On Theodicy, Medieval Pietists and the Suffering Messiah: A Response to Marc Saperstein

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I would like to express our gratitude to Prof. Saperstein for the two illuminating and intriguing papers read by him today. I was asked to respond to the paper delivered just now at this workshop, but I wish also to refer to one point in the public lecture delivered earlier and that is the point with which I shall begin.

I. Theodicy in the Medieval Chronicles

The question of theodicy, which was one of the issues discussed in the public lecture, caught my attention, because, as it so happens, twenty years ago I wrote my master thesis on that particular subject in this very school.[1] This subject, as I learned at the time, is wide and complicated, so I must apologize for simplifying things in this short comment due to the constraints of time. Basically, the need for theodicy arises from the apparent existence of evil in this world, and the wish to reconcile this fact with the belief in a god who is both omnipotent and good.

In biblical and later Jewish perception God is regarded as *just*: He will not punish unless there is transgression. According to the biblical covenant, God gave Israel their land on condition that they worshiped him faithfully; as detailed in Deuteronomy 28, keeping the covenant would be rewarded by many blessings, while breaking it would lead to multiple disasters and eventually exile and the loss of the land (v. 36). This perception was also expressed by the prophets, for example, Ezekiel 39:23: "And the nations will know that the people of Israel went into exile for their sin, because they were unfaithful to me. So I hid my face from them and handed them over to their enemies, and they all fell by the sword." Later this notion was formulated in the prayer book with the phrase: מפני חטאינו גלינו מארצנו ("Because of our sins were we exiled from our land").[2]

In his paper Prof. Saperstein mentioned the "Because of our sins" argument in the contexts of the Iberian pogroms of 1391, the expulsion from Spain in 1492, and the Cossack massacres of 1648, quoting in each case Jewish authors who pointed out specific sins or transgressions that brought about the terrible punishment. Having become the orthodox explanation or excuse for every catastrophe to befall the Jews, it was also the common orthodox response to the greatest catastrophe

of all, the Holocaust suffered by the Jews at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators during WWII. Among the sins mentioned by ultra-orthodox rabbis is the sin of Zionism, i.e. the attempt to hasten the final redemption contrary to rabbinical warnings, although, interestingly, the opposite view, that of opposing Zionism as the crucial sin, was also voiced.[3)]

However, modern Jewish sensibilities can no longer agree unanimously with the traditional excuse, and several other attempts at theodicy have been offered by twentieth century Jewish thinkers. For example, Martin Buber used the argument of the "Hidden Face" (borrowed from biblical phrases such as in the above-quoted verse from Ezekiel), which for him meant that God sometimes absents Himself from the world, thus laying full responsibility for evil on human beings alone. More radical arguments have been offered by several other theologians.[4)]

Returning to the atrocities of the First Crusade, it should be pointed out that the "Because of our sins" explanation can also be found in the chronicles and poetic laments of the time [see appended quotes]. Still, as Prof. Saperstein indicated, the chronicles contain in one or two places the notion that "the ordeal was visited upon their generation [...] because of its faithfulness and valor". This unique explanation could perhaps be linked to some other unique characteristics of the chronicles and the events they portray, especially the seemingly unprecedented slaughtering of children by their own parents.[5)] Such traumatic events called for an exceptional explanation and perhaps some of the literary embellishments (such as the concern over the perfect condition of the knives) were also the result of that need. The only way of endorsing these terrible acts rather than condemning them was by elevating the spiritual level of those involved to that of Abraham, if not higher. I wonder whether this argument was ever used again.

II. Jewish Pietists in Medieval Germany

The 12th to 13th centuries movement known as *Hasidei Ashkenaz* (German Pietists) was, as Prof. Saperstein described them, a "small yet influential" group of Jewish scholars, mostly family related, who produced a considerable body of literature over a relatively short period of time. Their writings demonstrate suspicion and animosity towards the surrounding Christian society, and in traditional scholarship they were viewed as a characteristically isolative Jewish community. The change in perception regarding the Pietists specifically and European Jewry generally was brought about during the 1930's through the studies of the great Hebrew University historian Yitzhak Baer (1888–1980).[6)] His studies opened the way to understanding that Jews were influenced by Christian society and that their ideas did not develop in isolation. As common in scholarship, some of Baer's

assertions were criticized by later scholars, but as another distinguished Hebrew University historian, Israel J. Yuval says, "we remain his students".[7] In recent years Yuval himself made an important contribution to our understanding of medieval Jewish-Christian historical and intellectual relationships. The work of these and many other scholars has taught us that it would be a mistake to view Jewish spirituality in the Middle Ages as free of the influence of Christian surroundings.

Still, I sometimes wonder how exactly did the interaction take place. The great majority of the medieval Christian population was illiterate; literacy was largely the domain of priests and monks, who conducted their scholarship mostly in Latin rather than the local vernacular. Were Jewish scholars proficient in Latin, and how did they acquire this proficiency? Were they able to obtain Christian books, which at the time were hand-written, rare and expensive? Were they able, in the relatively tolerant period before the Crusades, to discuss theological problems with Christian scholars without confrontation?[8] Perhaps Prof. Saperstein could enlighten us on some of these questions, but I would also like to mention a different viewpoint.

Last year, in our 6th annual CISMOR conference on Jewish Studies, we were fortunate to enjoy the participation of Israeli author A. B. Yehoshua, who among other subjects talked about his historical novel *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*.[9] In this novel the reader follows the voyage taken by a certain Jewish merchant as he sets sail from Morocco with his two wives and his entourage, arriving in Paris by boat and then traveling overland to the heart of the Rhineland, a voyage which takes place in the year 999 CE, nearly a century before the First Crusade, but in an atmosphere that forebodes catastrophe.[10] Yehoshua revealed that he consulted historians specializing in that period in order to avoid factual errors, but undoubtedly the power of the novel stems from the author's unique imagination and his ability to bring back to life a time long forgotten, and give new life to figures long lost. As scholars, we are bound by historical documents and the facts they may reveal to us, but as lovers of the past who are also invested in the future, we can benefit too from great novels, such as the one by A. B. Yehoshua.

III. The Suffering Messiah and the Zohar

The influence of Christian ideas on the *Zohar* (*Book of Splendor*), which was compiled in Spain in the 13th century although attributed to a much earlier period, was not ignored in research.[11] Although the book's attitude towards Christians and other gentiles is very hostile, some Christian residue can be felt in several passages, and the segment quoted by Prof. Saperstein could be one of them.[12] Still, this passage may not necessarily constitute an unequivocal example of Christian

influence, because the idea expressed in it has deep roots in Jewish sources.

The idea of a suffering Messiah is not alien to Jewish literature and thinking, nor is the identification of this Messiah with the figure of God's servant (or, more accurately, "slave") in Isaiah 53 (especially vv. 3–5). According to Gershom Scholem, this identification goes back to Tannaitic times,[13] although at this point I am only aware of Amoraic or later sources. Scholem indicated that most of the Haggadic sources and Medieval commentators interpreted these verses from Isaiah as referring to Moses, to Israel in general and so on, consciously avoiding the Christian association with Jesus Christ, although the other interpretive option still lingered. Several relevant sources can be mentioned. In *Talmud Bavli*, Sanhedrin 98b, Is. 53:4 is interpreted as referring to the Messiah, who is described as a leper (while in 98a we find the famous depiction of the Messiah sitting among the afflicted at the gate of Rome). Turning to the Midrash, in *Ruth Rabbah* "But he was wounded for our transgressions" (Is. 53:5) is interpreted as referring to the suffering Messiah, as in *Yalkut Shim'oni*. More specifically, the depiction of the Messiah in the Garden of Eden taking upon himself the sins of the Jewish people, the same as in the *Zohar*, appears most vividly in *Midrash Konen*, and in a similarly impressive way in *Psikta Rabbati*; in both cases the Patriarchs comfort the Messiah for having to suffer for the sins of Israel [see quotes below]. It would seem, then, that the idea of vicarious atonement may not be totally alien to Jewish sensibilities; most, if not all, the Midrashic material mentioned here is earlier than the *Zohar*.

It should also be noted that in the *Zohar* identification of the suffering slave is not limited to the Messiah. In the paragraph quoted by Prof. Saperstein from Part II 212a it is also said: "Similarly, Rabbi Eleazar [the son of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai] on earth".[14] In III 218a the same verse from Isaiah is used to depict the *Tzadik* (the righteous one) who also suffers similarly (in this case it would be Shimon bar Yochai himself); more such passages could be mentioned (especially from the *Ra'aya Mehemna* part of the *Zohar*). One of the most outstanding characteristics of the *Zohar* is the rich imagination of its author or authors, and their ability to interpret and use any given verse in various ways and for various purposes.

Still, it is perhaps also possible to offer an opposite angle (אפכא מסתברא) by returning to the early Talmudic references to the verses from Isaiah. Some of those present here today would remember another CISMOR conference, the fifth, held two years ago with the participation of Professors Ora Limor and Peter Schäfer under the title *Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages*.[15] Prof. Schäfer argued that literal and insinuated references to Jesus in the Talmud and other early rabbinical sources can teach us nothing about the historical Jesus, but they can teach us much about the relations between early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, and in particular about the views

of the rabbis in Babylonia (rather than Palestine), reflected in their Talmud.[16] According to him, the rabbis used strong polemics in refuting and even ridiculing basic Christian claims and beliefs, such as the virgin birth of Jesus or the events surrounding his death. Some of these polemics are clearly reflected in later Jewish sources, including the chronicles of the First Crusade, as quoted in Prof. Saperstein's public lecture.[17] Prof. Schäfer did not mention the passage from Sanhedrin 98b, but if that too can be considered an allusion to a Christian idea in order to repossess it as a Jewish one, then it might be argued that the idea was indeed a Christian one to begin with. However, the more we learn about early rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, both of which are rooted in the same Scripture, the more we see how closely intertwined they both were.

IV. Conclusion

Judaism and Christianity are sometimes referred to in terms of "mother" and "daughter" religions, but sibling relations would describe them more accurately. In the past the two have experienced the relations of feuding brothers, as depicted in Israel J. Yuval's book *Two Nations in Your Womb*, a title referring to the biblical twin brothers Esau and Jacob, who traditionally occupied opposite positions in the respective views of the two religions ("we Jacob, you Esau" as it were). But as Yuval also points out, the Christian-Jewish polemic in its old form has come to an end, and our generation can view things differently. During his historic reconciliatory visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome on April 13, 1986, Pope John Paul II evoked the metaphor of brotherhood positively, saying: "With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers, and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers." It still requires time and effort to overcome painful memories and uproot deeply trenched negative images on both sides, but we seem to have started out on the right path.

Notes

1)「神の沈黙の神学的問題」 (The Theological Problem of the Silence of God) (1993).

2) It appears in the *musaf* prayer on holidays.

3) See Pinchas H. Peli, "In Search of Religious Language for the Holocaust," *Conservative Judaism* 32 (1979), 1–24.

4) See a recent concise overview of their ideas in Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible After the Shoah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 5–17. Sweeney failed to mention the intriguing and most beautifully written book by Andre Neher, *The Exile of the Word: From the*

Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz (translated from the French by David Maisel; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981).

5) The authenticity of the chronicles as a source of historical facts has been long in debate; see, for example, Ivan G. Marcus, "The Representation of Reality in the Narratives of 1096", *Jewish History* V. 1, no.2 (Fall 1999), 37–48. See also the presentation of the problem by Joseph Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism: The Middle Ages* V. 5 (Jerusalem: Shazar, 2011), 14–16 [in Hebrew].
6) See some of his groundbreaking articles reprinted in the volume edited by Ivan G. Marcus, *The Religious and Social Ideas of the Jewish Pietists in Medieval Germany* (Jerusalem: Shazar, 1986) [in Hebrew].
7) Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (translated from the Hebrew by Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman; Berkeley: University of California press, 2006), 295 (originally in Hebrew, 2000).
8) Some scholars make a clear distinction between things, including words and ideas, which were absorbed by Jews from their immediate Christian surroundings, and anything pertaining directly to the Christian church, which was abhorred, including the use of Latin; see Joseph Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism*, 27–34.
9) Originally in Hebrew: *Masa' 'el tom ha'elef*; English translation: *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*, (translated from the Hebrew by Nicholas de Lange; New York: Doubleday, 1999). See A. B. Yehoshua, "Israel Between Myth and History," in: *The Revival of Hebrew Culture in the Context of Modern Judaism and in Relation to Japan, CJS* 6 (2013), 23–25.
10) In fact, in some places in France, Jews were persecuted and killed as early as 1010 CE, long before the Crusades, and Yehoshua must have had these events in mind when one of his characters foretells the Jews' fate.
11) See, for example, Yehuda Liebes, "Christian influence in the Zohar," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* Vol. II, 1 (1982/83), 43–74 [in Hebrew].
12) See comment by Yehuda Liebes, "The Messiah of the Zohar: On the Messianic image of R. Shimon bar Yochai", in: *The Messianic Idea in Israel* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Science, 1982), 206, n. 406 [in Hebrew].
13) Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Tzvi* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved,1957), 1, 42–43 [in Hebrew]; English translation: *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676* (Princeton: Princton University Press, 1973), 53–54.
14) The image of Rabbi Eleazar accepting suffering for possible sins is already found in TB, Bava Metsi'a 84b.
15) Today's program, as it is carrying us further into the High Middle Ages, can be considered as the second tier; hopefully, future conferences will carry us on to Christian-Jewish relations in the modern era.
16) Peter Scäfer, "Jesus in the Talmud," *CJS* 5 (2012), 135–142; in his lecture Prof. Schäfer referred to his book *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007)

[German and Japanese translations: 2010].

17) For example, the unholy birth of Jesus.