The use of sunkatabasis in reference to the Scriptures is usually identified as characteristic of St John Chrysostom. Not that the lexicons would encourage you in this impression: Lampe, for instance, briefly documents the sense, 'on the part of God, "accommodation, concession to human limitations"', from Origen and Chrysostom, with one NT citation from the latter and no OT—which would have to be judged a very jejune representation of one of the richest veins (in Chrysostom’s usage) of patristic thinking on Scripture. It is not only the lexicographers, however, who are at fault in not laying out to view Chrysostom’s thinking on sunkatabasis, nor is the teaching of this greatest of the Greek Fathers on Scripture in general any the better served. For this extreme neglect (at a time when other less well represented Greek Fathers, like Origen, are receiving attention) there are some obvious factors responsible. Prime among them is the very bulk of Chrysostom’s works: his extant works exceed those of any Father of East or West except Augustine, his exegetical homilies numbering between six and seven hundred. There is also the fact that the modern critical editions of the Fathers have elected to avoid Chrysostom’s exegetical works, probably for the foregoing reason; this is true of the Sources Chretiennes to date, while the Greek series of the Corpus Christianorum has only just begun to appear. Not that this accounts fully for the neglect: Migne is readily to hand, and his text is adequate.

It follows that Chrysostom’s teaching on particular aspects of Scripture is likely to have escaped exhaustive study; this is true of sunkatabasis, and that is a pity considering the richness of the notion. Two studies were done thirty or forty years ago. One need not be taken seriously in the form in which we have it—the NZ digest of an original Maynooth thesis—and to judge from the usual misspelling of the town Napier in bibliographies it is not generally consulted. F. Fabbi’s article in 1933, ‘La “condiscendenza” divina nell’ ispirazione biblica secondo S. Giovanni Crisostomo’, is a more

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2. The photographic reprinting by Brepols of Turnhout is a happy event for patristic scholars.
serious attempt, but again plagued by that besetting weakness of Chrysostom studies—paucity of reference to the text of the homilies, at least the Old Testament homilies, which because of the remoteness of the material would be more likely (than NT homilies) to document a treatment of such a notion dealing with linguistic considerateness of human limitations in our approach to the Scriptures.\(^5\)

So \textit{sunkatabasis} (which is usually to be translated as ‘considerateness’) deserves looking at again, preferably with abundant quotation from the text; and if my own study of Chrysostom’s teaching on scripture has been confined to the 160 OT homilies and leaves untouched the much greater bulk of NT homilies, perhaps it has the advantage of admitting this limitation and at least looking at all occurrences of the term in those OT homilies. (In opting away from the habitual translation, ‘condescension’, of course, I am already parting company with Fabbi and Flanagan; but a reading of Chrysostom at length makes it clear there is in \textit{sunkatabasis} no suggestion by him of patronising, condescending behaviour. For that reason, ‘considerateness’ has been chosen as its most adequate, while still brief, English equivalent, though I have not seen this in use elsewhere; ‘making allowance’, ‘taking into account’, even at times ‘consideration’ would fit Chrysostom’s intention—‘condescension’ never.)\(^6\)

Chrysostom meditates on this concept of God’s considerateness for us in the Scriptures about seventy times in the Old Testament homilies, and usually at some length. In these homilies at any rate, it would be the aspect of the Scriptures that fascinates him the most; so beautiful is it and so theological, the pity is it has not been fully presented to general view. There are, in fact, various distinct aspects to his thinking on \textit{sunkatabasis} that deserve explication and illustration.

‘Who is like the Lord our God, who dwells on high and looks down on things that are below?’ Doesn’t that strike you as a wonderful statement? Still, whenever you consider what is said about someone, it is always inferior to the reality. So as I keep saying, no point in stopping short at the level of the words themselves, but move beyond them to the sense. I mean, how can he live in the heavens who fills heaven and earth, is present everywhere and describes himself this way, ‘I am the God who is close by, not a God who is far off,’ ‘the one who measures the sky in his

\(^5\) Chrysostom’s OT homilies occur mainly in two large series, on \textit{Gn} and on \textit{Pss}, and several small series; these are contained in vols 53-56 of Migne, \textit{PG}. Fabbi refers to the OT homilies relatively infrequently, and usually briefly: 28 times to the \textit{Gn} series—and then only to those homilies in \textit{PG} 53, neglecting entirely those in \textit{PG} 54; 19 times to the \textit{Pss}; 4 to \textit{De Obscuritate Prophetiarum}.

\(^6\) Other of C.’s key terms, such as \textit{astheneia} and \textit{akribia}, are also generally loosely translated by commentators, missing his precise thought—an ironical fate for the champion of precision.
hand and the land in his fist, who compasses the limits of the earth'? Well, since those words of his were addressed to the Jews, that fact deter-
mined the kind of words he used for the time being while he gradually
raised the level of their thinking, uplifted their understanding and gently
refined it. Accordingly, he did not simply say, ‘The one who dwells on
high and looks down at things below;' instead, he first of all said, ‘Who
is like the Lord our God,' and then added, ‘who dwells on high and looks
down on things that are below;' in saying the first part he explained why
he said the second, namely, for the reason of the Jewish weakness in
showing respect for idols and adoring gods in the precincts of groves and
temples. Accordingly, he gradually makes the comparison, though of
course God surpasses all things and is therefore incomparable; but, as
I’ve repeatedly said (and will never cease repeating constantly), he
adjusts (rhuthmizein) the language to suit the limitations of his listeners.
His anxiety, you see, is not to ensure at the time that what he says is in
keeping with the respect due to God but that it can be grasped by them.
So he gradually leads them upwards; yet instead of remaining at the level
of earthly realities, he opens up other more elevated senses.7
That says most of what Chrysostom understands by sunkatabasis, without
this time using the term (though, of course, rhuthmizein denotes much the
same meaning): the divine concern more especially for mankind’s (especi-
ally the Jew’s) understanding of himself and his plan rather than for ade-
quate respect for the divinity, the consequent adjustment of language to
human limitations, yet the need to rise above the material level of the
language to the spiritual being employing it.
It is for this reason—that there are many distinct notes to Chrysostom’s
thinking on the subject—that sunkatabasis deserves looking at again and
more deeply; the material is certainly to hand. The study can be conducted
‘from above’ or ‘from below’. It is always as a theologian, and not as a
philologist, that Chrysostom himself proceeds, and he would like to remind
his listeners to make the sunkatabasis evidenced in the language ‘the occa-
sion for marvelling at the Lord’s ineffable goodness in showing such con-
siderateness.’ For him sunkatabasis is always a manifestation of the
goodness (philanthropia) and providential care (kēdemonia, pronoia) of
God.

What I was saying before, I say now, and will not cease saying contin-
ually, that great and unspeakable is the kindness (philanthropia) of the
Lord of all creatures towards us men. He displayed great considerateness
(sunkatabasis) for the sake of our welfare, and bestowed great honour on

7. Hom. in Ps CXII (PG 55, 302B.303A). (The translations are mine.)
this creature—namely, man—and made plain in words and deeds that he
exhibits greater care (kēdemonia) of man than of other visible things.\textsuperscript{8}
More particularly, and with deeper theological insight, for Chrysostom (as
we have written elsewhere)\textsuperscript{8a} every instance of scriptural sunkatabasis part-
takes of and is to be referred to the paradigm of the Incarnation. In several
of the Genesis homilies, and in particular in the course of profound exegesis
of Gn 32,25, Chrysostom refers the sunkatabasis of Scripture to the kenosis
of the Incarnation, and situates both within the context of the divine
oikonomia.

So much to illustrate the wider theological horizons of Chrysostom’s
thinking. ‘From below’, we could begin with his explanation of sunka-
tabasis that its purpose is to lead mankind (Jews directly, but all of us
recipients of the OT text) from material things upward to spiritual realities.
This note documents our earlier observation that the remoteness of OT
material makes the OT homilies particularly rich: it is because the bene-
ficiaries of the revelation were primarily Jews (with all their thēriōdia and
apeiria) and secondarily mankind in general (with all their astheneia) that
the kindly revealer had to make allowances in speaking if he was to succeed
in leading them upwards from their absorption in material things to an
appreciation of spiritual things. The homily on Psalm 110 is directed against
a whole range of opponents of Christ’s divinity, including the Jews, who
claimed the support of Dt 6, 4 to refute any suggestion of plurality of per-
sons in God, to which Chrysostom replies:

Now, if Moses says, ‘The Lord your God is one Lord,’ your limited
understanding is your own fault. Why be surprised if this development
takes place in ideas, when even in concrete realities God directs study
from the perfect to the less developed, out of considerateness (sunkata-
bainein) for our weakness... Well, does that mean Scripture contradicts
itself? Perish the thought. On the contrary, in a gradual way it arranges
everything in progression for our benefit, correcting the limitations of
each generation.\textsuperscript{9}

Predictably, the Jews are said to be most in need of the divine con-
siderateness. But the same existential need is realised in mankind generally:
sunkatabasis is required on God’s part because we are all like children and
need to be educated generally:

(53,288B).
8a ‘St John Chrysostom and the Incarnation of the Word in Scripture’, Compass Theology
Review (Melbourne) 1980.
9. Hom. in Ps CIX (55,266A.B.). Hom.II in Gn (53, 28B.29A), Hom.III in Gn (53,34A); and,
of course, De Obscuritate Prophetiarum passim.
When you hear of God’s anger and rage, don’t get the idea of anything typical of man; the words are used out of considerateness for us. The divine nature is free of all these passions. He speaks this way so as to make an impression on the minds of materialistic people. When we speak with foreigners, we use their language; if we speak with children we babble away with them, and even if we are extremely gifted, we show considerateness for their undeveloped state. What is surprising in our doing this in words when we do it in actions, like biting our nails and feigning anger, all for the sake of instructing the children? God likewise, wanting to make an impression on materialistic people, made use of such words. For in speaking, his concern was not for his own glory but for the benefit of his listeners.\(^\text{10}\)

A related note to his thinking on \textit{sunkatabasis} (as I have suggested in affirming the richness of the OT homilies) is that such considerateness was \textit{particularly necessary in the early stages of revelation history}. He frequently compares Old and New Testaments on this score;

When Moses in the beginning took on the instruction of mankind, he taught his listeners the elements, whereas Paul and John, taking over from Moses, could at that later stage transmit more developed notions. Hence we discover the reason for the \textit{sunkatabasis} shown to date, namely, that under the guidance of the Spirit he was speaking in a manner appropriate to his hearers as he outlined everything.\(^\text{11}\)

This note becomes clear also in a study of Chrysostom’s complete views on the relation of the two testaments.

A further aspect of Chrysostom’s use of \textit{sunkatabasis} is its application—again in connection with early stages of revelation history—to \textit{the Lord’s personal dealings with the patriarchs} and others. It occurs only in the \textit{Genesis} homilies, naturally enough, and has to do with the series of incidents, like the appearance of the three strangers to Abraham in \textit{Gn} 18, where the particular considerateness is shown to the person in question:

See the goodness of the Lord, how great the considerateness he displays in showing this respect for the good man and wishing to make plain the virtue hidden in his soul... The Lord stayed on with him, like one friend with another, as it were taking counsel with him on what he intended to do. So when they were leaving, ‘The Lord said,’ reads the text, ‘I will not hide from my child Abraham what I am going to do.’ Tremendous the considerateness of God, and beyond all telling his regard for the good man. See how he speaks to him, man to man, you might say.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{10}\text{Hom. in Ps VI (55.71A). Cf. Hom.III in Gn (53,75B).}\)

\(^{11}\text{Hom.II in Gn (53,29B). Cf. Hom.II in Gn (53,28B.29A); Hom.III in Gn (53,34A); Hom. in Ps XLIV (55,195A.B.196A).}\)

\(^{12}\text{Hom.XLII in Gn (54,387A.B.).}\)
The use of *sunkatabasis* in these cases would seem to be out of phase with its general application in the OT homilies in the sense of linguistic considerateness. In some cases, however, the reader cannot be sure if Chrysostom sees the considerateness exemplified in the incident between God and the patriarch, or in the language which is addressed to the latter, or the language in which the incident is recounted—as in the directions to Noah about building the ark,\(^{13}\) or the paraphrase of the Lord's words to Isaac at *Gn* 26,3:

So that you may have confidence, learn that 'the oath I swore to your father Abraham’ I am keeping with you. See God’s considerateness. He doesn’t just say, The agreement I made with your father, or the promises I made. No: ‘The oath I swore.’ I made the guarantee with an oath, he says, and my oath I am bound to keep and put into effect. Do you see the Lord’s considerateness? It is not with a view to his own dignity that he chooses his words, but out of considerateness for our limitations. You see, men are generally anxious to put into effect not the things they simply promise people, but what they have confirmed on oath; and in like manner the God of all things confirms his promise to the good man that everything said by him will happen, down to the last detail, in these words, Know that what has been sworn on oath by me must take effect. How could this be, do you ask? did God swear? by whom could he swear? Note that the expression arises from his considerateness: his endorsement of his promise he calls an oath. ‘I will keep the oath I swore to your father.’ Then he goes on to teach Isaac what he promised, and what was involved in the endorsement. ‘I will multiply your seed, like the stars of heaven.’\(^{14}\)

So perhaps in seeing these uses of *sunkatabasis* as exceptional, we are not crediting Chrysostom with sufficient critical sense; perhaps he sees no ambivalence for the reason that all the incidents come to us through the medium of Scripture, that transforms (thanks to divine considerateness) while it transmits.

No grounds for ambivalence, at any rate, in the most frequent usage of *sunkatabasis* in these homilies, where the sense is: *in Scripture, God uses simple ways of speech to accommodate our limitations*. Here the correlative term is *astheneia*, not so much ‘weakness’ as the limitations that are part of the human condition—all those aspects of humanity that the Word assumed

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in the Incarnation (to invoke again the paradigm of Chrysostom's thinking on Scripture). Over and over again, he urges his congregation to accept the incredible gesture God makes to us in the Scriptures through his accommodation to our human condition by the mundane quality (tapeinotes, tapeinosis) of biblical language—without (and here his unerring sense of balance always enters) prejudicing divine transcendence.

I want today to go on to what follows, so that you may learn the unspeakable goodness of God and the considerateness he has shown on account of his care for human nature... To learn from the words themselves the unspeakable considerateness of God you must listen to what is read: 'They heard the voice of the Lord as he walked in the garden in the evening, and they hid, Adam and his wife, from the face of the Lord among the trees in the garden.' Do not rush quickly, beloved, over things said in Sacred Scripture, nor stop short at the words themselves, but let us consider that the ordinariness of the words is made necessary by our limitations, and everything is done in the way God wants it for the sake of our Salvation. Tell me, if we wanted to be confined to the way the words go, and construe the meaning in a way unbefitting God, there would be no avoiding a multitude of absurdities. Take, for instance, the beginning of this verse: 'They heard,' it says, 'the voice of the Lord as he walked in the garden at evening.' What do you mean—that God walks? Are we giving him feet? Is our understanding of him quite demeaning? Does God walk? Nonsense.15

What might appear to a careless reader of Chrysostom as he balances the 'binomials' here (to use F. Asensio's term)16 to be some manichean dualism scorning the mundane quality of human discourse is in fact restored to integrity and balance by more careful reading of all these passages, and particularly by recalling Chrysostom's paradigm in all this, the Word made flesh. This reminder may be needed in proceeding to a further modality of his thinking on scriptural sunkatabasis, namely, that the concreteness of the language is required by the materialism of the listener/reader. Here the usual term applied to both language and recipient is pachutês. Again the Genesis material provokes the reminder frequently:

'When the Lord saw,' it says, 'that the evils of men were multiplied on earth': what is the meaning of the words, 'when he saw'? Did the Lord

15. Hom.XVII in Gn (53,134B.135A). Cf. (from the Gn homilies) III (53,34B), IV (53,43B), VI (53,60B), X (53,88B), XII (53,102B.103A), XVIII (53,150B.152B), XXII (53,191B.192B), XXVII (53,242B), XXVIII (53,254A.B.255A), LI (54,453B), LVIII (54,510A.B.), LX (54,521B). Also Hom.I in Oziam (56,97B); and (from Pss) VI (55,71A.B), XII (302B.303A), CXII (335A), CXVII (331B).
16. 'El Crisóstomo y su visión de la escritura en la exposición homilética del Génesis,' Estudios Bíblicos 32 (1973) 223-55.329-56.
not know? Impossible. But Sacred Scripture presents everything with our limitations in mind, and it says this to teach us that even after such great forbearance on his part they persisted in the same evils . . . 'The Lord regretted,' it says, 'that he had created man on earth.' See the concreteness (pachutēs) of the language, and the considerateness it reveals. 'Regretted,' it says, instead of 'changed his mind.' Not because God did change his mind—which would be out of the question—but because Sacred Scripture describes things to us in human fashion so as to teach us that the enormity of their sins had driven the loving God to such anger.17

Normally in commenting on the Psalms Chrysostom has quite another linguistic difficulty to warn his listeners about, the degree of figurative language. Only occasionally in this series of homilies is the concern about the concreteness of language uppermost in his mind.

'Lord, bow down the heavens, and come down.' He says this, not for the reason that God comes down—how could he, being everywhere? Instead, his purpose is that through these human expressions he might startle the more materialistic (tous pachuterous) of his listeners, and so he speaks about it in a rather human way.18

The corollary of this aspect of sunkatabasis is that, if the language of Scripture is dictated principally by the materialism of the listener/reader, the concern is not primarily with the dignity proper to God. We have seen Chrysostom saying this directly:

Do you see God's considerateness? It is not with a view to his own dignity that he chooses his words, but out of considerateness for our limitations.19

The Incarnation would have brought this home to him. So did many passages in the Bible that he was commenting on, prompting in him the need to remind his listeners that, if the transcendence of God seemed not be properly respected in the text, they should put it down to God's own considerateness:

'God left him, ascending at the spot where he had been talking with him.' See the extent of the considerateness of these expressions of Sacred Scripture. 'God ascended,' it says—not to have us consider that the divinity is circumscribed in place, but that we might learn from this his unspeakable love, namely, that the grace of the Spirit shows considerateness for our human limitations and describes everything in this way. Ascending and descending, of course, are not properly applied to God; but since it is a particular token of his unspeakable love that for the sake of our instruc-

18. Hom. in Ps CXLIII (55,460B).
tion he should permit the concreteness of such words, accordingly he employs such human expressions, since it would not otherwise be possible for human hearing to cope with the sublimity of the message had he spoken to us in a manner worthy of the Lord. Let us give good thought to this, and never remain rooted in the ordinariness of the expressions, but make it the occasion for marvelling at his ineffable goodness in showing such considerateness and not spurning the weakness of our nature.20

So he draws that conclusion in those last few lines: accept God’s sunkatabasis, wherein his own dignity is taken less account of in the mundane language used, but do not remain at the level of banal vocabulary nor think of God in human terms. Instead, respond to the divine intervention in all this, and rise upwards to the spiritual realities:

See the considerateness of Sacred Scripture in employing words like this because of our limitations . . . Don’t take what is said in human fashion, but consider the concreteness of the words used in terms of the human limitations. For if it had not used such terms, how would we have been able to learn these mysteries, which defy description? So don’t let us stop short of the words, but let our thinking bring us in fitting fashion to God himself. The expression, ‘He took (a rib),’ for instance, and others such, are used to help our limitations.21

In this reminder to his listeners to rise above the humanity of the language to the divinity of the revealer, the preacher of Antioch obviously (to judge from the frequency of its occurrence)22 has no uneasy feeling of inconsistency with his other frequent reminder—to respect the literal sense of the text and reject a temptation to abandon it in favour of a spiritual sense.

Chrysostom’s ease, with all the modalities to his thinking on sunkatabasis, arises from his secure hold on the paradigm of considerateness, the Incarnation. For him the Scriptures come to man as a further instance of divine love, as Homily 58 on Genesis suggests; in the course of his exegesis of Gn 32,2523 Chrysostom says that in the works of the inspired authors the Word comes clothed in the human limitations which the Word assumed in the Incarnation. His thinking here is as beautiful as it is theological.

20. Hom.LX in Gn (54,521B).
21. Horn.XV in Gn (53,121A).
22. Cf. (from Gn) XIII (53,109A), XVII (53,135A), XVIII (53,150A.B), LX (54,521B), and (from Pss) VI (55,71A.B), VII (97A.98A), CXII (302B.303A), CXXXVIII (418B).
23. 54,509A-510B.