

## THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA AN EXPONENTIAL EXEGETE OF THE ANTIOCHIAN SCHOOL IN THE GOLDEN AGE OF CHRISTIANITY

### Abstract

This paper explores the life and work of Theodore of Mopsuestia, a key exponent of the Antiochene school of biblical interpretation. After providing biographical background situating Theodore as a student of Libanius and Diodore of Tarsus, the article outlines the history of the School of Antioch and Theodore's role as a teacher propagating principles of grammatical-historical exegesis. His prolific writings included commentaries on much of Scripture, though his interpretation emphasized the literal sense while downplaying typological readings. Doctrinally, Theodore combatted contemporary heresies but evidenced questionable Christology himself. He spoke of two subjects or persons in Christ and rejected the communication of attributes between Christ's divinity and humanity. Though initially orthodox, Theodore's theology anticipated Nestorian ideas, leading Cyril of Alexandria to critique his work. Ultimately the Fifth Ecumenical Council condemned Theodore posthumously. Modern scholarship has aimed to rehabilitate his legacy by distinguishing his use of terminology, assessing newly discovered writings, and analysing translation issues, yet his condemnation has not been overturned. Thus, this study presents a complex picture of this exegetical pioneer – a creative, ingenious interpreter who crossed boundaries into heterodoxy.



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## Introduction

The Syrian capital, Antioch, became, from 270 AD, a particularly important ecclesiastical centre, whose emulation revolved around the reading and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures in a specific manner. But Antioch was never a centre of learning, like its rival Alexandria, another *Didascalia*, but merely a Christian geographic area with a scholarly clergy (Vacant and Mangenot 1909, 1435). The Antiochian exegetical school, which emphasized the literal-historical meaning of the text of Holy Scripture, the typology of ancient-testamentary passages and hermeneutical principles that had become traditional in the Church, appeared as a natural reaction against the allegorism specific to the Alexandrian Fathers (Stamatoiu 1998, 218). Antioch becomes the place and the environment in which, through the criticism of Alexandrian allegorism, various theological opinions are born which are then transmitted through preaching and writings to disciples interested in deepening the teaching of the faith. The learned leaders of this centre received a disciple-eucharistic education in this environment, before becoming accomplished teachers, being exemplary disciples of Syrian priests and bishops. The theological heritage received by the disciple will never be ignored, just as the memory of the famous forefathers will be honoured with great piety. Every new idea will be rooted in what the previous Fathers said and in the text of the Holy Scripture, leaving room for the birth, development and perpetuation of heretical ideas under the name of *tradition*, in obvious opposition to the truth of Tradition (Chirilă 2009a, 15-9; Chirilă 2009b, 11-3).

Historians have chronologically divided the existence of the School of Antioch into three distinct stages:

**1. Formative period (290-370).** Dorotheus and Lucian were the first important figures in the Christian centre of Antioch Syria. There is also the opinion that the real founder of the school was Malchion of Antioch, the most important fighter against the heresy of Lucian of Samosata, but above all “a man of a multilateral culture, who had been before and at the head of a rhetorical school within the educational institutions of the Hellenes of Antioch, but who was also the most esteemed by the priesthood of the community of this city for the exceptional purity of his Christian faith” (Eusebius of Caesarea 1987, 301). However, one cannot speak of the beginning of this school, through a spectacular increase in the level of education of the clergy and faithful in the institutional setting. Therefore, its beginnings must be sought at the beginning of the preaching and obedience of faith in Christ, the Messiah, by the Holy Apostles and their

disciples (Vacant and Mangenot 1909, 1436).

**2. Flowering period (370-430).** Two great personalities known above all for their boldness in expounding theology together with their ideas mark the beginning of this stage in the history of the existence of the school of Antioch: Bishop Flavian and Diodorus of Tarsus (†394). The latter is joined as disciples and friends by Theodore of Mopsuestia and St. John Chrysostom (Bud 2020, 43). Theodore gave great impetus to the group of scholars and teachers in Antioch through his specific method of interpreting Scripture: grammatically, historically, traditionally and typologically.

**3. The period of decadence (after 430).** The decline of this school is due to the attachment of many leaders to rational results transmitted with greater impact than the literal text of the Holy Scriptures in this didactic-ecclesiastical environment. Moreover, Nestorius, a disciple of Theodore, argues against the truth certified by the Sobor of the Church, the duality of persons in Jesus Christ. More serious is the result of the analysis of the entire production of this school which has exposed Theodore of Mopsuestia as the father of this heresy. “The School of Antioch disappeared into history because it fell into the Nestorian heresy, which was for it a germ of death” (Vacant and Mangenot 1909, 1436).

### Biographical notes

Theodore of Mopsuestia was born in 350 in Antioch Syria, to a wealthy family (St. John Chrysostom 1898, 209), his brother being Polihronius, the future bishop of Apamea, and his cousin Paenius. St John Chrysostom addressed four epistles to the latter, noted 95, 193, 204, and 220 respectively, which are found in the *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 52. Theodore’s intellectual formation is determined by the schools he attended, by the circles of friends in which he worked at various stages of his life, and by his careful and individual study of the books of Holy Scripture. It is well known that Theodore quickly distinguished himself for his qualities in rhetoric, philosophy and history (Tillemont 1707, 434). He began to perfect his rhetoric with Maximus, the future bishop of Seleucia in Isauria, who in Antioch had as pupils and friends Theodore and John Chrysostom (Paraschiv 2008, VII), then from the pagan sophist Libanius (Hill 2006, XV), who arrived in Antioch at the height of his activity (Socrates Scholasticus VI,3).

Another stage in Theodore’s education was his encounter with Saints John Chrysostom and Basil the Great. The latter persuades the young Antiochians to leave Libanius and enter the monastic school of Carterius and Diodorus, during which time

Theodore receives the Sacrament of Holy Baptism (Paraschiv 2008, VIII). Theodore gave up the riches he had in this world around 368 to embrace the simplicity and poverty of monastic life. “His conversion was prompt and at the same time sincere and very intense” (Tillemont 1707, 434).

Diodorus of Tarsus was a disciple and friend of Flavian of Antioch, a contemporary of St. Basil the Great and a participant in the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople. Diodoran Christology is formed by opposition to the last great heretic, Julian the Apostate. Diodorus of Tarsus became for his young students the “initiator” and then the “true founder” (Hill 2006, XV). As a pupil of Diodorus of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia “spent his days reading and his nights in prayer; he fasted long, slept on the ground and practised all forms of asceticism” (Paraschiv 2008, VIII). Theodore would remain more Diodorus’s disciple than his friend. St John Chrysostom, around 374, left the two for a deeper ascetic life and Theodore stayed for another four years (Hill 2006, XV) until Diodorus’s ordination as Bishop of Tarsus in 379. When Diodorus is elected bishop of the see of Tarsus, Theodore no doubt followed him as a true spiritual son. In 381 Theodore, then a priest in Antioch, attended the Ecumenical Council in Constantinople as Diodorus’ companion and, on Diodorus’ death, might have become Bishop of Tarsus if the people of Tarsus had not preferred Theophilus of Alexandria (Tillemont 1707, 437).

A new phase in Theodore’s life began in 392 when he was elected bishop of the Church of Mopsuestia, the third largest city in Cilicia. In this capacity he vigorously defends St John Chrysostom in 404, converts many pagans to Christianity and writes most of his exegetical work. His work was fruitful, fighting in writing and in discussion with the heretics of the time: Origenists, Arians, Eunomians, Apollinarists, and Pnevmatonmahites. His disciples include Theodoret of Cyrus, Rufinus, Nestorius and John of Antioch. Theodore’s strong personality led the latter to use his name and work whenever they “produced” opinions that were difficult to accept by the simple faithful and the Orthodox clergy. St. Cyril of Alexandria, who calls him “the father of Nestorianism”, demonstrates that the root of these disciples’ heresies lies in the work of the famous bishop of Mopsuestia. The dogmatic truth is not to be found in the work of Theodore which Father Alexandrinus consulted. But is this the true work of Theodore?

### **The Falls of Theodore**

Theodore fell at least once. But when he was alive, he appreciated the rebuke, owned his mistake and got back on track. It is known that Theodore entered the school

of Carterius as an apprentice, taking monastic vows immediately after his baptism. But Hermione, a young woman renowned for her beauty, made Theodore change his decision to follow a celibate life and marry her. Attracted by the young Hermione, Theodore renounced his celibate life and decided to marry her, living a secular life for a time (Patterson 2011, 2). Theodore's first fall shed many tears from the eyes of his friends, and many words were chosen and written for his uplift, of which a decisive role was played by the writings of St. John Chrysostom, "ad Theodorum Lapsum" (St. John Chrysostom 1898, 91). Thus St. John Chrysostom convinces Theodore that leaving the angelic life for Hermione is a great sin, marriage to her being a true adultery (Tillemont 1707, 435). Theodore's return was sincere and his determination in studying the Holy Scriptures was evident.

Theodore's other falls manifested themselves in preaching and writing, that is, in expounding his convictions as truths to be followed by the believers he addressed. In one of his sermons, Theodore stated that the Virgin Mary should not be called the *Birth of God*, a statement to which believers responded with protests to which he was forced to recant. This accusation went unchallenged until the beginning of the 20th century when theologians proved that this episode was an anecdote: Nestorius also attended the sermon and persuaded Theodore to retract (Devreesse 1948, 128-91; McKenzie 1949, 402). From an anecdote for the Nestorians' humbling of Theodore's personality came the denunciation of Theodore as the father of the Nestorians and as having anticipated Pelagianism. After long controversies over Theodore's work and person, which are revealed more than a century after he died in 428, Theodore of Mopsuestia was posthumously condemned, man and work, by the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553) as one of the "three chapters". The Byzantine emperor Justinian fought for Theodore's condemnation, who was convinced that the Antiochian had divided the Logos-Christ into two persons, one human and one divine so that Theodore's Christ was but a mere man (Anastos 1951, 125).

### Exegetical writings

The writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia are numerous, which is why Facundas, Bishop of Hermiane in North Africa, the most important defender of Theodore's memory, considered that the Syrian theologian wrote "countless books", while John of Antioch speaks of "tens of thousands", obviously both quantifications being exaggerated, but announcing an obvious reality: Theodore of Mopsuestia was a particularly prolific

writer, leaving behind him a very large work. Through his efforts, but consistent with a traditional grammatical hermeneutic, a good part of the books of the Holy Scriptures have been annotated in their entirety in Syriac. Thus, the library left to the Syriac-speaking Church by Theodore of Mopsuestia was taken as a starting point in the theological arguments of his followers but especially as an interpretative model.

Because the Fifth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (553) condemned the man and work of Theodore of Mopsuestia between the “three points”, most of his writings were lost or destroyed. But it was the discussion of this heretic that aroused the curiosity of the African bishops who, to make informed decisions, proceeded to translate the Theodoric writings into Latin. These Latin translations have persisted to the present day, allowing us to know a rich exegetical work, representative of the beginnings of the Antiochian exegetical school. Another way of transmitting Theodore’s work was by false attribution, following the otherwise classic method of heretics of disseminating his works under the names of orthodox fathers. Thus, a fragment of the Theodorian commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, attributed to Eutalius, was preserved as an explanatory note to Manuscript H containing the text of the Holy Scriptures. The transmission of this text practically defies the condemnation of the complete work by the Fifth Ecumenical Council, since the text in question, although belonging to Theodore, passes as orthodox among right-thinking Christian readers.

A complete list of the exegetical writings by Theodore of Mopsuestia is given by Ebed Jesu, the last great representative of Syriac theology, who also compiled the catalogues of Syriac writers between 314 and 1300 (Bar Brika 1852, 361-79). The first exegetical work, in chronological order, by Theodore of Mopsuestia, when he was a priest in Antioch, is a commentary on the Psalms of David. Having been written when he could not yet be suspected of heresy, it has been transmitted almost in its entirety, occupying 25 columns in the *Patrologia Graeca* edited by Jean-Paul Migne. The commentaries on the Psalms use the historical-grammatical method. After introducing the reader to the historical context of the psalm, Theodore comments on it by giving numerous connections to precise events in Israel’s history (von Rooy 2009, 120-34). The Bishop of Mopsuestia paid particular attention to the historical books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch of Moses, Joshua Navi, Judges, Ruth, Samuel and Kings. Some fragments were discovered and published by Hieromonk Nichifor in *Catena in Octateuchum et Libros Regum*, which appeared in Leipzig in 1772. We can imagine that Theodore supported the “Nestorian” and the “apokatastasis” ideas, which he expounded at length,

according to the testimony of Photius, in the last two of the three volumes of his work *Magia persanii*. Of the commentaries on the poetic books written by Theodore, the commentary on the Book of Job, dedicated, uninspired we say, to St. Cyril of Alexandria (Paraschiv 2008, VII), is interesting. Finally, the books of the minor prophets were explained by Theodore of Mopsuestia according to his exegetical method, commentaries which have been preserved and published in full. He also looked at two books written by King Solomon, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs, which he explained but disputed their inspired character.

New Testament exegetical work is also well represented in Theodore's concerns, focusing, as Ebed-Jesus tells us, on the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John, Acts, the Pauline epistles and some of the pastoral epistles. The commentary on the Gospel of John was published in full by Chabot in Paris in 1897, and extracts from the Gospel exegeses are found in PG 66. It is not only Ebed Jesu who speaks of commentaries on the Pauline writings of Theodore; these works were quoted in discussions at the Fifth Ecumenical Council by popes Virgilius, Pelagius and Facundus. The commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians and the following nine Pauline epistles of the New Testament canon are preserved in their entirety in Latin.

Because he did not mention them in the writings that were translated into Greek, Theodore of Mopsuestia was accused of disputing the canonicity of some of the Old Testament books I, II Paralipomena, Job, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes (Leontius of Byzantium 1913, 121-56). The same is true of six books of the New Testament: James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation (Stamatoiu 1998, 218). The error can be excused because Theodore followed exactly the Antiochian view of the canon of Holy Scripture at the time. There are other explanations for the so-called split in the canon of Holy Scripture expressed by hostile judges of Theodor's work. Devresse has painted another profile for Theodore. The titles of the psalms were rejected by Theodore as canonical, parts of Job and perhaps Ecclesiastes but also the literary species of the book of Song of Songs. Also, not quoting from James, I Peter and I John in the New Testament does not mean that he rejects them from the canon of Holy Scripture (Mckenzie 1949, 399).

Biblical inspiration was considered by Theodore not in terms of the theandric work of transmitting and codifying the words of the Godly Scriptures, but as the fruits of this work. Thus, some books are diminished in their sacred dimension by reducing inspiration to "the gift of prudence and wisdom" for poetic books (Proverbs, Ecclesias-

tes) and to “the grace of prophecy” for prophetic books (Stamatoiu 1998, 218). Similarly, he notes the book of Job as “a drama composed after the pagan poetic art by a vein poet” and the Song of Songs as a poem dedicated to Solomon’s marriage to the Egyptian princess (Stamatoiu 1998, 218), “a relic of Solomon’s other poetic works, allowing an insight into domestic life” (Paraschiv 2008, XVII). The total disregard for previous research led Theodore to exclude the Song of Songs from the canon because “it was never read in the synagogue or churches” (Paraschiv 2008, XVII). No one, however, can easily decide whether this compromising information was written by Theodore or by the forgers of his work.

The method of exegesis used by Theodore was taken in part from his forerunner Diodorus of Tarsus, whose work, however, is insignificant. “For him, Scripture has only one meaning, either that of the mere letter or the writing, or that which lies hidden in hyperbole and metaphor. The multiple meanings of Scripture are absurd. Those who interpret Scripture allegorically are playing with the truth of God” (Tyng 1931, 303). Opposing the Alexandrian exegetical school, which proposed allegorism as an exegetical method even for historical books, Theodore falls into the other extreme, of historical and literary interpretation of the scriptural text, while accepting with great difficulty some typological references to Christ in the Old Testament books. His exaggeration in applying the literal-historical sense is even seen in his denial of the applicability of the Psalms to Christ, recognizing as Christological only 23 or 24 Psalms. The “style of Theodore” is his style of interpreting the Holy Scriptures, recognized above all by his hermeneutical independence from the authorities in the field and his refusal to accept the Christological interpretation of the prophetic texts. These “stylistic flaws” did not diminish the scope of his exegetical work, but aroused the curiosity offered by his originality, later condemned as heretical by the Church.

### **Doctrine**

Theodore of Mopsuestia was a prolific fighter against the heresies condemned by the Church before him. Origenists, Arians, Eunomians, Pnevmatonmahites “benefited” from the attention of Theodore of Mopsuestia, who delivered numerous sermons against them and composed his writings with apologetic and dogmatic observations for the suppression of the mentioned heresies. Attempting to combat the heresy of Paul of Samosata, for whom Christ is a mere man, Theodore defined the connection between the human and divine natures in the hypostasis of the Logos Inhumitus by the term



*parsupo* (πρόσωπον, person) (Apostolache 2014, 157). Theodore of Mopsuestia was at one time Orthodox and a defender of Orthodoxy in the struggle against Arian and Apollinarian heretics. Incidentally, he died in peace with the Church and covered with glory. This is why some of his thought is accepted by the Church, knowingly or not, in the treatises of the Antiochian followers and not only (Rees 1939, 352).

Theodore's greatest errors are in Christology and Soteriology. Theodoret maintains the identity of nature and person in the Savior, and thus the existence not only of two natures but also of two persons. The union of the two beings and persons is purely moral. It is a union of goodwill, of authority, of dignity, of sonship. This is because it cannot be said that God was born of the Virgin. He who is born of Mary is of the seed of David. Therefore, between the two beings and persons, there is only a relationship, an inhabitation. Theodore rejects the communication of appropriations: the Jesus of history cannot be attributed to the titles and deeds of the Logos, and the Logos cannot be attributed to those of Jesus. The Virgin Mary is the Birth of God only by relationship. She can also be called the Birth of Man and the Birth of God, Birth of Man by nature of the thing, Birth of God by relationship. Jesus is the Son of God, but by grace, the same as man. In Jesus Christ, there are two sons.

Denying the inheritance of original sin, Theodore argued that salvation means only the elevation of the human being to a higher stage, which is entered into with Baptism. In the light of discoveries in his writings, the judgment on Theodore's doctrine is today more comprehensive, though not definitive. Thus, we learn his belief that man was not created by God immortal but mortal; Adam and Eve were wounded by their sin and the guilt for the universality of mortality does not belong to Adam. The justification for this slippage by Theodore's new defenders is that "Theodore saw, or thought he saw, in the writings of Jerome a declaration of the inevitability of sin; in his vigorous style he went too far in the opposite direction. Hence we may say that Theodore has not yet perfectly synthesized in his mind the elements of the doctrine of original sin" (Mckenzie 1949, 400).

Theodore affirms, however, the real, not symbolic, presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the transformation of the bread and wine into the Lord's Body and Blood.

Theodore of Mopsuestia's status as a heretic is attacked with assessments of his extensive work, his complex personality and their effects. Moreover, just as an attempt is made to reconcile the methods of interpretation of Alexandria and Antioch based on the typology authorized by Antiochian hermeneutics, so too is an attempt made to

mitigate dogmatic discrepancies by arguing the differences in meaning for “being” and “person” in the language of Theodora.

St. Cyril of Alexandria turned his attention from Nestorius to Theodore of Mopsuestia in the early years after the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus. He notes, for example, that the Theodorian interpretation of the fragment of the Psalms (Ps 8:4-5, taken up by St. Ap. Paul in the Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Hb 2:7-9) was the basis for Nestorius’ division of Jesus’ threads (Parvis 1975, 416).

Is Theodore’s Christology identical to Nestorius’? The Fifth Ecumenical Council decided, based on the texts attributed to Theodore, that the work of Theodore of Mopsuestia should be condemned as heretical, as should his person. This condemnation has not been lifted, despite all the apologies made so far for these misdeeds and all the attempts to exclude the incriminating fragments from the originals of the Bishop of Mopsuestia.

### Conclusions

Theodore of Mopsuestia, the leading exponent of the School of Antioch, both as a disciple and especially as a teacher, was a powerful personality to whom many scholars and teachers throughout the centuries, from different parts of the Christian world (Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian), turned their critical eyes. The honour he enjoyed from his disciples, the lack of condemnation of his work during his lifetime, and the possible impregnation of heretical ideas in translations made in heterodox environments are some of the directions in which research has been carried out to rehabilitate the personality and work of Theodore of Mopsuestia.

Because only an Ecumenical Council could raise anathema on him and his work, Theodore can be judged with caution and studied only in the light of the teaching of faith certified in the decisions of the Ecumenical Synods, lest the heretical interferences in his works that have been handed down to us, be still today the ferment of unbelief or the destruction of the principles of sound education.

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