

Theodore of Mopsuestia as an Interpreter of the Old Testament

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Henry Preserved Smith, in his commentary on Samuel in the International Series, tells us that he derived much suggestion from the ancient work of Theodoret, bishop of Cyrhus. Theodoret was a disciple of Theodore of Mopsuestia, the great representative of the Antiochian School of the historical and literal interpretation of Scripture. It was with some expectancy, then, that I reviewed not long ago Theodore's work on the Minor Prophets and the other fragments on the Old Testament, as these are collected in Volume 66 of Migne's *Patrologia*. Theodore's theological utterances make him sound often as a modern writing in the fifth century. Would the great ancient protagonist of the modern method of Scriptural study have anything to offer to the modern student?

I must confess that I was a trifle disappointed. Theodore is undoubtedly suggestive in the New Testament field. But in the Old Testament, so far as our fragments permit us to judge, it is otherwise. The reasons are not far to seek.

In the first place, Theodore evidently knew little or no Hebrew. This is clear, in part, from his total inability to recognize Hebrew idioms in their Septuagint dress. Thus in commenting on Zephaniah 3 a he fails to see that $\pi\rho\omega\iota\ \pi\rho\omega\iota$ of his Greek text is the equivalent for "every morning" in Hebrew, and expounds it as the equivalent for "utmost haste."¹

An instance of another sort. In Zephaniah 1 4-6 he is totally unaware that the same Hebrew consonants can be read either as

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Malkām or Melchom. On the basis of his own Septuagint version he decides that the passage does not mean that their king shall go into captivity, as suggested by the "Syrian" interpreter, but that Melchom shall do so. By a curious irony Theodore's rendering is supported by the non-Greek versions, for which, as we shall see, he had only contempt.

The same evidence, of lack of acquaintance with Hebrew is brought out by his very effort to substantiate his own rendering by a cross-reference to Amos 1 15, where the 'Massoretic text gives us "their king shall go into captivity." This reading is supported by the context and by the great Septuagint versions. But Theodore's own Greek text here again reads Melchom, which for him settles the question. "These men (referring to the Syrian interpreters) should be aware that the contents of the Holy Scriptures were declared in the Hebrew tongue. They

¹ Migne *Patr. Graeca*, vol. 66, p. 468.

were translated into that of the Syrians by some anonymous person (we do not know even now who he was). But those who turned the Scripture into Greek were seventy elders of the people accurately conversant both with their own tongue and the Holy Writings, men approved of by the high priest and the Jewish nation as those most worthy of such a work of interpretation, whose interpretations and versions the blessed apostles evidently accepted... Therefore, would it not be senseless to suppose that the Seventy, being men of such quality and weight, should have erred in their reading?"²

That Theodore's knowledge of the Hebrew was by report only seems to be indicated further by his translation of Malachi as a messenger, and, again, by his treatment of Amos 5 26. On this corrupt passage he comments:—They say (scilicet) that the morning star is thus designated in the Hebrew tongue (i.e. ῥευφάν). Finally, to quote no more instances, in his exegesis of psalm 72 and Amos, 9 11-12, where the point is the exact meaning of one or two words, where the Hebrew text would have upheld Theodore's contention, his silence is eloquent.

Theodore's great weakness as an exegete of the Old Testament is, then, textual criticism. His incompetence in Hebrew is matched by his blind acceptance usually of whatever Septuagint text lay before him. In his early commentary on the Psalms he refers

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occasionally to other readings of the text. The later work on the Minor Prophets never hints at the existence of such Septuagint textual variants, although the parallel work of his disciple Theodoret has frequent reference to Aquila and Symmachus and Theodotion.

That Theodore possessed a good historical background for his exegetical work, is evident from his surviving books. He seems, for instance, to know Josephus well. His acquaintance with Bible history and Biblical texts is thorough. His exegetical method is essentially sound. But in a field where modern investigation has changed the face of everything, the help that Theodore can give is, after all, very small. Of the soundness of his method and the negligibility of his results let his much reprobated work in Messianic prophecy be our illustration.

Theodore's early commentary on the Psalms gave great offence to the orthodox of Antioch. For of the twenty odd psalms which Christian piety had come to look upon as prophetic of Christ, Theodore would admit only four, namely, Psalms 2, 6, 16 and 68. In checking up this ancient charge I find it necessary to make a slight modification. Psalm 54 he accepted as secondarily Messianic. Such a startling approximation to the modern position lends interest to Theodore's own interpretation of the supposed Messianic meanings.

Thus Psalm 72, which traditional Christian piety has conceived to be a prophecy of Christ and His kingdom, as prefigured by the happy reign of Solomon, Theodore believes, for reasons of exegetical exactitude, to refer to Solomon alone. Commenting on v. 5 ("He shall continue with the sun and before the moon" —that is Theodore's text) he says:—"The word 'before' is here not a temporal affirmation, as some have thought. For what, connection does it have with

² P. 452-453.

persistence in time? The text says, 'he shall continue with the sun and before the moon'... likewise in v. 17 (His name shall continue forever, his name continueth before the sun) the text makes it clear that 'before' is not so predicated of time that one may refer it to Christ, as some think. It means merely that his name (i.e. Solomon's) abides a thing of admiration not less than the sun or the moon." In other words, the text cannot be a prophecy of Christ, because the temporal sense of 'before' contradicts the rest of the sentence. Inasmuch as it would not be lawful for

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Theodore to look upon his text here is muddled, he can only believe that a Messianic prophecy was intended by Saint-David.

Psalm 40, considered to be a prophecy of Christ's Advent Redemption, Theodore rejects the simple reason that the supposed Messianic reference speaks merely of sickness and trouble. Inasmuch, however, as St. David must have been predicting something, Theodore assigns the words to the sickness of Hezekiah.

So much for the illustrations of the reasons why Theodore rejected traditional Messianic interpretations in the psalms. Why did he accept such interpretations in four cases?

Two of the psalms he admits on the basis of New Testament quotation. For to believe that apostles could and did err would, of course, be blasphemy. Thus Psalm 16, which on the strict application of Theodore's principle of literal interpretation, could yield only the thought of the resurrection of the righteous, is taken to be Messianic on the basis of Peter's Pentecostal Sermon. "Thou wilt not leave my soul in Sheol neither wilt, thou give thy righteous one to see corruption," is, then, a prophecy of the Resurrection. For Peter said so.

Psalm 68, with the verse, "Thou hast led captivity captive and received gifts from men," Theodore accepts on the authority of Ephesians 4:8. He notes, however, with approval, that Paul has substituted "given gifts" for "received gifts." "For this is more appropriate to Christ, who did not receive, but after his ascension into the heavens, bestowed the gifts of the Spirit."³ The other two psalms Theodore accepts without express New Testament validation, though this is really against his hermeneutic principles.

Turning now to the other portions of the Old Testament, to the more mature stages of Theodore's work, we find some interesting exegetical results. Strange to say Hosea's "out of Egypt have I called my son" in spite of its confirmation by Matthew 2:15, is not Messianic. The son is Israel. The "Branch"⁴ starts no Messianic thought in the minds of either Theodore or Theodoret, for their respective texts have "Orient—his Name." The prophecy of the outpouring of the Spirit in Joel 2:28-29, Theodore would like to explain away, his point being that the Holy Spirit as such was not

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³ P. 688.

⁴ Zechariah 3, 8. 525.

'known before Pentecost. But he, accepts the Messianic reference in deference to the authority of Peter.

Micah 4 Theodore cannot accept in a Messianic sense. For "the words, 'the law shall go forth from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem' are at wide variance with the assertion of Christ, who said distinctly to the Samaritan woman, "Believe me, woman, the hour cometh, when neither in Jerusalem nor in this mountain shall ye worship the Father." So this is not a prophecy of Christ but one of the return from Babylon.

Not to multiply, instances, one may say that a reading of Theodore's commentary on the Minor Prophets, with an eye on the, parallel works of Theodore and of a soaring allegorist like Cyril of Alexandria, show the parsimony with which Theodore makes use of Messianic interpretation. But once in a while, as in the fragment on Genesis 49 10-12, he shows that he can allegorize with the best of them. Nevertheless even a relatively sober 'Messianist like Theodoret is in a different class.⁵ Theodore accepts Messianic prophecy, but, to be valid, such prophecy must be explicit and expressly confirmed by the New Testament. Although, as we have seen, traditional .Messianism is occasionally too much for him.

Thus in his interpretation of the Old Testament Theodore is not really a modern in the fifth century. He holds to the letter of Biblical infallibility. The essence of prophecy is predictive and miraculous. He has no interest nor competence in textual criticism. Objectivity, in the modern sense, he does not strive for. When Kihn and Pirot, in their valuable works on Antiochean exegesis, accuse him of being a subjective rationalist and devoid of the devotional. approach to Holy Scripture, they are not far wrong.

On the other hand, in his refusal blindly to follow tradition or the *consensus patrum*, so far as it then existed, and in his adherence to the literal and historical method, Theodore breathes the modern

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spirit. To him Scripture has only one sense, be this of the letter pure and simple or of the letter which lies hidden in hyperbole and metaphor. The multiple sense of Scripture is absurd. Allegory is playing with God's truth.

The fifth General Council, held 125 years after Theodore's death, condemned his writings in toto, and consigned his person to hell. The reasons for the condemnation were mainly theological and political. Justinian wished to conciliate the Monophysite Church in the granary land of Egypt. So he insisted on and obtained the condemnation of the reputed father of Nestorianism. Incidentally Theodore was execrated as a Judaizer in exegesis. Pope Vigilius, who had been Justinian's prisoner for seven years, was forced to sign the condemnation of Theodore's doctrines. But he refused to condemn the person of one who had died so long before in the peace of the Church as the revered bishop of Mopsuestia in Cilicia.

⁵ In this connection there is an interesting contrast between Theodore's general method and, say, that of Cyril, which I may illustrate by the locusts in Joel. Theodore finds the literal sense inadequate, so he takes locusts in the metaphorical-literal sense as a symbol of the ravaging Assyrian. Cyril has no difficulty with the literal sense, but jumps at once to the allegorical. The locusts symbolize the ravaging effects of sin. Again, they stand for the devouring heretic who leaves both mind and soul stripped and bare.

With his condemnation, most of Theodore's writings perished. In the Old Testament field only his commentary on the Minor Prophets has survived in toto. In the New Testament field only his work on the Minor Epistles of Paul survives intact in a Latin translation. This was long attributed to St. Ambrose, the sanctity of whose name sufficed to shield both its bad Latin and its doubtful theology.

But Theodore's influence lingered in the works of other men, notably in those of Theodoret and Chrysostom. The Nestorian Church still reveres him as "the Interpreter." Through Cassiodorus and Julius Africanus the ideas of the school of Antioch found lodgement in the West. The spirit and method of Theodore was revived after the Reformation in the monumental exegetical work of John Calvin.

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