

# DIVINE CONDESCENDENCE (*SYNKATABASIS*) AS A HERMENEUTIC PRINCIPLE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TRADITION

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The earliest author to draw attention to the use of divine condescendence as a hermeneutic principle in the study of the Old Testament<sup>1</sup> was the Anglican theologian John Spencer (1620–1693).<sup>2</sup> The essence of his teaching, as pieced together from this voluminous treatise, may be summed up in the following propositions: 1. That God's revelation came to us, not only couched in human language, but also taking into consideration the thought-patterns and customs related to it; 2. that God did not at any time reveal to man everything he was capable of notionally apprehending, but only what he was able to effectively

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1. On this subject generally, see the following bibliography: H. Pinard, "Les infiltrations païennes dans l'ancienne loi d'après les Peres de l'Eglise: la thèse de la condescendence," *Recherches des Sciences Religieuses* 9 (1919), pp. 197–221 (this article has been used extensively in the present study); K. Duchatelez, "La condescendance divine et l'histoire du salut," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 95 (1973), pp. 593–621 (see p. 593, n. 2 for extensive bibliography); B. de Margerie, *Introduction à l'histoire de l'exégèse. I. Les Pères orientaux* (Paris, 1980), pp. 125 ff., 214–239. The Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, devotes section III: 13 to this question.

2. *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus et earum rationibus* (La Haye, 1686).

assimilate, on account of his weakness and sinfulness; 3. that some divine dispositions were given unwillingly, out of consideration for human waywardness, with a view towards him fulfilling the Divine will more perfectly in the long run; 4. that those pagan elements (rites, customs and institutions) which found their way into the Mosaic Law from the existing cultural background must be understood and explained in this perspective.

### **I. Divine Condescendence in the Christian Tradition**

In the New Testament, we find a saying of Jesus which undoubtedly played a major role in the formation of the Christian doctrine of divine condescendence; namely, the statement in Mark 10:5 (=Matt. 19:8) concerning divorce: “It is because of the hardness of your hearts (*sklerokardia*) that he (i.e., Moses) gave you this law.” In other words, the fact of sin obliged the Divine legislator to enact imperfect laws, as more perfect laws, while they could be understood, were not going to be obeyed.

This doctrine was also held by the majority of the Church Fathers, although the term “condescendence” (*synkatabasis*) itself only appears in St. John Chrysostom. Thus, St. Justin Martyr (ca. 100 – ca. 165) asserts that, in His enactment of laws, God accommodated Himself (*harmosamenos*) to the Jewish people. Thus, sacrifices were commanded by God so that they be offered in His name rather than to idols.<sup>3</sup> (Ch. 198).

St. Irenaeus (ca. 130 – ca. 200) deserves special mention as one of the rare instances of a Church Father who relates divine condescendence to an evolutionary concept of the Hebrew people, in which they pass gradually as a collective entity from an infantile to an adult state. In the modern world, in which cultural evolution is largely taken for granted, this idea is of course quite a familiar one, but it was not so during the period under review. Irenaeus is therefore an exception; for him, man is like a little child who gradually grows to attain the perfection of adulthood. God, for His part, in order to better educate mankind, Himself becomes a small child sharing the human condition.<sup>4</sup>

Alongside this insight, Irenaeus presents a point of view similar to that of the Gospel and of St. Justin, namely, that some precepts of the Mosaic Law are to be understood as a concession made to a sinful people.<sup>5</sup> He adds that this is found even in the New Testament.<sup>6</sup> Laws concerning sacrifices were only given after the

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3. *Dialogue with Trypho*, Ch. 19.

4. *Adv. Haer.* IV, 38:1–3.

5. *Ibid.*, IV, 15, 2.

6. *Ibid.*

idolatrous worship of the Golden Calf.<sup>7</sup> He adds, however, that such ordinances were well suited for the religious education of the people.<sup>8</sup> Note, finally, that St. Irenaeus places the Incarnation itself in this perspective: “In the last times, when he encompassed all things in Himself, our Saviour came to us, not as He could have otherwise come, but in such a manner that we were capable of seeing Him... It was His coming precisely as Man.”<sup>9</sup>

Tertullian (ca. 155 – ca. 220) takes up the same theme, offering further examples. The law of retaliation, of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, limited violence by creating a salutary fear of reprisals, while at the same time awaiting a more perfect law in which vengeance would be reserved to God. Much the same applies to the laws concerning sacrifice: “God did not want them for Himself, but He was moved by His solicitude for a people given to idolatry and disobedience. He wished to attach them to Himself by arrangements similar to those in force in contemporary paganism, *but with a view to turning them from their idolatry*. Furthermore, He prescribed that the sacrifices be offered to Himself, as if He desired them, in order that the people not sin by offering sacrifices to idols.”<sup>10</sup>

Origen (ca. 185 – ca. 255) adds some interesting refinements to the work of his predecessor. Certain rites having to do with divination (the Ephod, the Urim and Tummim), as well as some of the prodigies performed by the prophets with the help of their oracles, were not introduced for their own sake. Rather, they were a sort of concession to the people, so that in their eyes their religion was no less well provided than that of their neighbors.<sup>11</sup> In the same way, the choice of animals to be burnt as offerings was fixed by the fight against idolatry; one could not easily idolize animals which one had oneself slaughtered.<sup>12</sup> We shall encounter a similar idea in Maimonides.

St. Gregory of Nazianzen (ca. 330 – ca. 389) proposes a new idea which we shall likewise find in Maimonides. The Divine act of pedagogy is progressive, by way of successive improvements and gradual refinements. In this manner, God needn't constrain His people, and so can obtain from them their uncoerced agreement to spiritual progress.<sup>13</sup>

St. John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407) is the great theologian of Divine

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7. *Ibid.*, IV, 15, 1.

8. *Ibid.*, IV, 16, 5.

9. *Ibid.*, IV, 38, 1.

10. *Contra Marcion* II, 18.

11. *Contra Celsum* I, 36 and III, 2.

12. *Fragments on Lev.* (PG, 12, 400).

13. *Discourse XXXI* (PG 36, 160 ff.).

condescendence which, like St. Irenaeus, he relates to the general economy of Divine salvation. That is, God has placed Himself within man's reach by using human language in Scripture, as well as in becoming Man for him through the Incarnation.<sup>14</sup> For Chrysostom, God is compared to a person, who makes use of stratagems and ruses in order to gain his objectives. Thus, some of His ordinances are given with a view towards avoiding a greater evil and in anticipation of an eventual greater good.<sup>15</sup> "God therefore countenanced sacrifices which He did not want, in order to assure the success of what He really wanted."<sup>16</sup>

St. Jerome (ca. 347–420) continues the same line of thought as his predecessors, particularly the point made by St. Irenaeus about God not ordering sacrifices prior to the episode of the Golden Calf — in other words, that these are simply a concession to the idolatrous tendency of the people. Commenting on Ezek. 20:25, "I gave them statutes that were not good," St. Jerome commented that this text refers to the function of Divine condescendence, "not good" being the equivalent of "less good."<sup>17</sup> Even more important, he presents another idea which was bold and original for its time, namely, that the priesthood was itself something which the Jews had borrowed from the pagan world, and not the other way around as the Christian apologists would have it.<sup>18</sup>

We could easily add to the list of Church Fathers who develop similar ideas, but we must confine ourselves to the most important examples, and to their main ideas. The general characteristics of patristic thought on this subject may be summarized as follows. First, that the context is often one of anti-Jewish polemic. To give a single example, permission to divorce was seen as a lesser evil, in light of the danger otherwise of uxoricide with a view to remarriage.<sup>19</sup> Other positions are scarcely less tenable. Thus, certain laws of the Old Testament are depicted as purely penal correctives for a people reduced to a state of virtual slavery by sin. This is particularly mentioned in connection with the verse from Ezekiel cited earlier by Jerome.<sup>20</sup> The New Testament consistently avoided such extravagances, St. Paul clearly affirming that *the Law is good* (Rom. 7:12).

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14. *On the Epis. to Tit.* III, 2; *On Gen. XVIII*, 3; *On Math.* XXVI, 39 (PG 62, 678; 53, 152; 51, 36).

15. *Adv. Judaeos* IV, 3; *On. Col.* IV, 3; *On Tit.* III, 2; *On Heb.* XVIII, 1 (PG 48, 879 ss.; 62, 328 ff.; 62, 678; 63, 135).

16. *On Is.* I, 4 (PG 56, 19).

17. *On Ez.* (PL 25, 194): "non erat per se bonum et nequaquam malum quia Deo offerebantur, et tamen non bonum quia boni auctorem offenderant." See also on Jer. 7:22 (PL 24, 733).

18. See *Letter* 73 (PL 22, 678): "...ut non Gentes ex Judaeius, sed Judaei a Gentibus sacerdotium acceperint...".

19. Chrysostom, *De Virginibus* 41 (PG 48, 563); St. Jerome, *Comm. on Math.*, 19:8 (PL. 26, 134).

20. Thus St. Justin, *Dialogue*, 21; St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* IV, 15, 1; and others. Compare also *Didascalia Apostolorum* VI, 18.

The essential principle is that of progressive divine pedagogy designed to educate a sinful people. In Irenaeus, as explained above, we find the idea of a people who, like the individual, pass progressively from infancy to adulthood. The same concept is later found in St. John Chrysostom.<sup>21</sup>

Divine condescendence is not the only explanation offered for anthropomorphisms in the Bible. The Law is not only a pedagogue; it also reveals the mysteries of Christ and of the World to Come in hidden, symbolic and allegorical manner. Allegorical exegesis of the type favored by Philo, albeit oriented to the Christian mysteries, is already present in the New Testament (cf. Heb. 9:9); we find numerous patristic references to this. In this context, however, it is noteworthy that the Antiochene School of Exegesis (Theodore of Mopsuestia, Diodorus of Tarsus, St. John Chrysostom) tended to put the emphasis rather more on the principle of Divine condescendence, while the Alexandrian School (Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, etc.) was famous for its allegorizing tendency.

Turning to the Middle Ages, we find that medieval theologians made their own use of patristic teachings in this regard. In the 13th century, St. Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) made abundant use of the principle of condescendence, specifically in his treatise on the Old Law.<sup>22</sup> His immediate predecessors, Alexander of Halès and William of Auvergne, had already done the same.<sup>23</sup> They were in turn anticipated in the previous century by Walafrid Strabo and Anselm of Havelberg.<sup>24</sup> All these writers, however, stress the fact that Divine condescendence is not the sole determinant of the precepts of the Mosaic Law, but that these also have a symbolic meaning, presaging the mystery of Christ.<sup>25</sup> The general thinking of the Middle Ages is well summed up in the following formula from the *Glossa Ordinaria* on Lev. 17:7: “Lex ergo, quasi paedagogus eorum praecepit Deo sacrificare ut in hoc occupati abstinerent se a sacrificio idolatriae. Tamen sanctificavit sacrificia quibus mysteria significantur futura.”<sup>26</sup>

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21. *On Col.* IV, 3 (PG 62, 328).

22. See especially I-II, 91, 5 *corpus*, and also in the *Prima Secundae* 98, 1 co; 98, 2 co and *ad lum*; 101, 3 co and *ad 3ium*; 107, 2 co.

23. See A. Funkenstein, “Gesetz und Geschichte, zur historisierenden Hermeneutik bei Moses Maimonides und Thomas von Aquin,” *Viator* 1 (1978), pp. 147–178, esp. pp. 167 ff. and notes. Bear in mind that the Christian theologians of the 13th century depended as much on Maimonides as on the Fathers in this matter.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 116, and notes 75, 76.

25. We are dealing here with a commonplace of medieval theology. See in particular St. Thomas' treatment of the question in I-II, 101, 2; 104, 2, etc.

26. “The Law, indeed, like their Teacher, stipulated that one offer sacrifices to God, in order to avoid sacrifices to idol, as they would be occupied with these lawful sacrifices. Nevertheless, He made the sacrifices holy by letting them foreshadow the mysteries of the New Covenant.” PL 113, 344 ff. (beginning of 12th cent. at latest).

Finally, an important new element was introduced in the thirteenth century, namely, the concept of *Natural Law* developed by Christian moral theologians. For them, many of the moral precepts of the Mosaic legislation, as well as some of its ritual laws, were seen as appertaining to the laws of nature or, more precisely, to the nature of man. St. Thomas can thus maintain that it is in conformity with human nature to offer sacrifices to God.<sup>27</sup>

## II. Divine Condescendence in the Jewish Tradition

A central point of reference within Jewish thought for the discussion of this question, whether referred to explicitly or not, was the well-known passage in Moses Maimonides' (1135–1204) *Guide of the Perplexed* concerning the subject of animal sacrifices. Both supporters and opponents of Maimonides searched the sources of the tradition in order to find arguments *pro* and *contra*. Maimonides explained his own position as follows:

As therefore God sent Moses our Master to make out of us a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, so that we should devote ourselves to His worship... at that time... the universal service upon which we were brought up consisted in offering various species of living beings in the temples in which images were set up... His wisdom... did not require that He give us a Law prescribing the rejection, abandonment and abolition of all these kinds of worship. For one could not then conceive the acceptance of such [a Law], considering the nature of man, which always like that to which it is accustomed... Therefore He... suffered the above-mentioned kinds of worship to remain, but transferred them... to His own name... Thus He commanded us to build a temple for Him... to have an altar for His name... [and] to have the sacrifice offered up to Him.<sup>28</sup>

He adds further that “God does not change at all the nature of human individuals by means of miracles,” but rather acts in a gradual, progressive way. Thus, these sacrifices, which were offered in one place and at fixed times and only by the members of a priestly caste, “to restrict this kind of worship.”

In a later chapter of the *Guide* (II:46), in which Maimonides again expounds the *raison d'être* of the various laws concerning sacrifice, he shows in great detail how this design of God was realized. In his view, idolatry was combatted insofar as the animals offered were held in high regard by their pagan neighbors, to the extent of being personally held as divinities.

This approach of Maimonides made a considerable impact, not only on the Jewish, but also on the Christian world, where the *Guide* was known in Latin from the 13th century. The majority of the scholastic theologians of the 13th

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27. St. Thomas in particular develops this point. For the moral precepts, see I-II, 100, 1; on the question of sacrifice, II-II, 85, 1.

28. *Guide of the Perplexed* III:32. English translation taken from S. Pines edition (Chicago, 1963), pp. 526.

century made use of it: William of Auvergne, Alexander of Halès, St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas. In his *Pugio Fidei* (ca. 1270), the Dominican Raymond Martini cites the 32nd chapter in its entirety, in Hebrew and Latin. As is well known, for a long time this book was the great source from which Christians drew their knowledge of Jewish thought.

Nevertheless, despite the support which Maimonides seemed to offer to the Christian thesis of the provisional character of the Mosaic Law as an imperfect pedagogical tool, his teaching was accepted by Christian theologians as only a partial explanation, in keeping with patristic thinking.<sup>29</sup>

The same must be said of the successors to Maimonides: of the many Jewish thinkers who later commented on and discussed this text from the *Guide*. Some refused entirely to accept this point of view. Thus, Naḥmanides (1194–1270) did not hesitate to describe the theory as inept and absurd (*divrey havai*) in his commentary on Lev. 1:9. Isaac Arama (1420–1494) offers a careful critique of it, including the reproach that it plays into the hands of the Christians.<sup>30</sup> We must remember that the famous Controversy of Tortosa (1414), during the course of which this Maimonidean text was indeed invoked by the Christians in support of their position, was not far away in time.<sup>31</sup> Among the more ardent defenders of Maimonides, one may single out Isaac Abrabanel (1437–1508), who tries to establish Maimonides' orthodoxy by demonstrating that his view corresponds to that of traditional teaching.<sup>32</sup> In his commentary to Jer. 7:22, he returns to the idea propounded by the Fathers and St. Thomas that sacrifice was only enjoined after the episode of the Golden Calf (a point which is debatable, at least if we accept the present order of the text. Cf. Ex. 20:24). Among the other defenders of Maimonides was David Kimḥi (Radak, 1160–1235), who approves of and summarizes his teaching in his commentary on Jer. 7:22. We shall have occasion to refer to this text below. But the majority view is more complex. No one denies that sacrifice was intended to counter idolatry, as is clear from the biblical texts themselves (e.g., Lev. 17:7). In a general way, we may state that the doctrine of divine condescendence, which is well attested in the Rabbinic literature of

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29. Thus William of Auvergne (d. 1249), *Tractatus de fide et legibus* (Paris, 1874), II: 29: "septem de causis ante Ikegem et etiam sub lege sacrificia huiusmodi offeri voluit Deus, non solum propter consuetudinem idolatriae ut quidam [referring to Maimonides] opinati sunt. Haec enim causa in Cain et Abel locum non habuit." Naḥmanides (Commentary to Lev. 1:9) uses the same rather ineffectual argument against Maimonides; for God did not in fact require a sacrifice from either Cain or Abel.

30. Arama's best-known work is his philosophical commentary on the Pentateuch, *'Aqedat Yizḥaq*. For details and references, see S. Heller-Wilensky, *R. Yizḥaq 'Aramah u-Mishnato ha-filosofit* [The Philosophy of Isaac Arama (Heb.)] (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, 1958), pp. 109–113.

31. See Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain* (Philadelphia, 1970), II: p. 194.

32. See the discussion below on the Midrashic and Talmudic antecedents of this approach.

antiquity (cf. below), is not taken as the *sole* or total explanation of the sacrificial rules, nor even as the most important.

For Nahmanides (*Commentary*, Lev. 1:9), who revives the opinion of Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) in his own commentary on Lev. 1:1, sin offerings somehow substituted the death of an animal for that deserved by the sinner.<sup>33</sup> There might be a Christian influence at work here, but this is uncertain.<sup>34</sup> For Isaac Arama,<sup>35</sup> this is considered as the sign of man's total giving of himself to God. Again, others insist on the "sacramental" value of such sacrifices, in that they somehow serve to bring man closer to God (i.e., the word *qorban*, "sacrifice" is derived from *qarov*, "near"). Thus Albo (15th cent.)<sup>36</sup> and the Maharal of Prague (early 16th cent.),<sup>37</sup> possibly inspired by R. Judah Ha-Levi (ca. 1075–1141).<sup>38</sup> In the Kabbalah we find yet another approach, namely, that sacrifice brings about a union of the heavenly powers (*sefirot*).<sup>39</sup>

We turn now to Jewish thought prior to Maimonides, in the classical period of the Midrash and the Talmud. In the introduction to his commentary on Leviticus, §4, referred to above, Abrabanel defends Maimonides against his critics by showing that his doctrine is a traditional one. In this context, he cites a Midrashic parable of the Palestinian amora, Rav Levi (d. ca. 310):

A king has a son who is given to eating morsels of carrion. The king says, "Let him eat them (*yokhlem*) always at my table, and so he will quickly lose the habit." So it is with Israel, who are passionately addicted to the cult of idols, who carry its sacrifices to satyrs in spite of the divine displeasure. The Holy One, blessed be He, says: "Let them offer their sacrifices in the Tent of Meeting, and they shall be rid of their idolatry."<sup>40</sup>

Abrabanel's text has, "let him eat *them* always at my table," as above, while the critical edition<sup>41</sup> reads, "let him always *be* (*yihyeh*) at my table." Abrabanel's

33. *Perush Ramban 'al ha-Torah*, ed. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1959–60), Lev. 1:9, II: p. 11, and *Perush Ibn 'Ezra 'al ha-Torah*, Lev. 1:1. See also Nahmanides' discourse, *Torat Ha-Shem Temimah* [The Law of the Lord is Perfect], in *Kitvey Ramban*, ed. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1963), I: 164.

34. This idea is already found in the Septuagint. Thus, *ba-nefesh* in Lev. 17:11 is translated as *anti tes psyches*. In ancient Rabbinical literature this idea is extremely rare: thus, *Pesikta Rabbati*, ed. Friedmann (Vienna, 1880), p. 194b: *she-yekhapper dam 'al dam* (quoting Simeon bar Yohai). The reluctance to view sacrifice in this light contrasts with the Christian usage, in which Old Testament sacrifice figured as a foreshadowing of the Passion of Christ.

35. See note 29 above.

36. *Sefer ha-'Iqqarim* III:25 [English: translated by I. Husik (Philadelphia, 1930)], III: p. 229.

37. *Gevurot ha-Shem*, Chapter 69.

38. *Sefer ha-Kuzari* III: 53.

39. *Zohar* I:206b. Cf. Albo, *'Iqqarim*, *loc. cit.*

40. Leviticus Rabba 22:8 (*Parashah Aḥarey Mot.* on Lev. 17:3).

41. *Midrash Va-Yiqra Rabba*, ed. M. Margulies (Jerusalem, 1972<sup>3</sup>), p. 517 which, however, does not cite this variant.



variant reading has not passed unnoticed. Indeed, both D. Hoffmann and in his wake N. Leibowitz consider it false, arguing that it is impossible that an amora would have compared sacrifices offered to the true God to carrion.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the rules of textual criticism stand: *lectio difficilio lecto potior*; one may more easily understand the genesis of the present text as a correction of the original, as cited by Abrabanel (for the reason indicated by Hoffmann and Leibowitz) than the other way round. Again, the text as given by Abrabanel bears an interesting parallel with the text of St. Jerome cited above — and we know that Jerome was fairly familiar with rabbinic exegesis. Nevertheless, we must not exaggerate the significance of the difference between the two texts. In a parable, not all details have a religious significance or necessity, and in any event the explanation given by R. Levi of the text which follows the divergence disappears.

The existence of this text in the Midrash Rabba places in doubt the theory of Pines, according to which Maimonides relied on this point on the Church Fathers, through the intermediacy of Arab writings.<sup>43</sup> Admittedly, nearly identical formulations do appear in St. John Chrysostom and Maimonides, and the idea was so widespread among Christians that the latter could have had access to it in a variety of ways. Nevertheless, the thought expressed in the *Guide* may be adequately explained by Jewish sources, as well as by the author's genius and his own meditation on the Bible.

A well-known instance of the theory of condescendence appears in the Talmud, in the discussion of the law of the *yefat to'ar*, the comely woman captured in war. According to this law, a member of the conquering army may have sexual relations with her even prior to her conversion to Judaism and their lawful marriage; this, according to the Talmudic text, is a concession to man's baser instincts (*yezer ha-ra*).<sup>44</sup>

An important principle, repeated frequently in the Talmud and Midrash, is that "the Torah speaks in the language of man" (*dibrah Torah ki-leshon b'ney Adam*),<sup>45</sup> which corresponds to the first point mentioned above in the definition of

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42. D. Hoffmann, *Das Buch Leviticus* (Berlin, 1906). I have only been able to consult the Hebrew version of this book: *Sefer Va-Yiqra* (Jerusalem, 1976), I: pp. 60 ff.; N. Leibowitz, *Studies in Wayikra (Leviticus)* (Jerusalem, 1980), p. 17.

43. S. Pines, "Some Traits of Christian Theological Writing in Relation to Moslem *Kalām* and to Jewish Thought," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities V:4* (Jerusalem, 1973), pp. 108–110.

44. Kiddushin 21b, interpreting Deut. 21:10–14. Cf. the commentaries of Rashi on the Biblical and Talmudic passages in question; also Maimonides, *Guide* III:41.

45. For example, in Midrash Sifrey on Num. 15:31; Berakhot 31b; Ketubbot 67b; Yebamoth 71a; etc.

Divine condescendence. We must note, however, that in Talmudic and Midrashic literature, this phrase does not relate directly to the subject under discussion, but rather to the interpretation of biblical texts. Rabbi Akiba contended that even seemingly superfluous words in Scripture (e.g., the particle *et* in the accusative; the doubling of the verb in such phrases as *mot yumat*, etc.) are meaningful. Against this view, Rabbi Ishmael contends that whatever words lack significance in ordinary spoken language are likewise bereft of meaning in Scripture, given the rule that the Torah speaks the language of human beings.<sup>46</sup> However, the formula has acquired on a wider sense, seeing divine condescendence as the means of placing Himself within reach of both the sages and the simple folk alike. Maimonides often uses it in this sense;<sup>47</sup> he was anticipated in this by Bahya Ibn Pakuda (fl. 11th cent.) and by Judah Ha-Levi.<sup>48</sup> Bacher<sup>49</sup> cites numerous other authors of the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries who used the formula in this extended sense: Ibn Koreish, Dunash ben Labrat, Jacob ben Nissim, Menahem Ibn Saruq, Tobias ben Eliezer. It must be remembered, however, that we are not dealing here with an evolutionary mentality, which sees Jewish religious history as moving from a primitive state (in need of such condescendence on the part of the divine) to a more perfect one. Such a view was virtually unknown in antiquity, with the exception of Irenaeus, as we have already stated. We are dealing here with a *synchronic* view; at all times there are both learned and simple people, but God places Himself within reach of the simple.

### III. Origin of the Doctrine in the Old Testament

We have already traced the development of this doctrine in both Jewish and Christian tradition. May they both be traced back to a common source in Holy Scripture?

On the question of sacrifice, which we have encountered so often in the course of this study, the Bible presents us with two groups of texts: namely, the sacrificial rituals of Leviticus, given by God's command, and the well-known prophetic texts condemning the concrete practice of sacrifice without conversion of the heart. The two groups of texts must obviously be reconciled by those who accept the Bible as the word of God. Nor is it enough to say that only the deviations in the sacrificial cult are condemned, i.e., worship without justice, love and penitence,

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46. For a full discussion of the schools of R. Akiba and R. Ishmael, especially on this question, see A. J. Heschel, *Torah min ha-Shamayim be-Aspaqlarayah shel ha-dorot* [Theology of Ancient Judaism (Heb.)] (London, 1962–65), 2 v. esp. p. 3–23, 199–219.

47. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodey ha-Torah* 1:9; *Guide* 1:26, 33, 46.

48. Bahya ibn Pakuda, *Hovot ha-Levavot* I: 10; Judah Ha-Levi, *Kuzari* V: 27.

49. W. Bacher, *Die Bibelexegese der jüdischen Religionsphilosophen des Mittelalters vor Maimuni* (Budapest, 1896), p. 72, n. 1; *idem*, *Die Bibelexegese Moses Maimunis* (Budapest, 1896), p. 19, n. 4.

for texts such as Amos 5:25 and Jeremiah 7:22 go much further. Could not the solution again be found in the principle of Divine condescendence? This point of view was recently adopted by Moshe Weinfeld, and it seems perfectly correct. He presents his case as follows:

In these words of Jeremiah there is a theological truth which in some measure corresponds with Maimonides' view on sacrifices. On this verse Radak [i.e., R. David Kimhī] has rightly said: "In the entire Ten Commandments, which are the principle of the Law, there is no reference to a burnt-offering, to a sacrifice... and to the daily burnt-offerings, nor to the Temple built for Divine service; it may be, as our master Moses (= Maimonides), of blessed memory, wrote, that this was to eradicate alien views and to assign the temples built for idolatry to the service of God, that the name of idolatry shall be obliterated from them."<sup>50</sup>

Weinfeld argues quite plausibly that Jeremiah followed the chronology of Deuteronomy, according to which only the Decalogue was given to the people on Mt. Sinai, while the rest of the legislation, although received by Moses on the holy mountain, was not promulgated by him until sometime before his death, on the plains of Moab.

#### **IV. Contemporary Perspectives**

The problem which the doctrine of condescendence attempts to resolve is one of perennial concern. Progress in the fields of historical studies and comparative religion has made available an entire body of knowledge unknown to the authors cited above. The mental world of the people of the Bible was shaped by the outlook and culture of their own time and milieu. The words of Revelation could not possibly be heard by them unless dressed in the forms of this mentality and culture. While the Word of God of course causes this mentality to evolve and progress, it does so slowly and by stages. Here, we are confronted with a phenomenon which is not conditioned exclusively by human sinfulness (however great that influence may be), but is an inexorable consequence of man's very *historicity*. There is, therefore, a process of evolution, of change in cultures and in ways of thinking, which is neither one of continual progress nor of general decadence, but includes progress in certain areas and decadence in others.

There are a number of dangers involved in a theology of divine condescendence. There is clearly a certain risk of rationalism, towards explaining the Bible, and particularly its commandments, exclusively in terms of the setting and age in which the texts were written. Maimonides explains a great number of biblical laws in terms of the mores of the time in which they were promulgated.<sup>51</sup> The reader might thus be led to believe that, the mores in question being no longer relevant,

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50. M. Weinfeld, "Jeremiah and the Spiritual Metamorphosis of Israel," *ZAW* 88 (1976), p. 17–56. See especially pp. 53 ff. The text cited here is on p. 54.

51. *Guide* III:31–49.

such commandments have altogether lost their meaning. But Maimonides does not say so; on the contrary, he severely condemns those who belittle a commandment because they do not understand the reason behind it.<sup>52</sup> This danger is no less real today, and can only be countered by the conviction that the meaning of the inspired words goes beyond what reason alone can construe. At the famous Controversy of Tortosa (1414), this was precisely the reply of the Jewish scholars to the Christian theologians who wished to demonstrate, by appealing to Maimonides, that the Mosaic Law was no longer valid. In substance, they replied that what Maimonides said was true, but that he did not say everything. Even he would have to admit that there remains another dimension to the question of sacrifice, mysterious and inaccessible to reason.<sup>53</sup>

Another risk is that of subordinating revelation to philosophy — a reproach commonly brought against Maimonides. He held that the ideal cult which God had in view when he chose Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation was one with neither temple nor sacrifice.<sup>54</sup> But the real question is where one is to look for this reality: in the Bible or in some human philosophy?

An interesting parallel might be drawn here between Maimonides and the contemporary Christian theologian Rudolf Bultmann, who also strove to disengage the sense of the biblical texts from their time-bound, mythical formulation. He too, was confronted with the same reproach, namely, that of ultimately relying not on the Bible, but on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

In effect, the situation we have described belongs to every age. It comes to the fore in any religion where an effort is made to disengage the message of the sacred writings from the mentality in which it is expressed, and to graft it onto contemporary culture. What emerges clearly is the need for objective criteria allowing us to reinterpret biblical thought in our own mental world, but without sacrificing the Bible to modernity, and indeed preserving its critical and sometimes oppositional role vis-a-vis the culture and spirit of the present age.

For the Christian, the New Testament is at least in part such a criterion: Christ is the end or the final intention of the Author of the Old Testament. Nevertheless, however fair this solution may be for a Christian, it only shifts the problem elsewhere; after all, the message of the New Testament is also expressed through a mentality and culture scarcely less foreign to our own.

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52. *Mishneh Torah, Hil. Me'ilah* 8:8.

53. See above, note 31.

54. Cf. *Guide* III:32.

Both Jewish and Christian tradition would seem to provide the requisite criterion, namely, *the life of the community*. In Judaism, this takes the form of the halakhic rule of “Go and see how the people behave.”<sup>55</sup> In the Christian tradition, one may appeal to the *sensus fidelium*, common to all branches of the Christian tradition, albeit with notable differences in application. We shall give a few examples, limiting ourselves to questions of law.

In the Christian tradition, the decrees of the Council of Jerusalem (48 C.E.) quickly fell into desuetude without ever being officially abolished by authority, despite the fact that they were promulgated in the New Testament as of Divine origin (Acts 15:28): “It has pleased the Holy Spirit and us...”. It was the sense of the community that this was not a matter of permanent law, but of a provisional concession, a Divine condescendence, if you will, called for by a particular set of circumstances — viz., the coexistence in the primitive community of Christians of Jewish origin and others converted directly from paganism.

In Judaism, the law of the bitter waters given to a woman suspected of adultery (Num. 5:11–31) was abolished by Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai at the beginning of the present era. While the reasons given for this suppression differ in the Mishnah and in the Babylonian Talmud,<sup>56</sup> it is clear that Ben Zakkai’s edict only formalised an already existing state of things, despite its continued use in some isolated cases.

One could say much the same about the abolition of polygamy by R. Gershom (*Me’or ha-Golah*) of Mainz (ca. 960–1028). In all these cases, there was an unformulated conviction on the part of the believers that such laws represented only a reflection of a vanished age. Yet, in other seemingly analogous cases, in both the Jewish and Christian traditions, certain elements of the Law which were also associated with defunct mentalities were preserved. In the conviction of the faithful, such laws had a more profound dimension, though perhaps difficult to conceptualize, such that their abolition or suppression would have seriously diminished their spiritual heritage.

We can therefore say, by way of conclusion, that the doctrine of divine condescendence, common to both Jewish and Christian tradition, can and indeed ought to be taken into consideration even today as a valuable principle of biblical hermeneutics, with the proviso, however, that it serve only as a *partial* principle, and that the criterion of its application must be the life of the believing community in its living relationship with the sources of its faith.

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55. Berakhot 54a and parallels: *puq ḥazi may ’amma dabar*.

56. Compare M Sotah 9:9 and BT. Sotah 47b.