

LES JUDAÏSMES DANS
TOUS LEURS ÉTATS
AUX I^{er}-III^e SIÈCLES

(LES JUDÉENS DES SYNAGOGUES,
LES CHRÉTIENS ET LES RABBINS)

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Claire CLIVAZ, Simon Claude MIMOUNI et Bernard POUDERON

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EARLY CHRISTIAN EXEGESIS OF BIBLICAL THEOPHANIES AND THE *PARTING OF THE WAYS*: JUSTIN OF NEAPOLIS AND CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

Bogdan G. BUCUR

Duquesne University

Résumé

Le débat académique sur la « séparation des chemins » devrait également tenir compte des implications exégétiques, doctrinales et liturgiques des interprétations des théophanies bibliques dans la chrétienté primitive. Ce qu'on nomme « l'argument des théophanies » a précédé son usage par Justin; il était crucial pour l'appropriation théologique de l'histoire sacrée d'Israël, et avait une place significative dans les polémiques anti-juives, anti-dualistes et anti-monarchianistes des II^e et III^e siècles. Bien que l'« apocalyptique internalisée » de Clément d'Alexandrie ait inauguré une approche différente des théophanies, les plus anciennes traditions apocalyptiques auxquelles il fait écho (par exemple l'imagerie de l'échelle cosmique, les premiers anges créés et le « mécanisme » de l'inspiration prophétique) nous permettent de spéculer sur la manière dont les premiers chrétiens ont contextualisé les passages bibliques théophaniques pertinents. Les écrits de Justin qui nous sont parvenus offrent un aperçu du processus par lequel le désaccord exégétique sur les théophanies a contribué à la cristallisation progressive d'identités distinctes religieuses et sociales « juive » et « chrétienne ».

Summary

The scholarly discussion of the « parting of the ways » should also take into consideration the exegetical, doctrinal, and liturgical implications of the early Christian interpretation of biblical theophanies. The so-called « argument from theophanies » preceded its use by Justin; it was crucial for the theological appropriation of the sacred history of Israel, and figured significantly in the anti-Jewish, anti-dualistic, and anti-monarchian polemics of the second and third centuries. Although Clement of Alexandria's "internalized apocalypticism" inaugurated a different approach to theophanies, the older apocalyptic traditions he is echoing (e.g., the cosmic-ladder imagery, the first created angels, and the « mechanism » of prophetic inspiration) allow us to speculate about the way in which early Christians contextualized the

relevant theophanic passages of the Bible. Justin's surviving writings offer a glimpse into the process by which the exegetical disagreement over theophanies contributed to the gradual crystallization of distinct «Jewish» and «Christian» religious and social identities.

Introduction

The highly complex developments that resulted in what came to be known as «Christianity» and «Judaism» are amenable to analysis from a variety of angles, using lenses provided by a variety of disciplines. I have chosen the exegesis of theophanies as an entry-point into this discussion because this is a crucial element in early Christianity's process of theological self-definition. Even though it does not touch directly on the social, political, or economic realities associated with the so-called parting of the ways, the early Christian interpretation of texts such as Genesis 18, 28, 32, Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1, Daniel 7, or Habakkuk 3:2 (LXX) offers a glimpse into the increasingly distinct symbolic universe of early Christianity.

Indeed, the exegesis of theophanic texts was of acute interest to early Christian writers. It figured significantly in a catechetical manual such as Irenaeus' *Demonstration*; it was part of the exegetical argumentation that defined the Christian faith of a Justin Martyr in opposition to the Judaism placed on the lips of Trypho; it was part of the anti-dualistic arsenal deployed by Irenaeus and Tertullian; it was the crucial argument used by Tertullian and Hippolytus against monarchians, and later by Eusebius against Marcellus, and by Homoians against the «modalistic» writers of the fourth century. Theophanic texts such as Genesis 18, 28 and 32, Exodus 3, 19, 24, 33, Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1, or Habakkuk 3:2 LXX provided the very heart of hymnography and iconography—including hymns of the *Improperia*-tradition—and were, by the end of the first millenium, inextricably linked to Christianity as performed and experienced in liturgy, irresistibly commanding the gaze of the iconographer, the ready pen of the hymnographer, the amazing tales of the hagiographer. It is no surprise to find, if we fast forward to fourteenth-century Byzantium, that it was yet again the exegesis of biblical theophanies that provided the exegetical infrastructure for the Hesychast controversy.

In short, we have in the exegesis of biblical theophanies one of the most potent, enduring, and versatile «ingredients» involved in the gradual crystallization of a distinct exegesis, doctrine, liturgy, and spirituality from the earliest stages of the Jesus movement until well into the fifth century and, in the case of hymnography and iconography, until the ninth and the fifteenth century, respectively¹.

1. See in this respect G. LEGEAY, «L'Ange et les théophanies dans l'Écriture Sainte d'après la doctrine des Pères», *RThom* 10 (1902), pp. 138-58, 405-424; 11

authoritative (after all, Trypho does not heed his teachers' advice to shun all company and discussion with Christians – he even speaks [*Dial.* 10.2] of having read « the Gospel »), the voice of these Jewish διδάσκαλοι and ἄρχοντες τοῦ λαοῦ can be clearly discerned in the *Dialogue*: it is radical in rejecting two-power theologies, prohibiting any discussion on such topics of *minuth*, and seeking to minimize social interaction with the *minim*. Justin, for his part, offers the Christian perception of the same: it is those διδάσκαλοι and ἄρχοντες τοῦ λαοῦ (*Dial.* 73.5) that are not to be trusted inasmuch as they reject the Septuagint (*Dial.* 71.1) and « mutilate » some of the scriptural passages (*Dial.* 72-73); overall, Trypho should obey God rather than these « stupid, blind teachers » (*Dial.* 134.1, βέλτιόν ἐστιν ὑμᾶς τῷ θεῷ ἔπεσθαι ἢ τοῖς ἀσυνέτοις καὶ τυφλοῖς διδασκάλοις ὑμῶν).

The exegetical and theological parting of the ways on the issue of biblical theophanies was bound to have a real and lasting social impact. For both sides of the debate, Scripture reading was not so much an individual as a communitarian enterprise, and part of a complex network holding together sacred text, doctrinal speculation, and liturgical and ascetical practices, with each element unfolding its meaning in reference to the others. Evidently, the identification of Jesus as subject of the Old Testament theophanies had practical consequences for the communal worship of the God of Israel, and, thus, for the worshipping community's religious experience⁸⁵; this experience set in motion a process of « reshaping » of the self, which in turn led, inevitably, to a gradual social distinction between the two worshipping communities and the individuals within them.

Concluding remarks

Early Christian exegesis of theophanies shows fascinating points of continuity and discontinuity with « non-Christian Jewish » exegesis. The concern with biblical theophanies is itself not a distinctively Christian element; neither is the binitarian framework within which sacred texts are interpreted originally or distinctively Christian, nor, of course, the practice of « re-written Bible » (of which I have argued elsewhere the christological interpretation of the theophanies constitutes a good example)⁸⁶. And yet, the christological reading of theophanies marks a radical exegetical, theological, and liturgical gap between the two parties. Clement of Alex-

85. We are all indebted to HURTADO for his insistence on the factor of « religious experience » as the medium and catalyst of the fusion between Jewish monotheism and early Christian worship of Jesus. See HURTADO, « Religious Experience and Religious Innovation in the New Testament », *JR* 80 (2000), pp. 183-205, and *Lord Jesus Christ*, pp. 180-204.

86. BUCUR, « Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies in Byzantine Hymnography: Rewritten Bible? ».

andria, and especially the less studied Clement of the *Excerpta, Eclogae, and Adumbrationes*, allows us a glimpse into the way in which early Christian biblical interpreters approached theophanic texts by «bending» the apocalyptic framework shared by Jews and Christians in the early common era to the requirements of the apostolic kerygma.

It is noteworthy that the encounter of Church and Synagogue dramatized in Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* is, essentially, an exegetical confrontation in which Old Testament theophanies play a substantial role. The older scholarly view, according to which the consistently christological interpretation of texts such as Genesis 18-19, Exodus 3, Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1, etc – i.e., «the argument from theophanies» – was Justin Martyr's invention, is no longer tenable today, largely because of a certain evolution in New Testament Studies and the study of Christian Origins. The «argument from theophany» did not derive *from* Justin's second-century anti-dualistic polemics, but was the extension *to* such purpose of a much older exegetical tradition. Justin has the merit of applying it to the needs of anti-Jewish and anti-dualistic polemics. A few decades later, Tertullian and Hippolytus of Rome would find it to be just as useful a tool against monarchianism. Considering Justin's *Dial.* 38.1, where Trypho presents the christological *exegesis* of Scripture and the christological *worship* of God as two inextricable aspects of the same blasphemy (*Dial.* 38.10), and Melito's *Peri Pascha*, it would seem that recourse to theophanies was part of the discourse *ad intra*, within the context of worship and celebration.

Inasmuch as the christological exegesis of theophanies produced an immediate reinterpretation of the object and manner of divine worship, and led to the cultic worship of Jesus, it also, more than the «proof from prophecy», laid the seeds of an ideological and social rift between those who advocated and those who rejected this exegetical avenue, a rift greater than the one separating, for instance, the sectarians at Qumran and the religious establishment around the Jerusalem Temple. The active ingredient, as Hurtado puts it, was present «amazingly early», «astonishingly early», «phenomenally early», and «from the earliest observable years of the Christian movement». Or, to quote Martin Hengel, «[t]his development in Christology progressed in very short time. Its final result was that the statements in the Old Testament in which the inexpressible divine name [...] was used, were now transferred directly to *Kyrios Jesus*⁸⁷».

Ironically, however, this initial exegetical and theological step away from all other self-professed forms of Judaism, was later deemed to be insufficiently distinct and therefore theologically deficient. A perfect example of this situation can be found in the history of the interpretation of Genesis

87. HURTADO, *Lord Jesus Christ*, p. 651; M. HENGEL, *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish Hellenistic Religion*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1976, pp. 2, 77.

18. After some five centuries of christological exegesis rehearsing the exegesis of Justin, and using it in anti-Jewish, anti-dualistic, and anti-modalistic contexts, the interpreters pivot—starting with Cyril of Alexandria and Augustine—towards a robustly Trinitarian view. In the sixth century, Procopius of Gaza offers the following assessment of the situation :

Some take the three men as three angels; those who are judaising (ἰουδαϊζόντες), however, say that one of the three is God, while the other two are angels; others still deem them to bear the type (τύπον ἔχειν) of the holy and consubstantial Trinity, who are addressed as « Lord » in the singular⁸⁸.

That the Gospel of John, Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, etc would qualify, in this instance, as ἰουδαϊζόντες, offers, evidently, a measure of the parting of the ways. What Procopius is bearing witnessing to is a *trend*, a process set in motion much earlier, which has moved inexorably towards increasing separation.

The highly complex developments that resulted in what came to be known as « Christianity » and « Judaism » cannot be reduced, of course, to a single cause. I hope to have made the case that early Christian exegesis of biblical theophanies, an exegetical practice with immediate liturgical, doctrinal, and social implications, rooted in the very first decades of the Christian movement, should be taken into account as a significant contributor to the parting of the ways.



88. PROCOPIUS OF GAZA, *Comm. Gen.* 18, PG 87/1, col. 364 B. Discussion in E. GRYPEOU and H. SPURLING, « Abraham's Angels: Jewish and Christian Exegesis of Genesis 18-19 », in E. GRYPEOU and H. SPURLING (eds), *The Exegetical Encounter Between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, Leiden, Brill, 2009, pp. 181-202, at pp. 190-197.