on the definition of 'father' as "he who generates in the image and likeness of his substance (*in identitate substantiae suae*)", but he specifies that this definition pertains exclusively to the *pater naturalis*. By contrast, the *pater divinus*, as an eternal and spiritual being, cannot become part of the carnal substance of Jesus, and therefore is not the 'father of Jesus' in this meaning.[27]

The second argument is based on the Aristotelian definition of 'father' as the active and efficient cause of the generation, who by means of his seed continues to perform his efficient causality in what is generated.[28] In ordinary gen-

[23] See, e.g., Albertus Magnus: *De vegetabilibus* II, tr. 1, cap. 1, eds. Ernestus Meyer/Carolus Jessen, Berlin 1867, p. 106: "Ministrat enim pater et substantiam seminis et virtutem activam generationis in conceptu; sol autem virtutem solam et ideo non convenit in substantia in plantis. [...] consequens est, solem etiam affinitatem cum plantis proprie non habere. Et ideo procul dubio coelum nihil univocum sui habet in planta: pater autem et substantiam et virtutem univocam habet in conceptu. Ex quibus duabus proportionibus necessario concluditur quod sol vel coelum non est pater plantarum nisi metaphorice et aequivoce."

[24] For a reconstruction of Albert's doctrine of the generation of plants, see Cerrito, Amalia: "Disclosing the Hidden Life of Plants. Theories of the Vegetative Soul in Albert the Great's *De vegetabilibus et plantis*", in eds. Fabrizio Baldassarri/Andreas Blank: *Vegetative Powers: The Roots of Life in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Natural Philosophy* (International Archives of the History of Ideas 234), Cham 2021, pp. 105–122. On Albert's commentary on the pseudo-Aristotelian *De plantis*, see *ead.:* "Alberto Magno e il *De plantis*: ricostruire la botanica perduta di Aristotele", in eds. Marco Martorana/Rafael Pascual/Veronica Regoli: *Raccolta di Saggi in onore di Marco Arosio* (Ricerche di Storia della Filosofia e Teologia Medievali 5), Rome 2019a, pp. 9–28.

[25] Albertus Magnus *De incarnatione* q. 1, a. 6, ad 4, ed. Backes, p. 178: "Videtur enim, quod filius conceptus sit de patre; patri enim respondet generatio, quia dicit Augustinus, quod proprium est patris generare ergo videtur quod conceptus sit de patre et non de spiritu sancto. Item, generatio temporalis imago est generationis aeternae; utraque enim est de uno et super naturam; ergo videtur, quod attribuenda sit patri."

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 188: "verum est quod patri respondet generatio, sed generatio talis quae competit naturae patris. Omnis enim pater generat in identitate substantiae suae. Unde patet, quod generatio secundum carnem temporalis patri non respondet, qui est aeternus et spiritus."

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 187: "illius est generare active vel generatum efficere, quod agit et remanet in ipso

eration, the formative power of the paternal seed remains in the embryo until the formation of its body is perfected, shaping the offspring in resemblance to its father. It follows that, in order to transmit the divine nature to Jesus, something of God had to remain in Jesus's body to perfect it.

To respond to this argument, Albert makes it clear which kind of efficient causality is at work in the generation of Jesus:

> Dupliciter dicitur generatum efficere: uno modo sicut efficiens extra, nihil de substantia sua ministrans generato, sicut artifex generat artificiatum. Et huic generationi similis est generatio Christi temporalis. Nihil enim de deo conversum est in carnem.[29]

An efficient cause can perform its action also from the outside and, therefore, without sharing its substance with the effect. A craftsman can be said to be the efficient cause of his product, even if he does not convey his animated nature to the artifact which remains artificial (*artificiatus*). This is the kind of efficient causality involved in the human generation of Jesus: God was the efficient cause of the human generation of Jesus but nothing of his divine substance was converted into human flesh.

Frequently, Albert uses the analogy of the craftsman and his product to describe the efficient causality involved in the generative process of plants: the sun is the efficient cause even if it does not transmit its celestial nature to plants. In the generation of plants, the paternal functions are not performed by an individual figure, but they are distributed in a chain of internal and external causalities (or powers) cooperating in the generative process. So, while animals derive their substantial nature from a generating individual, the substantial nature of plants stems from the mixture between the matter surrounding the seed and that of the soil where the roots are grounded. Even if it is caused by a higher substance, the nature of plants is fixed in the matter.[30] Similarly, God is the efficient cause of the human generation of Jesus, although he does not share his divine substance with the Son's flesh, which remains human.

In commenting on the passage of the pseudo-Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus*, where the generation of Jesus and the spiration of the Holy Spirit from the Father are compared to the germination of the flower, Albert clarifies the parallel with the *pullulatio floris*.[31] One of the 'opponents' in the argument won-

generato. Ergo, cum filius operatus sit conceptionem ita, quod remanserit in ipso concepto, videtur, quod propriissime conceptio ei attribuatur."

29 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

30 See, e.g., *id.*: *De vegetabilibus* II, tr. 1, cap. 1, eds. Meyer/Jessen, pp. 106–107: "secundum modum commixtionis terrae cum elementis, ita quod semper terrae virtutes emineat et vincat, terra concipit et impraegnatur virtute coelesti. Haec igitur plantae conveniunt secundum substantiam et generationem. [...] nec operatur actum vitae nisi per instrumenta elementalia, quae sunt qualitates elementales quas movet, ordinat et dirigit ad opus vitae anima vegetabilis quae est in eis."

31 [Ps.-] Dionysius Areopagita: *De divinis nominibus,* translatio Joannis Saraceni, in *Dyonisiaca. Recueil donnant l'ensemble des traductions latines des ouvrages attribués au Denis L'Aréopage*, ed. Philippe Chevallier, Bruges 1937, I, p. 96: "Rursus quod pater quidem est fontana deitas, filius autem et spiritus deigenae deitatis, si ita oportet dicere, pullulationes divinae natura et sicut flores et supersubstantialia lumina".

ders whether a parallel with animal generation would not, perhaps, be more appropriate to explain the divine generation of Jesus, as the terms used to refer to the trinitarian persons (i.e., *pater* and *filius*) are mostly used to refer to animal generation.[32] In replying to this argument, Albert states that:

> Generatio plantarum est minus materialis quoad principium activum, quia agens in generatione plantarum est virtus caeli [...] Et secundum hoc, magis convenit cum divina generatione, quae est omnino immaterialis, et praeterea generatio plantarum est tantum ex uno, quia virtus sigillans maris et feminae recipiens coniunctae sunt in uno individuo, generatio autem animalis est ex duobus, et ideo convenientius exemplum est de generatione plantarum, quamvis non sit in ea pater et filius. Nullum enim exemplum inveniri posset, ut ipse dicit, quod perfecte illam processionem repraesentet.[33]

The generation of flowers better applies to explain the generation of Jesus for two reasons. First of all, the efficient cause of plant generation, i.e., the *virtus caeli*, is much more immaterial than the efficient cause of animal generation, i.e., the formative power of the seed. Secondly, while animal generation is the result of the union of two individual substances (*ex duobus*), plants are generated from one single individual seed which contains the male and female powers already combined. For these reasons, Albert concludes that "although in the generation of plants there is no father and son (*quamvis non sit in ea pater et filius*)", one cannot find a better model to represent the procession of the trinitarian persons.

Albert's comparison between divine and botanical generation depends on a concept of *paternitas* that is broader than the biological notion of the same. In commenting on the *Lord's Prayer* as recorded in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, Albert reframes the biological and anthropological concepts of fatherhood within an ontological Dionysian scheme.[34] In Albert's view, each kind of earthly fatherhood is a reverberation and imitation of the exemplary paternity of God. Natural paternities bear traces of the archetypal structure of the divine *paternitas* from which they derive. The trait universally shared by every natural father is the power to bring something into being, i.e., the *virtus productiva* provided by God by the act of Creation.

In this perspective, even if the botanical fatherhood model is less perfect than that of animals, it can be legitimately applied to explain the human gener-

[32] Albertus Magnus: *Super Dionysum de divinis nominibus cap.* 2, §58, ed. Paulus Simon, *Alberti Magni Opera Omnia*, vol. 37.1, Münster 1972, p. 82, l. 44–47: "Praeterea, in generatione vegetabilium non dicitur pater et filius sicut in generatione animalium, cum igitur in generatione divina dicatur pater et filius, convenientius exemplum divinae generatione fuisset de generatione animalium."

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 83, l. 36–48.

[34] Cf. Cerrito, Amalia: "'Paternitas naturalis' and 'Paternitas divina': Albert the Great on Matthew 6,9 and Luke 11,2", in *Divus Thomas* 122 (2019b), pp. 59–78. For further details on how the Dionysian scheme underlines Albert's interpretation of the Lord's Prayer, see Perfetti, Stefano: "'Adveniat regnum tuum.' Dionysian Schemes of Divine Kingship and Foundation of the 'Political' in Albert the Great's Commentary on Matthew 6,10", in *Divus Thomas* 122 (2019), pp. 79–112.

ation of Jesus, since this kind of fatherhood also shares some features with the archetypical model of divine *paternitas*.

4. Natural Embryology as a Biblical Exegetical Tool

In his biblical commentaries, Albert frequently resorts to his natural-philosophical knowledge to interpret biblical passages and theological issues. Natural philosophy helps interpret the poetical language of the Bible, giving fresh foundation to allegorisation or moralisation while amplifying literal aspects of the biblical verse.[35] Moreover, natural-philosophical doctrines, argumentation, and notions are often subtly reformulated and reused in order to prove the truth of the biblical text (e.g., the *quaestio* between physicians and philosophers on Mary's contribution to Jesus's generative process).

The parallels between natural and divine embryology are not only used as tools to investigate theological issues. In the exegetical context the comparison between botanical and divine embryology is enriched with functional details so as to reject heretical doctrines about Mary's and the Holy Spirit's contributions to the generation of Jesus.[36]

In commenting on Matthew 1:18, where the birth of Jesus is narrated, Albert clarifies the reasons why the botanical generative model is more appropriate to explain the generation of Jesus:

> Aeterna enim generatio ex patre sine concupiscentia et sine corruptione, et huic similis ex matre facta generatio. Sed in hoc differt, quod in caelis est ex patre sine matre, in terris autem ex matre sine patre. Propter quod flori assimilatur qui secundum Protagoram in caelo patrem habet sine matre, qui est sol, et in terra matrem sine patre, quae est terra.[37]

In line with his previous commentary on *De divinis nominibus*, Albert explains that the generation of Jesus can be more rightly compared to the generation of flowers than to that of animals since it took place without concupiscence and the corruption of *coitus*. Indeed, botanical generation does not require mating: flowers have their formal principle (i.e., their father) in the sky, though, they derive their material principle (i.e., their mother) exclusively from the ground.

[35] Albert's biblical exegetical works show a variety of interactions between exegesis, natural philosophy, and theology. Biblical commentaries integrate natural philosophy and were the place of confluence where every scientific field found its 'veritable end'. Cf. Perfetti, Stefano: "Biblical Exegesis and Aristotelian Naturalism: Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and the animals of the Book of Job", in *Aisthesis* 11 (2018), pp. 81–96.

[36] As regards the use of botanical knowledge in Albert's exegesis, see my study, Cerrito, Amalia: "Botany as Science and Exegetical Tool in Albert the Great", in *Aisthesis* 11 (2018), pp. 81–97. There, I show how Albert reuses his botanical doctrines and alphabetical entries to interpret physiological processes or plants mentioned in the Bible. Moreover, in the framework of biblical commentaries, Albert also offers new naturalistic doctrines and explanations about vegetative processes.

[37] Albertus Magnus: *Super Matthaeum* cap. 1, v. 18, ed. Bernhardus Schmidt, *Alberti Magni Opera Omnia*, vol. 21.1, Münster 1987, p. 27, l.40–47.

Similarly, in the generation of Jesus, the formal and efficient principle was exclusively the Father, while the material principle was derived entirely from the substance of Mary, and not from the mixture of two seeds resulting from a carnal union.

This argument prepares the ground for the rebuttal of the Helvidian heresy, which deemed the Holy Spirit as the natural father of Jesus.[38] In Albert's view, Matthew 1:18 (*Maria [...] in utero habens de Spiritu Sancto*) should not be interpreted literally, as if the Holy Spirit were materially present in the form of seed in Mary's womb. This verse does not imply any material participation of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' human generation, which, instead, is more akin to the sprouting of a new plant in barren soil. In line with Isaiah 53:2, Albert argues that Mary's womb should be understood as barren soil (*terra sitiens sive ariens*), not fertilized by any seed.[39]

This conceptual analysis is confirmed by Albert's exegesis of the same biblical passage in the *Postilla super Isaiam* (c. 1250–1262):

> "Et ascendet sicut virgultum coram eo." Modum tangit nativitatis, in se scilicet et in matre [...] "Sicut virgultum", quod et planta est et parvum et rectum et viride. Planta autem in caelo habet patrem et in terra habet matrem. Et hoc significat generationis eius modum divinae. Auctor enim et factor illius generationis in caelo est et mater in terra [...] Quantum ad substantiam matris, "de terra" est uteri virginalis.[40]

In Albert's Christological interpretation of the passage from Isaiah, Jesus is compared to a flower, not only because they both have a heavenly father (*sicut flos patrem non habet nisi caelestem*), but also because, just like a flower, Jesus drew his substance exclusively from the root from which he sprouted.

In his *Super Lucam*, Albert again discusses heretical arguments regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus's generation. Among these is the following: unlike any other embryo, Jesus's was not formed from the mixture of the active

[38] *Ibid.*, *cap.* 1, v. 19, p. 32, l. 4–7: "Mentiuntur ergo haeretici Helvidiani, qui dicunt spiritum sanctum esse patrem Christi secundum temporalem ipsius generationem, quia pater est qui de substantia sua generat, quod non fecit spiritus sanctus." Probably, Albert knew Helvidia's heresies via St. Jerome's systematic Mariological treatise *De virginitate Beatae Mariae. Adversus Helvidium*, see Hunter, David G.: "Helvidius, Jovinian, and the Virginity of Mary in Late Fourth-Century Rome", in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1 (1993), pp. 47–71.

[39] Albertus Magnus *Super Matthaeum cap.* 1, v. 19, ed. Schmidt, p. 32, l. 14–19: "In praepositione enim notat potestatem, ut non credas in generatione esse patris alicuius materiam seminalem. Is. LIII (2): 'Ascendet sicut virgultum coram eo et sicut radix de terra sitienti'. Radicis enim non est radix, et ideo radix prima generationis Christi fuit verbum, filius dei, non alia radix, sicut semen dicitur esse radix generationis. Et ideo uterus virginis terrae sitienti sive arenti comparatur, quia nullo virilis humoris semine est infusus."

[40] Cf. *id.*: *Postilla super Isaiam* cap. 53, v. 2, ed. Ferdinandus Siepmann, *Alberti Magni Opera Omnia*, vol. 19, Münster 1952, p. 517, l. 53–73. Similarly, commenting on Isa 11:2, Albert states (*ibid.*, p. 166, l. 63–74): "Et flos de radice eius ascendet. Per metaphoram tangit ortum nati [...] Flos enim lumine solis nascitur, quod est lumen caeleste non habens generans aliquid nisi caelum. Sic in nativitate non erat generans nisi divinum [...] Sic enim floruit dominus, quando sol aeternus totam virtutem caloris et luminis in uterum congessit virginis."

and passive seed, for as a Gregorian chant proclaims, Mary generates her son *sine virili commixtione*.[41] Since Mary was able to conceive without the male seed, it follows that the Holy Spirit conceived and formed the corporeal substance of Jesus from its own divine substance. Albert deems this argument inconsistent and heretical: given its immensity, "the Holy Spirit cannot be enclosed (*includitur*) and conceived (*concipitur*) anywhere", not even in the corporeal substance of Jesus.[42] Rather, the Holy Spirit transformed, formed, and configured the substance exclusively derived from the matter of Mary.

According to Albert, due to the similarity between the formative function of the Holy Spirit and that of the paternal seed, Eutyches and Nestorius held that the Holy Spirit was the father of Jesus *secundum humanam generationem*.[43] In Albert's view, the conclusion of the two heretics does not follow:

> Quod non sequitur: quia pater est qui aliquid suae substantiae habet in filio, quae in filium convertitur. Si autem spiritus sanctus aliquid sui haberet in Filio, sequeretur quod sua substantia esset divisibilis, et ita ipse non esset simplex: quod absurdum est. Praeterea, si esset convertibilis substantia eius, iam non esset Deus nec aeternus, sed temporalis et corporeus: quod esset adhuc maior absurditas: et ideo hoc non est dicendum.[44]

It is true that the 'father' is "he who has something of himself in the offspring", but if the Holy Spirit had something of itself in Jesus, then its divine nature would be divisible and convertible into human nature. This would deny the absolute simplicity of the divine substance. Moreover, if "something of the father is converted into the offspring", the divine nature would be changeable (*convertibilis*) and "God would not be eternal, but temporal and corporeal."

41 Albertus Magnus *Super Lucam* cap. 1, v. 31, ed. Borgnet, p. 71b: "Conceptus enim est captio duorum seminum permixtorum ad generationem: quorum unum est agens, et alterum patiens. Hoc autem non est fas dicere de Virgine, de qua cantatur: 'Quae sine virili commixtione genuit Filium, qui suo mundum cruore redemit.'"

42 *Ibid.*: "Si autem ad hoc dicatur, quod concepit corpulentam substantiam Virginis, et Spiritum sanctum qui illam substantiam formavit: incongruum est et illicitum: quia Spiritus sanctus eo quod immensus non concipitur, nec includitur alicubi."

43 *Ibid.*: "Unde dicendum quod cum sua corpulenta substantia concepit virtutem Spiritus sancti, quae illam corpulentam substantiam primo decidit a sanguine Virginis, et postea convertit eam, et formavit, et figuravit, et in membra distinxit et animavit. Ex hoc autem arguunt Eutyches et Nestorius, quod Spiritus sanctus pater sit Filii secundum humanam generationem." On Albert's reception of Boethius's *Contra Euthychen et Nestorium*, see Hipp, Stephen A.: *"Person" in Christian Tradition and the Conception of Saint Albert the Great: A Systematic Study of Its Concept as Illuminated by the Mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation* (Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters 57), Münster 2001. For the late medieval reception of Boethius's *Opuscula sacra*, see Erismann, Christophe: "The Medieval Fortunes of the *Opuscula sacra*", in ed. John Marenbon: *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius* (Cambridge Companions to Philosophy), Cambridge 2009, pp. 155–177.

44 Albertus Magnus *Super Lucam* cap. 1, v. 31, ed. Borgnet, p. 72a.

5. Conclusion

This article has shown the interaction between theology, biblical exegesis, and natural philosophy in Albert the Great's discussion of the *generatio Christi*. Albert's conceptual analysis of the generation of Jesus builds on an interdisciplinary approach,[45] in which natural-philosophical and medical doctrines on human generation help to interpret the dynamics involved in Jesus's generation. Through a detailed comparison with the dynamics involved in the process of ordinary generation, Albert makes clear what kind of causation is at work in the 'human' generation of Jesus. In explaining his formation in Mary's womb (§1), Albert avoids the epigenetic explanatory strategies, arguing instead in favour of preformism (i.e., already perfectly formed body parts since conception). In discussing Mary's role in the human generation of Jesus (§2), Albert uses his natural-philosophical and medical knowledge to prove that her contribution was ordinary and natural. Albert overcomes the theoretical impasse arising from the seedless generation of Jesus by resorting to a botanical generative model (§3). In line with the anti-heretical commitment of the Dominican order, Albert interweaves biblical, theological, and philosophical sources in his biblical commentaries to discuss heresies on the *generatio Christi* based on parallels with ordinary generation (§4).

[45] This interdisciplinary approach is typical of Albert's mature biblical exegetical works; see Perfetti, Stefano: "Filosofia naturale e trasformazione morale. Alberto Magno interprete del 'Cantico della Vigna' (Isaia, 5, 1–7)", in eds. Luca Bianchi/Onorato Grassi/Cecilia Panti: *Edizioni, traduzioni e tradizioni filosofiche (secoli XII–XVI). Studi per Pietro B. Rossi* (Flumen Sapientiae 7), Rome 2018, pp. 341–352. *Id.*: "Covenant Lawsuits and Repentance: Albert the Great on Isaiah 1–3", in *Theoria* 38 (2018), pp. 61–74; Cerrito 2018 and 2019b. See also Beryl Smalley: *The Gospels in the Schools, c. 1110–c.1280* (History Series 41), London/Ronceverte 1981, p. 241.