

FELLED BY “GOOD PLEASURE”

AN EXAMINATION OF THE CONDEMNATION OF THE GRAMMATICO-HISTORICAL METHOD OF INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE, AS IT WAS DEVELOPED IN THE EXEGETICAL SCHOOL OF ANTIOCH

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The thing they call 'Allegory' is manifest absurdity, superfluous at every turn.
Theodore of Mopsuestia¹

1. INTRODUCTION: THE SECOND COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE (553) AND THE CONDEMNATION OF “THE THREE CHAPTERS”

By the mid-sixth century of the Christian era the Monophysites of Syria and Egypt were heterodox populations alienated from the Constantinopolitan orthodoxy that the emperors sought constantly to impose on them. They had never accepted the Chalcedonian formulation of 451, objecting to what they perceived as its strong Nestorian flavor in speaking of Christ's two natures as remaining distinct from one another, even after the Incarnation. But their breach with the imperial orthodoxy took on a more permanent cast when, in 542, Jacob Baradaeus, the Monophysite bishop of Edessa, began the process of ordaining a Monophysite counter-hierarchy in Syria.²

The emperor, Justinian, thus found himself confronted with an intractable problem in the Syrian heterodoxy – one that seriously threatened the long-term security and integrity of the empire. His solution was to appease them. Specifically, he hoped to win over Monophysite support by condemning certain teachings which they fiercely opposed. In 543, Justinian issued an edict condemning the so-called Three Chapters, a grouping that included the person and writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia, the writings of Theodoret against Cyril, and the letter of Ibas of Edessa to Maris the Persian. Theodore had been the teacher and friend of the heretic, Nestorius, and, though he had died in the communion of the church and was throughout his life widely respected as a skilled exegete and orthodox theologian, he was now to be condemned for having expounded proto-Nestorian formulae. And the sin of the other two was their having written letters in support of Theodore.³

This politically motivated reinterpretation of Chalcedon, finding and condemning errors over one hundred years in the past which earlier councils had not deemed necessary to condemn, was troubling to the Latin clergy of the west. Because of the pivotal role played by Leo's Tome at Chalcedon, they had come to regard the fourth council as “their” council, and they didn't appreciate

¹ H.B. Swete, *Theodori Episcopi Mopsuesteni in Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1880), 73ff, quoted in D.S. Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch: a Study of Early Christian Thought in the East* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 35.

² Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Malden: Blackwell, 1996), 128. Accordingly, modern Syrian Monophysites are called Jacobites.

³ Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 14, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils* (United States: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 299.

Justinian's cynical manipulations that threatened to undo it. In accord with these sentiments, Vigilius, the bishop of Rome, refused to assent to this condemnation. But Justinian was indifferent to the Latin clergy's feelings on this matter, and he sent a ship to Rome to fetch the reluctant Pope and bring him in person to the imperial capital, where the emperor could apply all the pressure he needed to switch Vigilius' position on these issues. This even involved some use of force; Peter Brown reports that "on one occasion [the Pope] was dragged from sanctuary in the church of the papal delegation with such violence that the heavy marble altar, whose column he had grasped, almost collapsed upon him."⁴

At length, Vigilius at last gave in to this imperial arm-twisting, and, on April 11, 548, he issued his *Judicatum*, which condemned the Three Chapters. This provoked a fierce reaction in the west, however, where the bishops of Africa, Illyria, and Dalmatia, along with two of Vigilius' own deacons, withdrew from his communion. And in 550, the African bishops, under Reparatus of Carthage, not only rejected the *Judicatum* but anathematized the pope himself. The following year found Vigilius at Chalcedon, where, away from Justinian's overbearing presence at Constantinople, he withdrew his *Judicatum*, and in its place published the *Constitutum*. In this new document he effectively reversed his earlier position, still condemning certain propositions of Theodore and Theodoret, but sparing their persons, and declaring the letter of Ibas to have been pronounced orthodox at Chalcedon.⁵

In the wake of these events Justinian called for a new "world-wide" council to settle the matter. Accordingly, the Second Council of Constantinople was assembled by imperial command, on the fifth of May, 553. Though styled the Fifth Ecumenical Council, it contained a mere 156 bishops, drawn mostly from the core of Justinian's empire.⁶ Moreover, Vigilius had refused Justinian's invitation to preside, and declined even to attend the council, arguing that the persons involved should be spared, if only because they had died long ago and in the communion of the Church. The council convened without him.

The session opened with a letter from the emperor, in which he exhorted the assembled bishops to condemn Theodore of Mopsuestia, who maintained "that God the Word was one, and Christ another."⁷ He also argued that the assertion (by the absent Vigilius) that "heretics" ought not be anathematized after their deaths was absurd. He cited the example of Flavian, late bishop of Constantinople, who was so shamefully treated at the heterodox Second Council of Ephesus (449), yet who was restored to honors after his death. The inference, then, was that if the assembled bishops had authority to restore those

⁴ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 127.

⁵ Schaff, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 299.

⁶ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 127.

⁷ Schaff, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 302.

who had already died, then surely they must also have authority to anathematize dead heretics.

At this point, Vigilius sent a delegation to the council, along with the *Constitutum*, the document that elaborated his new stance on the issue of the Three Chapters. Perhaps he had hoped his document might have the same electrifying effect on the assembly that Leo's Tome had had at Chalcedon, but the response to it was rather more like that which greeted the Tome at the Robbers' Council of 449 – it was rejected out of hand. When the bishops viewed its contents, they would neither read it nor present it to the emperor. At this point, the imperial representative at the council seized the initiative and urged that the bishops break off communion with Vigilius, for having departed from orthodox doctrine and for defending impiety. This they did forthwith.⁸

As for Theodore, he was accused of rejecting the Old Testament, of attempting “to shew that the divine words be nothing but fables,” of saying that there are “two Sons and two Christs,” making him guilty of *anthropolatry*, and so on. On the basis of these and other charges, the council proceeded to anathematize the Three Chapters, as the emperor had urged all along.⁹ Now, among the many doctrinal aberrations that were attributed to Theodore and for which the bishops condemned him was one which is rather interesting from the perspective (mine) of a Protestant committed to a literal-contextual and historical interpretation of the Bible. The last portion of the twelfth anathema reads as follows:

If, then, anyone shall defend this most impious Theodore and his impious writings, in which he vomits the blasphemies mentioned above, and countless others besides against our Great God and Savior Jesus Christ, and if anyone does not anathematize him or his impious writings, as well as all those who protect or defend him, *or who assert that his exegesis is orthodox*, or who write in favor of him and of his impious works, or those who share the same opinions, or those who have shared them and still continue unto the end in this heresy: let them be anathema.¹⁰

Thus did those assembled at the Second Council of Constantinople, thinking and speaking of their assembly as the “fifth world-wide council” of the Christian Church, condemn the method of biblical interpretation which had been developed over many years by the exegetical school of Antioch, and particularly by Theodore of Mopsuestia. The teachers at Antioch had urged and applied a literal, historical, and rational approach to the understanding of Scripture – one which would have accorded quite closely with our own grammatico-historical method. Indeed, we in the Reformed tradition would most certainly and boldly

⁸ Ibid., 305.

⁹ Ibid., 309.

¹⁰ Ibid., 315. (Italics mine.)

assert that Theodore's exegetical method *is* orthodox (though we would, as we shall see, question several of his conclusions). And therefore, we who embrace the grammatico-historical method of exegesis stand thus anathematized by this council!

But surely this doesn't matter. To the extent that Protestants accept and embrace the formulations of the first four ecumenical councils, we do so on the basis of what we believe to be their valid conformity to Scriptural teaching. We are not bound by a council simply by the fact of its being a council, nor do we accept the notion that a gathering of bishops called by the Roman emperor is protected from error by some special superintendence of the Holy Spirit at the proceedings. In this sense, then, it really doesn't matter what the dubious Council of 553 decreed.

But it does matter in terms of understanding the historical development of the Church. The problem is that Catholics and Eastern Orthodox are bound, by their doctrine of ecclesiology, to affirm these councils. And this is so despite even the abundant evidence of the Roman bishop's opposition to the proceedings. The sad postscript to the Fifth Council was that Vigilius bowed once again to the imperial pressure – the emperor would not let him leave for Rome until he accepted the decrees of the council – and he repudiated the *Constitutum*, once again condemning the Three Chapters. When at last he left the east to return to Rome, he died before arriving there, in 555. His successor, Pope Pelagius, affirmed the condemnations. This triggered a schism in the Latin church, with several dioceses withdrawing from communion with Rome. But over time these divisions were healed, unity was restored, and (unfortunately) the affirmation of the legitimate authority of the Fifth Council stood.¹¹

One of the major consequences, then, of the Second Council of Constantinople was that exegesis of the Bible according to literal, historical, and rational principles – the method which we call grammatico-historical, but called by various names at Antioch, among them “the literal exegesis”¹² and “the historical interpretation”¹³ – was discredited and rejected, being seen as necessarily generative of heresy. In a classic example of the logical fallacy *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, the Church effectively blamed Theodore's exegetical method itself for bearing the poison fruit of Nestorianism. The consequence of this was the undisputed triumph of the allegorical methodology most clearly associated with Antioch's rival, the exegetical school of Alexandria, and in particular with its outstanding advocate, Origen. So while grammatico-historical

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 305.

¹² Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes I-LXXX*, ed. Robert Devreesse (Citta del Vaticano: Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, 1939) , 334, 1.30, quoted in Dimitri Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Bible: a Study of His Old Testament Exegesis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 123.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 194, 1.14, quoted in Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 123.

methodology disappeared from the practice of the Latin and Greek churches (though not, interestingly, from the Syriac and “oriental” ones), the prevailing, “orthodox” interpretation of the Bible came to be based on the principles of allegorical methodology originally devised in Alexandria, by which every verse of Scripture is seen to have multiple levels of meaning, and according to which the literal meaning is often entirely dismissed in favor of the higher, purer, “allegorical” meanings. Indeed, “to write a history of Origenist influence on the west would be tantamount to writing a history of western exegesis.”¹⁴ It would take a thousand years for context-based methodology to reappear in Western Europe, with the advent of the Reformers and their dedication to recovering the unencrusted teachings of Scripture.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to explore the connection between the Antiochene, and especially Theodore’s, exegesis and the emergence of heresies. It is my conviction that the “lesson” drawn by the Church from the Council of 553, that grammatico-historical exegesis (by whatever name) is to be shunned as generative of heresy, is wrong. I believe that the truth and orthodoxy of the doctrines of the Reformed faith are themselves evidence of this fact, and testify not only that a literal-contextual and historical approach to Scripture is *not* in itself a cause of heresy, but that such an approach is itself the best protection *against* heresy. But all of this begs the question: What went wrong at Antioch? If we disagree with the conciliar conclusion that “the literal exegesis” necessarily feeds and nurtures heresy, we must answer the question of what factor or factors then *did* account for the Antiochene’s school’s descent into error.

First, we will review the historical events and conditions that prevailed in fourth century Antioch, then we will turn our attention to an analysis of Antiochene exegesis and view of Scriptural inspiration, and finally we will explore Theodore’s christology. We hope to show that, despite the conscious effort by the exegetes of that school to think in biblical categories and to exclude to the extent possible non-biblical, Greek philosophical language and thought from their interpretation of Scripture, they held fast to two philosophical notions – the extreme “other-ness” of God and the absolute freedom of the human will – which together ultimately undermined their entire system. In short, the fault for which the School of Antioch fell from the Church’s favor resided not in the grammatico-historical method that it pioneered, but in the philosophical baggage to which it clung so tenaciously.

¹⁴ Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 14.

2. THEODORE AND “THE ASKETERION”: THE HISTORICAL SITUATION AT ANTIOCH IN THE THIRD AND FOURTH CENTURIES

Antioch, where those who professed Jesus Christ as Lord were first called “Christians,” and where the first gentile converts were made by these followers of “the Way,” was the original home of “overseas” Christian missions.¹⁵ It was there, as early as 110, that Ignatius was writing of the need for a monarchical bishop to ensure unity and preserve the true doctrine of faith. Later in the second century Antioch produced Theophilus, the Greek apologist who first described the three-and-oneness of God as a “triad.” He also, according to Zaharopoulos, “represents an early attempt to formulate a learned system of theology based on the literal interpretation of Scripture. His teaching is thus a precursor to what would later emerge in the *Asketerion* [or Hermitage, the name of the exegetical school of Antioch].”¹⁶ Antioch was the first of the great Christian sees to fall into heresy, with the elevation, in 260, of Paul of Samosata, the most famous expounder of dynamic monarchianism, to the episcopal seat. Theodore of Mopsuestia would later condemn this Paul, referring to him as “an angel of Satan, because he taught that Christ our Savior is a simple man and he did not recognize that *hypostasis* of the divinity of the one before the ages.”¹⁷ We shall discuss the concept of *hypostasis* a little further on, but for now let us note that, even here, as early as the mid-third century, we see evidence of that emphasis upon the humanity of Christ which would become the defining characteristic of Antiochene christology. Indeed, although Arianism became prominent in Alexandria, its roots were in the city of Antioch, and in the confusing wake of the Council of Nicea, Antioch became a stronghold of Arianism. The spiritual leaders of the Nicene faction there were two monks, Diodore and Carterius, who would later found the *Asketerion*.¹⁸

Theodore was born, in Antioch, about the year 350, during this period of Arian ascendancy. Like Calvin, he was trained to be a lawyer, but decided to heed a more spiritual calling and went off, along with his friend, John Chrysostom, to become a monk and to study under Diodore. The young, upper class men who attended the *Asketerion* regarded one another as brothers and as “members of a body.” On joining the school the members would make a covenant with Christ, binding themselves to Him and to one another, and vowing to remain celibate, to abstain from wine and meat, to wear a distinctive dress, and to devote themselves to prayer. It seems that after a relatively short time Theodore’s ardor for the ascetic life cooled, and he left the brotherhood to

¹⁵ Acts 11:20,26.

¹⁶ Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 199.

¹⁷ R. Tonneau, ed., *Les homelies catechetiques de Theodore de Mopsueste* (Citta del Vaticano: Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, 1949), 387, quoted in Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 199.

¹⁸ Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 199.

pursue the “secular track” of career and marriage. But Chrysostom wrote him two impassioned letters, in which he expressed his fear for his friend’s salvation and even argued that his new course would amount to adultery, since he had already “joined himself to the heavenly bridegroom.” Obviously, Theodore was moved by Chrysostom’s exhortations, because he soon returned to the *Asketerion* and rededicated himself to its discipline.¹⁹

The School of Antioch was founded, as mentioned above, by Diodore, who taught Exegesis and Theology, and Carterius, who taught Ascetics. It was a cloister-school, based on a monastic discipline, and was under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Antioch. Students and teachers lived together as a community of cenobitic monks, and the Bible was that which was principally taught. What was distinctive about the school was the literal and historical method of biblical exegesis there expounded by Diodore, who developed this approach to Scriptural interpretation in conscious opposition to the allegorical method that was being taught at the School of Alexandria.

In 378, Theodore was ordained as a presbyter of the church in Antioch, and, in 392, was consecrated as bishop of Mopsuestia, a town in Cilicia. During his episcopate he wrote many pastoral letters and strove to purge errors and heresies – Arianism, for example, and Apollinarianism – from his diocese. When in 394, during a visit to Constantinople, he preached at the imperial court, the emperor, Theodosius I, was very impressed, claiming never to have heard such a teacher.²⁰ He died in 428, having just received Nestorius, a “graduate” of the *Asketerion* from the next generation of students who followed Chrysostom and himself, who was *en route* to Constantinople to fill the bishop’s seat there. At his death, Theodore was widely respected in the empire as a staunch defender of orthodoxy and as a brilliant biblical exegete. He died in the communion of the Church and had never been reprimanded by it.²¹

However, his orthodoxy began to be called into question posthumously, when, at the Council of Ephesus in 431, a certain Charistus introduced a deformed creed that was linked with Theodore. The assembled bishops condemned the creed, but did not discuss its author. Yet in the anti-Nestorian environment that prevailed after the council, Rabboula, bishop of Edessa, declared Theodore to have been a proto-Nestorian and ordered that all his manuscripts be confiscated and burned. And to the voice of Rabboula was soon added that of Acacius, bishop of Melitene, who warned his Armenian flock to read neither the works of Theodore nor the “evil poison” of Nestorius. Cyril of Alexandria, the great opponent of Nestorius and his doctrines, had nevertheless once spoken favorably of Theodore’s exegetical method. Yet now he, too, joined

¹⁹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: the Story of John Chrysostom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 20-23.

²⁰ Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

the growing chorus of voices, and denounced his teaching as the wellspring of Nestorianism, charging that both he and Nestorius “speak as if from one mouth the same poison.”²² But Theodore was still supported by a strong alliance of Oriental Fathers and Antiochenes, including Rabboula’s successor at Edessa, Ibas, John of Antioch, and Theodoret, another alumnus of the *Asketerion* and a widely respected biblical exegete.

The emperor Theodosius II brought peace to this situation, which had been being fueled by the increasingly bitter rivalry that existed between Alexandria and Antioch and between their respective exegetical schools. He issued an edict, at the recommendation of Proclus of Constantinople, to John of Antioch, Cyril of Alexandria, and the bishops, establishing a rule never to assail the memory of persons who died in the communion of the Church.²³ This Pact of Union (433) resolved the conflict for a while, but “within thirty years the School of Antioch had disappeared from the scene, along with its traditional defenses of a literal, historical method of exegesis.”²⁴ During its “Golden Age” Antioch and the *Asketerion* had produced a remarkable crop of Church leaders and thinkers, among them Diodore of Tarsus, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Nestorius, and Theodoret. But it never recovered from its tainting by association with Nestorianism, and in the aftermath of Chalcedon it had ceased to exert influence on the Church as a whole.

When Theodore was condemned at the Fifth Council in 533, the Church was breaking the quite sane precedent it had established for itself one hundred years earlier of not assailing those who had died in the peace of the Church.²⁵ His writings suffered the fate of heretical texts, being burned or otherwise destroyed, so that very little of this man’s intellectual legacy survived, either in Greek or Latin. Antioch had by this time become the scene of a new struggle, between the orthodox defenders of Chalcedon and the heterodox adherents of Monophysitism, while both sides reviled the *Asketerion* as the school that had nurtured Nestorius and his heresy. Yet, interestingly, Theodore remained revered in the east, in the border regions of eastern Syria between the Roman and Persian Empires, where he was known to the Syriac-speaking Fathers as the *Mephasqana* (the Interpreter). Apparently his teachings “migrated” to the school of Edessa under Ibas and Narsai, in the latter half of the fifth century, then traveled further along, to Narsai’s school at Nisibus, in the Persian Empire. Teachers at the school of Edessa translated several of his works into Syriac, and they became thus the literary heritage of the Nestorian Church of Syria and Persia.²⁶

²² Cyril of Alexandria, *Epist. 69, Ad Acacium*, PG (77), 340, quoted in Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 15.

²³ Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 17.

²⁴ Frederick G. McLeod, *The Image of God in the Antiochene Tradition* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 5.

²⁵ Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 21.

²⁶ McLeod, *The Image of God*, 5.

3. A COMPARISON OF THE ALLEGORICAL METHOD OF THE ALEXANDRIAN TRADITION WITH THE “LITERAL EXEGESIS” OF THE ANTIOCHENE SCHOOL, AND A DISCUSSION OF THE LATTER’S SIMILARITY TO THE GRAMMATICO-HISTORICAL METHOD

Philo, Origen, and the Alexandrians

The translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek is unimpeachably one of the decisive events of human history. According to legend the work was completed by seventy-two scholars working together but in separate rooms on the island of Pharos, near Alexandria, who, upon finishing their labors, realized that they had all translated the Torah exactly the same in every detail. This story gave rise to the view that it was an inspired translation, and it quickly gained the widespread acceptance of Greek-speaking Jews throughout the Dispersion. Above all else, the Septuagint (“Seventy,” per the story of its translation) came to be associated with the huge, Hellenized, and cosmopolitan Jewish community of Alexandria, where it had been translated in the first place.

And it was there, in that atmosphere of religio-philosophical syncretism, that Philo developed the allegorical method of Scriptural exegesis. His was a conscious blending of Jewish principles of interpreting the sacred texts – by which the rabbi was free to interact associatively between the fixed, written Torah and the more fluid, unwritten, or oral, Torah, in an engagement intended to encounter the Torah as alive and as applicable to all situations in life, even to those seemingly far removed from the literal words of the text – and of Greek philosophical concepts. And by this “allegorization” of Scripture he hoped to reveal to the wider Greek-speaking world that the Jews possessed a literature and philosophy worthy of – indeed, superior to, as it pre-dated – anything the Greeks had developed.

Philo’s first exegetical principle held that, since God inspires Scripture, it could not possibly have a meaning that is unworthy of God or that fails to instruct and to edify men. God had given us the assorted stories, poems, teachings, etc., in order to reveal much deeper spiritual truths, but the truths were not to be found so much in the stories themselves, but behind and beyond them, in their allegorical, spiritual meanings. In other words, Philo assumed that every verse of Scripture has a twofold meaning – a literal or obvious one, and an underlying, spiritual one. This last he called “allegory,” which he defined as “the nature which loves to hide itself.”²⁷ He compared the literal meaning with the body, the cumbersome bulk of dense mass which functions to clothe the soul. But our true being resides not in our body, not in our dead mass, but in our soul. And it is the

²⁷ Philo, *Opera Omnia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 32.197, quoted in Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 106.

soul to which he likens the allegorical meaning of a Scriptural text. Thus, he derived his axiom of biblical interpretation, by which “everything in Scripture has a figurative meaning, but not all of it has a literal meaning.”²⁸

Clearly, one feature of this methodology is its built-in elitism. It removes from the “uninitiated” any possibility of understanding the “real” saving message contained in Scripture, and assigns great power to the exegete who is trained in the “mysteries” of allegory. It makes God’s Word into a cryptogram decipherable only by experts who have the leisure to acquire the education to break it. And it is this mystification of Scripture, and its removal from the comprehension of “untrained laity,” which is the great tragedy, as I see it, represented by the triumph of the allegorical method in the Middle Ages.

In any event, most Jews rejected the allegorical method that had been developed by Philo for the Hellenized Jews of the Dispersion after the events of 70. The destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple by Roman armies was a catastrophe which caused Judaism’s focus to turn inward, pulling back from its earlier Hellenizing tendencies and, at the same time, shifting its literary production away from the historical orientation of Scripture and toward the more timeless dimension of discussion, distillation, and application of the Law. Moreover, because of the antagonism between them and the Christians, they gradually abandoned the use of the Septuagint and turned to a series of newer translations by Aquila, Theodotion, and Symmachus.

It was thus the Christians of Alexandria who inherited the Septuagint from the Jews of that city, along with their (pre-Christian era) conviction that it was an inspired, and thus infallible, translation. And it was the Christians who also began to apply Philo’s non-literal methodology to the task of Christ-centered Scriptural interpretation, first through the work of Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215), and then – and especially – through that of Origen (+253). In fact, this proclivity for the allegorical method was to become the characteristic trait of the School of Alexandria through succeeding centuries.

Origen was the foremost exponent of this method. Like Philo, he proceeded from the assumption that the Bible, being infallibly inspired by God, could contain nothing unworthy of God. Indeed, God is the author of every detail of the Bible – the Holy Spirit having filled the human writers’ souls and used them as instruments to convey the divine revelation for us. “He looked upon the Bible as though it were a sacrament, in which every detail possesses a spiritual meaning placed there by God’s Spirit.”²⁹ Origen, again like Philo, taught that it was through the use of allegorical interpretation that one could attain to the deeper meanings that God had implanted in any given passage of Scripture, and that this was especially the case when the literal meaning might be obscure,

²⁸ Ibid., 107.

²⁹ Ibid., 18.

“inappropriate,” or unworthy of such a document. He even expressed the interesting notion that the Holy Spirit purposely tossed stumbling blocks into the text – obvious inconsistencies or obscurities, for example – as a reminder for seekers of divine truth that there remained hidden meanings beneath and beyond the literal surfaces.³⁰ And for truly obscure passages he taught they are to be understood in light of the Christian apostolic tradition.³¹

Origen divided Scriptural interpretation into three senses, which accorded with his understanding of the triple division of human nature. Thus, every passage of Scripture was said to yield three meanings: the literal, corresponding to the body; the moral, corresponding to the soul; and the spiritual or perfect, corresponding to the spirit.³² He supported this view by quoting Proverbs 22:20 – or more precisely, by quoting that verse as it was mistranslated in the Septuagint – “Have I not written unto thee in a triple way?”³³ And so, through the systematic application of the allegorical method, the whole of Scripture became a record of Christian revelation, such that every passage was seen to point to Christ and the Church as its fulfillment. Indeed, such Christ-centered exegesis would seem to be justified, even demanded, by our Lord’s words to the crowd in John 5:39 and to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:44. But the problem with the allegorical method was really a most fundamental one, and that was on the one hand its studied disdain for and discarding of the literal meaning of the text, and on the other hand the frequent usurpation of that literal meaning by “spiritual” meanings which, more often than not, evidenced more the speculative and subjective creativity of their “discoverers” than any actual meaning inhering in the text.

Diodore, Theodore, and the Antiochenes

1. Sensus Literalis

(WCF 1.7) All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.³⁴

Thus reads the seventh section of the first chapter of the Westminster Confession, which is placed at the head of this section to highlight the remarkable conformity of the Antiochene exegesis, as we shall see, with the

³⁰ Ibid..

³¹ Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 109.

³² Origen, *De principiis*, PG (11), 364, quoted in Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 108.

³³ Ibid., quoted in Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 109.

³⁴ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom With a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 3, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 604.

principle here quoted. “Not only the learned, but the unlearned... may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.” This is the fundamental premise which undergirds both the Antiochene and Protestant exegetical strategies. The Scripture is God-breathed and infallible. As such, it has been given to us that we might be instructed in the things we need to know, not by the imaginings of clever men, but by the words themselves, as they “clearly propound” God’s communication to us through human authors in particular historical contexts. In light of this root principle, then, we are to look for the meaning of a sacred text neither “behind” nor “beyond” its obvious import, but in the literal sense itself as it is revealed linguistically and contextually. Indeed, context must be the sure guide to our understanding what the Spirit was actually inspiring a sacred writer to reveal, not our subjective intuition or musings.³⁵

Above all else, the Antiochenes sought to contain and restrain the Alexandrian zeal for allegorization. Several centuries after Theodore’s death and condemnation, Photius, bishop of Constantinople during the ninth century, reported having read some of the Antiochene’s writings, and doubtless intended no compliment when he penned that “Theodore avoids the use of allegory as much as possible, being only concerned with the discovery of the historical sense of the book.”³⁶ But Photius is only stating a fact that Theodore, and the other Antiochenes, would heartily have admitted. They did avoid the use of allegory, and they objected to the allegorical method, first, because it introduced a dangerous subjectivity into the task of Scriptural exegesis and, second, because it routinely overstepped its warrant in rejecting the literal meaning in favor of obscure and questionably derived ones. Again, the grounding principle of the Antiochene exegesis was that Scripture is the Word of God, clearly propounded, and comprehensible not just to the learned, but the unlearned as well. God had not hidden his revelation behind his words for scholars to play at breaking the puzzle; rather, the revelation and the applicability was in the meaning of the words themselves. According to the “literal exegesis,” then, there may be several applications for any given passage of Scripture, but there is only one meaning – the literal one. And this exegetical tenet is exactly opposed to the central principle of the allegorical method, which is that every passage in fact has multiple meanings, of which, indeed, the literal one may be dispensed with entirely.

We must not imagine, however, that the Antiochenes embraced a crude literalism in their interpretation of Scripture. They recognized that biblical language is often metaphoric, and they understood that the literal meaning of a given text may sometimes be best understood as a metaphor, or as hyperbole, or so on, depending on the literary and historical context out of which it takes shape. So “literal exegesis” refers not to a wooden literalism but to a due

³⁵ McLeod, *The Image of God*, 19.

³⁶ Photius, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, PG (103), 72, quoted in Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 110.

attention to expounding meaning in the context of the literary form in which it is expressed. But – and this again is a crucial distinguishing feature of the Antiochene methodology from that of the allegorists – this recognition did not lead them to deny the literal meaning of the text. They insisted that the interpreter has no right to depreciate the literal and historical sense of the sacred text.

A critical concept for properly understanding the exegetical method as it was taught and practiced at the *Asketerion* is that of *theoria*, which Wallace-Hadrill refers to as “the faculty of insight.”³⁷ In renouncing the suitability of allegory as a valid key to Scriptural interpretation, the Antiochenes nonetheless admitted that the sacred texts can and do contain deeper, spiritual messages. They understood *theoria* as the mind’s ability to discover “real” relationships existing between two texts – e.g., between a type and its archetype, or between a prophesy and its fulfillment. It is that power of the mind “to perceive within the historical elements of a text another higher or more sublime ‘reality’ to which the present text points as being its own fulfillment.”³⁸ Note that, whereas the allegorical method employs this “faculty of insight” to the interpretation of texts as they stand alone, the Antiochene exegesis made use of it for the comparison of texts where context warrants the presence of a relationship existing between them. And this careful process of comparison was called “typology,” which Greer defines as “the comparison of two poles against an historical, eschatological background, with the belief that a real relationship between the two exists, and that the second is the fulfillment of the first, and with the conviction that each pole has its own reality.”³⁹ Or again – here according to Zaharopoulos – “typology is not an interpretation of biblical texts but an historical comparison of events. It is the external correspondence of the events themselves in the two Testaments that has to be compared and brought forward.”⁴⁰ Thus, a type is never known in isolation, but as it is realized or fulfilled in its archetype, and these pairs remain historically grounded, wed to the context of their respective Scriptural settings, yet their correspondences may be said to shed light, one upon the other. A good example of a type-archetype pair is the shadow-fulfillment relationship of Adam to Christ. Both are real – that is, their historicity is not to be discarded in the search for some deeper spiritual truth – and yet both exist in a real correspondence with one another – a correspondence which is sanctioned by Scripture itself, in Romans 5. Thus we see that a “type” may be a person, thing, action, or event which actually – that is, according to Scripture itself – foreshadows something else. But where there is no such historical connection between two poles, the Antiochenes called this “allegory.” In short, they would argue that a type was an exegetically deduced

³⁷ Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch*, 32.

³⁸ McLeod, *The Image of God*, 19.

³⁹ Rowan A. Greer, *Theodore of Mopsuestia: Exegete and Theologian* (Westminster: Faith, 1961), 108-9, quoted in McLeod, *The Image of God*, 36.

⁴⁰ Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 131.

relationship warranted by Scripture, while an allegory was an exegetically deduced interpretation not warranted by Scripture.

Diodore, who it will be recalled founded the School of Antioch and taught both Theodore and John Chrysostom, apparently wrote a treatise entitled, *The Difference between Theory and Allegory*, which is now lost. But we are able to garner some of his thought on this matter from his introduction to the *Commentary on the Psalms*, where he declares that *theoria* and *allegoria* differ from each other on the basis of *historia*, by which latter term he meant not “history” as such but an author’s real intent. “*Historia* [that is, the author’s intended meaning, in context] does not exclude a more lofty *theoria*. Rather it is the basic substructure for higher insights. This alone must be held to, lest *theoria* be ever looked upon as subverting that upon which it is founded. For such would no longer be *theoria* but *allegoria*.”⁴¹

On this note, it is interesting to read of the Antiochenes handling of Paul’s use of the word “allegory” in Galatians 4:24, to describe the passage in which he refers to the slave/free relationship of Hagar and Sarah, and compares it to the relationship pertaining at the time of his writing between the Jews (slaves to the Law) and the Christians (free in Christ). John Chrysostom essentially reprimands Paul for using the wrong word, explaining that he should really have used “type,” as that would more correctly have described the passage in question. His reasoning is that, since the apostle does not destroy history as he elaborates this spiritual interpretation, but believes in the historical reality of the events he describes, therefore, Paul’s construction is really a “type” and not an “allegory” at all. Paul, he wrote, “called this type an allegory in a misuse of language.”⁴²

For Theodore, the authority of the typological interpretation must be supported by a New Testament proof text. And, applying these rigorous rules to the search for types in Scripture, he recognized only three that satisfied his criteria:

1. The sprinkling of the doorposts with blood at Passover typified our redemption by Christ’s blood, per 1 Corinthians 10:11 and Hebrews 9:13;
2. The bronze serpent typified Christ’s conquest of death, per John 3:14; and
3. Jonah’s being swallowed by the great fish and his mission typified Christ’s entombment and his summons of mankind to salvation, per Matthew 12:40-41.⁴³

⁴¹ Diodore, *Diodori Tarsensis Comentarii in Psalmos*, ed. Jean-Marie Olivier (Turnhout: Brepols, 1980), xcii., quoted in McLeod, *The Image of God*, 21.

⁴² Chrysostom, *Commentary on Galatians*, PG (61), 662, quoted in McLeod, *The Image of God in the Antiochene Tradition*, 25.

⁴³ Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 131.

Now, the Antiochenes also admitted the presence of one more sense of meaning besides the literal and a typological senses, which they called the “accommodated” sense of Scripture, as referring to those situations where a person points out how a given present situation is congruous with another situation, but with which it has no inherent connection. They understood several of the “fulfillment” passages in which the New Testament writers apply Old Testament prophecy to Jesus as its fulfillment (“a virgin shall conceive...,” “Rachel weeping for her children...,” “out of Egypt...,” even the Suffering Servant passages) as examples of this accommodated sense of Scripture. That is to say, the prophets were not originally prophesying about Jesus, but their language was close enough to the new reality that the New Testament writers could point out how appropriate they were to this later situation.⁴⁴

Thus with regard to the Psalms, regarded by the Alexandrians – as indeed by the non-Antiochene consensus of the early Church – as a book of oracles pointing in every verse to Christ, Theodore again rejected typological or oracular connectedness from all but four of them. In other words, with the exception of Psalms 2, 8, 45, and 110, he rejected the notion that any of the other Psalms were truly messianic, arguing instead that most of the several quotations of the Psalms in the New Testament were examples of the accommodated sense of Scripture. The New Testament writers who made use of them realized that their phraseology and rich symbolism helped explain and to shed light upon analogous spiritual conditions in the Christian revelation. A particularly good example which Theodore used to explain his view on this issue is found in his analysis of Psalm 68:22, where he discusses this Psalm’s various uses by New Testament writers:

The evangelist made use of this text as referring to the Lord (Mark 15:35, John 19:29), and the Lord himself applied the utterance ‘the zeal for thy house shall eat me up’ to himself; the blessed Paul, on the other hand, talking about the Jews, quoted from the same Psalm the text, ‘Let their table be made a snare and a trap and a stumbling block, etc.’; and finally the blessed Peter, speaking about Judah, quoted the utterance, ‘Let this habitation be made desolate’; although the circumstances for each case have been entirely different. Shall we say that this psalm must be understood to speak at one moment of those people, at another of him, and at another moment of somebody else? No, the psalmic utterances in question are referring to the apostatized Jews and reproach their ingratitude. But the use of the testimonies has been applied to analogous circumstances.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ McLeod, *The Image of God*, 20.

⁴⁵ Zaharopoulos, Dimitri Z., *Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Bible: a study of his Old Testament exegesis* (Paulist Press, New York, 1989) p. 145.

Thus, for Theodore, simply quoting a psalm in the New Testament did not prove the psalm was written about that subject; rather, its use indicates a free, yet valid and logically coherent, accommodation of the original text to a new situation.

So, too, with his interpretation of the prophetic books. If we compare the Alexandrian exegesis of Paul's quotation, in 1 Corinthians 15, of Hosea 13:14 ("Death, where is thy plagues? Grave, where is thy destruction?"), with that of the Antiochenes, we see that whereas Cyril of Alexandria thus understood Hosea 13:14 to mean that "God redeems us from the tyranny of death, the instrument of redemption being the death of Christ";⁴⁶ while Theodoret, expressing the "moderate" variant of the Antiochene view, begins with the historical foundation, then proceeds to typology, asserting that the type here is the return of the Jews to Jerusalem – death and the grave referring to their experience of captivity – and that the antitype which fulfills it is Christ, such that these events in the national history of Israel are a type of God's care for all men;⁴⁷ while finally Theodore, in his in his Commentary on Hosea⁴⁸ refuses the typological linkage entirely, writing that "the passage speaks of the Assyrians," despite even Paul's citation of it!

2. Inspiration of the Original Text Only

(WCF 1.8) The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them.⁴⁹

Again, the quote is from the Westminster Confession. The Reformed doctrine that the original copy (the *autograph*) of a sacred text, in the original language, must be accorded the highest authority, rather than the copies and translations of it which followed, conforms again to the Antiochene exegesis, and is opposed to the view that certain translations are inspired. Theodore accepted the Septuagint as the authoritative version of the Old Testament, treating it with great respect and speaking of its superiority over other translations. But he considered it to be an undertaking of purely human origin. He did not accept it as a miraculously inspired translation, having equal authority with the original, but rather, saw it as the scholarly achievement of brilliantly qualified men.

⁴⁶ Cyril of Alexandria, *Comm. in Hos.*, PG (71), 312, quoted in Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch*, 34-35.

⁴⁷ Theodoret, *Comm. in Hos.*, PG (81), 1628, quoted in Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch*, 34-35.

⁴⁸ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Comm. In Hos.*, PG (66), 205, quoted in Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch*, 34-35.

⁴⁹ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, 604.

Listen to his defense of the Septuagint as the best translation of the Scriptures into Greek: “But if one paid attention to the context as well as the mind of the scriptural text, he would never prefer another version other than that of the Seventy; not because they translated everything accurately – there are passages which they rendered very poorly, at times they failed, while the other translators carried it out with more clarity and consistency – but because by a general comparison the Seventy are found to be surpassing the other versions even though they rendered much of the text in an unusual way.”⁵⁰

What is significant here, for our purposes, is that even as Theodore praises of the quality of the Septuagint as a translation, he proves that he does not view it as inspired. And so it seems logically quite consistent when we learn that he places great emphasis on the authority of the original text. “The Hebrew text,” he writes at one point in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, “which is the most authoritative of all and upon which the interpretation must be based, happens to be against this sort of exegesis.”⁵¹

3. Interpretation of Scripture by Scripture

(WCF 1.9) The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.⁵²

The assumption that grounds the Westminster Confession section quoted above is the belief that the books of Scripture constitute a closed canon. Thus, the Scripture is complete, and is inspired in its entirety. It is on the basis of this inspiration of a complete book that we can search for understandings by referring one passage to the other, confident in the knowledge that we do so with the fullness of Scriptural revelation at our disposal. Now, it is true that, in Antioch of the third and fourth centuries, the canon was still incomplete. We know that Chrysostom and Theodoret excluded second Peter, second and third John, Jude, and Revelation from their list of inspired sacred texts, and we can be fairly certain that Theodore did as well.

Despite the incompleteness of the Antiochene canon, however, the exegetes of the *Asketerion* applied many of the same rules in the task of interpretation as would the Reformers over a thousand years later. Theodore, for example wrote commentaries on nearly all of the books in Scripture, frequently referring to other passages of Scripture to shed light upon those sections he was discussing. And in these commentaries, he would preface each book and each Psalm by an introduction, in which he set forth the subject of the

⁵⁰ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Psaumes*, 365, 11.5-12, quoted in Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 118-119.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 195, 11.23-25, quoted in Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 116.

⁵² Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, 605.

text to be studied and then dealt with such questions as dating, authorship, historical occasion, and the purpose of biblical writing. He studied and interpreted the Bible in light of its literal, conceptual, and historical environment, and strove to keep pagan and philosophical language out of his discussion of Scripture. He was guided by the principle that “the Bible must be interpreted by the Bible.”⁵³

4. Scripture’s Authority Higher than Men’s

(WCF 1.10) The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.⁵⁴

This quotation from the Westminster Confession expresses the Reformed conviction that it is to the Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) that we are to turn as the final authority in these matters. As the Word of God it is not to be reckoned as merely another voice amidst the clamor of human voices. Thus it is not to the traditions of men that we must appeal, nor is it upon them that we are to ground our authority, but on the Scripture alone. As for Theodore, “if we may judge from his extant biblical commentaries, he never appeals to the authority of earlier church fathers, but frequently attacks other commentators with derision.”⁵⁵ Or again, “while it is true that Theodore felt free to follow wherever his critical analysis of a text would point him, even if this led him into public opposition with traditional teachings, he always adhered to the conciliar doctrines of Nicea and Constantinople I.”⁵⁶ It would seem, then, that he accorded authority to the conciliar statements because they conformed to the biblical standard, higher than which was no human authority.

Summary: Antiochene and Reformed Theology Compared

In this brief overview of Antiochene exegesis, we discussed its various elements and emphases in light of key sections of the Westminster Confession which deal with the matter of Scriptural interpretation. We have seen that the Reformed and Antiochene approaches to biblical interpretation share many features in common, and that, in particular, both stand opposed to the allegorical methodology of the Alexandrians. Here are some of the exegetical beliefs shared in common:

First, both approaches are committed to expounding the literal sense of Scripture by use of the grammatico-historical method. That is, (1) both see the *sensus literalis* as providing the best, fullest meaning for a given passage of

⁵³ Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 123.

⁵⁴ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, 605-6.

⁵⁵ Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Bible*, 138.

⁵⁶ McLeod, *The Image of God*, 34.

Scripture, and (2) both focus on the historical context of the text and pay close attention to its grammatical structure. As the Antiochenes were opposed to the fanciful methods of the Alexandrian allegorists, so the Reformers were opposed the Medieval allegorists, whose *quadriga* had increased the complexity of biblical interpretation from the three levels sought by Origen for every passage to four: the literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogical. Antiochenes and Reformers would both agree that, “though a text may have a multitude of applications, it has only one correct meaning.”⁵⁷

Second, both approaches reject the notion that certain translations (e.g., the Septuagint, the Vulgate) have been divinely inspired and so are equally infallible and inerrant as the original texts in the original languages. Both would hold that the original texts (the *autographa*) were the ones written in the closest proximity to the inspiration of God and which are most perfectly inerrant. (The reason for our qualified language here – “closest proximity” instead of “immediate,” “most perfectly” instead of “perfectly,” will become apparent in our next section, contrasting the Antiochene and Reformed view on inspiration.)

Third, both approaches adhere to that fundamental principle that Scripture is to interpret itself (*Sacra Scriptura sui interpretis*), also known as the “analogy of faith.” Though Reformers and Antiochenes would have some substantial differences with regard to the exact composition of the canon (the Antiochene exegetes excluding four of the Catholic epistles and the book of Revelation from the New Testament, for example), yet both believed the Scripture to be complete and infallibly of God. Therefore, one passage could and should be used to shed light on another. “We are to interpret the obscure in light of the clear, the implicit in light of the explicit, and the narrative in light of the didactic.”⁵⁸

Fourth, both approaches view the Bible as the highest authority in matters of faith, doctrine, and practice. While we must be careful not to assert that the Antiochenes were proto-Protestants, proclaiming *sola Scriptura* back in the fourth century, we may note that – certainly this was the case with Theodore – that his exegetical methods were pointed very definitively in this direction, as evidenced by the sheer Bible-centeredness of his life-work and training, and by his overall lack of appeal to the authority of the Fathers as that upon which he based his work.

4. A DISCUSSION OF THEODORE’S VIEW OF INSPIRATION, CONTRASTED AGAINST THE PROTESTANT AND REFORMED VIEW

⁵⁷ R.C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown: the Heart of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 57.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

(WCF 1.1) Therefore it pleased the Lord, to commit the same [i.e., that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation] wholly unto writing.⁵⁹

We have seen that the Antiochene exegesis may be regarded as a true forerunner of the grammatico-historical method. But when we turn our focus from the question of interpretation to that of inspiration, a substantial difference emerges between the Reformed and Antiochene – and particularly Theodore’s – views on the matter, with the former holding to a doctrine of plenary inspiration and with the latter, to one of “dynamic” inspiration. And since one’s view of inspiration is the ground upon which everything else stands in the task of Scriptural exegesis, then no matter how right the methodology constructed atop it be, if the foundational view of inspiration is errant, the whole system can and will go awry.

The quoted text which heads this section is from chapter one, section one of the Westminster Confession. It states the fundamental assertion of biblical Christianity, that “it pleased the Lord to commit [his special revelation for our salvation] unto writing.” The Reformed tradition states unambiguously that the Bible is the *verbum dei* (the Word of God), and the *vox dei* (the voice of God). Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that “all Scripture is God-breathed.” That is to say, God is its source and ultimate author. At the same time, the church recognizes that the Scriptures were composed by human authors, addressing concerns of audiences in specific situations. To explain how this fully divine, fully human special revelation of God came into being, the Reformed doctrine of inspiration declares that God enabled the human writers to be agents of this divine revelation, writing under the inspiration and superintendence of the Holy Spirit. But this agency was not wholly passive. Their inspiration was not “mechanical”; they were not thrown into trances, nor were they merely stenographers of God’s aural dictation. Rather, their individual styles and gifts remained intact, even as, by God’s sovereign will, they conformed fully to His own. “The inspiration of Scripture refers then to the divine superintendence of Scripture, preserving it from the intrusion of human error. It refers to God preserving his Word through the words of human authors.”⁶⁰

So the Reformed tradition holds to this “plenary” view of inspiration, by which God is understood as superintending every detail along every step of the process of inscripturation, and by which “every word is the word of God, and every word is the word of man.”⁶¹ As we have seen, this view is opposed to the “mechanical” theory of inspiration, by which the human element is effectively negated. It is also opposed to the “dynamic” theory of inspiration, which

⁵⁹ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, 600-1.

⁶⁰ Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, 45.

⁶¹ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 421.

removes the operation of the Holy Spirit from the production of the Sacred Books and emphasizes the role of humans whose inspiration by God preceded their relating the experience in writing. In this view, the Bible becomes not so much the Word of God by the Holy Spirit as the words of Spirit-filled men, and this is a fact that undermines the uniqueness and distinct authority of the canon of Scripture. Finally, there is a fourth view of inspiration, the theory of “partial” inspiration, by which certain portions of Scripture are deemed inspired and others not – which of course is opposed to the view of plenary inspiration, by which the whole of Scripture in every detail is believed to be inspired.⁶²

Theodore seems to have held what might be called a “partial-dynamical” view of Scriptural inspiration. With regard, first, to the “partial” aspect of his outlook, he held that not every book in the Old Testament is inspired, but that several were of merely human origin, based on wisdom and experience. These “purely human” books would seem to have included everything written by Solomon – Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs – as well as the book of Job. In addition there are questions as to whether he accepted Esther and Ezra into the list of inspired books.⁶³ In all this, he argued that the Holy Spirit’s action varied from writer to writer, and that the special gift bestowed on the prophets was in a different category from the grace of prudence which Solomon possessed. He used Paul’s distinction between words of knowledge and words of wisdom, in 1 Corinthians 12:8, as the Scriptural basis for this notion of greater and lesser inspiration.⁶⁴

Second, he embraced an increasingly “dynamic” view of Scriptural inspiration, one that sought to distinguish between the biblical writers’ actual encounters with God and their subsequent relating of the experiences in writing. The Church Fathers had made no such distinction between revelation and inscripturation, nor had the writers of the New Testament, who clearly thought of the words of the Old Testament as being the direct utterances of God (e.g., Hebrews 1:1, Ephesians 4:8, Acts 3:21). God was the real author of Scripture, and the prophets and apostles were simply his instruments of this revelation. Listen to Justin Martyr, for example, who wrote of “the divine plectrum itself, descending from heaven, and using righteous men as an instrument, like a harp or lyre, [that God] might reveal to us the knowledge of things divine and heavenly.”⁶⁵ In short, inspiration had traditionally been understood as a

⁶² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Combined ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 153.

⁶³ Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 52. He also rejected the authenticity of the titles to the various Psalms, and did not include the Apocrypha in the canon of inspired Scripture. Despite referring to Solomon’s books and to Job as works of purely human wisdom and experience, he included them in the canon. But he rejected Song of Songs, seeing it as an unseemly love poem and, characteristically, refusing to interpret it allegorically.

⁶⁴ McLeod, *The Image of God*, 29.

⁶⁵ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, American ed. (United States: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 276.

communication of divine truth, by which God initiated the process of revelation and effectively saw it through to inscripturation as the infallible and inerrant conveyance of that revelation.

But Theodore began to split the process, moving from a plenary view of inspiration to one that more heavily emphasized the role of the human authors. He came to view inspiration not so much as a propositional communication of truth, still less as a period of superintendence during which the biblical writer recorded the revealed truth, but as an ecstatic state during which the prophet experienced a direct encounter with the Holy Spirit, and by which the Spirit awakened in him “a disposition of thoughts and images without audible communication.”⁶⁶ He saw it “as a movement whereby God implanted certain ideas and images within the sacred writer’s mind,” a terrifying encounter with the very power and presence of God, after which the prophetic utterance burst forth.⁶⁷ But note that God’s role is done once the revelation, the ecstatic period of inspired possession, is past. After this, it is the human prophet who vocalizes the content of his “awakened dispositions” and who still later writes them down. Thus, the initial message from God is filtered through and inevitably modified by the human role in the successive processes of speaking it and writing it. From a theological point of view, we see that Theodore thus abandons the idea of “effective conveyance,” by which it is held that God oversees the entire process such that it is his very word that appears even at the stage of its final written form.

Commenting on Hosea 3:1, for example, Theodore writes “It is quite clear, and we have said it several times in the past, that the sayings of the prophets have not been compiled in the form of a book following a harmonious pattern, but separately, and the prophesies were spoken by the prophets *when they received the revelation.*”⁶⁸ (Italics mine.) The books of written prophesy, then, are themselves loosely organized compilations of the prophesies which had been spoken by these men in response to their experiences of inspired revelation. Far from reading God’s very word, then, we are reading a written compilation of reports by men of their encounters with the Lord, and so God in this sense is twice removed from the reader of Scripture. And note, moreover, that this is so with prophetic writings, for which Theodore professes to hold a “high” view of inspiration! For non-prophetic Scripture, the effects of the Holy Spirit in the generation of the text become almost nil.

It is in his commentaries on the New Testament that we see the full effects of this elevation of the human and diminution of the divine role in the production of Scriptural texts. Listen to this fascinating passage in which

⁶⁶ Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 98.

⁶⁷ McLeod, *The Image of God*, 30.

⁶⁸ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Comm. in Hos.*, PG (66), 144, quoted in Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 87.

Theodore explores John's motives for writing the Gospel. John is described as having praised the circulating synoptic gospels as being true, yet having found them to have omitted certain things pertaining to Jesus' most important miracles and doctrines:

Thereupon, the brethren begged John entreatingly to choose the things he estimated to be of great value for the interpretation of the doctrine which had been omitted by the rest [Matthew, Mark, and Luke] and commit them to writing immediately. And this is what he did."⁶⁹

This is far from Justin's image of a lyre upon which God's revelation can play. Here we see the author responding to the requests of his flock, drawing on his own memories, and writing them down according to his own capabilities. The Bible thus becomes not the exclusive work of God's Spirit, but of spiritual men exercising their free will and faithfully reporting their inspired encounters with God. And it is this view of inspiration, which severely limits God's role while radically inflating the human factor in the production of the biblical texts, which reveals Theodore's doctrine of Scripture to have been heterodox.

In summary, the Council of 553 was in error when it condemned "the orthodoxy of his exegesis." It was not his "literal exegesis" – a true prototype of the grammatico-historical method – which nurtured heresy, but rather, his view of inspiration. Unfortunately, he grounded a very sound exegetical method on a foundation of a very questionable understanding of God's role in inscripturation, with the result not only that his whole approach was called into question and ultimately condemned, but also that the literal method of interpretation developed at Antioch was rejected by the Church as well. This was a tragic development, as it led to the triumph of allegorization and mystification of Scripture for the next thousand years.

This brings us to the crux of the matter, in which we shall attempt to answer why, given Theodore's professed commitment to think biblically, he developed a distinctly unbiblical view of inspiration. As we mentioned above, it is surely true that the human authors of the sacred texts believed that "all Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16-17), that it was both in its aggregate and in every detail the word of God (Hebrews 1:1, Ephesians 4:8, Acts 3:21). Why then did Theodore expound a teaching that rejected this clear sense of Scripture? The answer may be found in the assumptions he made in formulating his Christology, and it is that subject to which we now turn our attention.

5. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THEODORE'S CHRISTOLOGY, EXAMINING ITS LOGICAL LINKAGE TO HIS VIEW OF INSPIRATION AND TO PELAGIAN MORALISM

⁶⁹ Robert Devreesse, *Essai sur Theodore de Mopsueste* (Citta del Vaticano: Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, 1948), 305-6, quoted in Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 89.

[The assembled council] opposes those who would rend the mystery of the dispensation into a Duad of Sons."⁷⁰

The Christological outlook formulated at Antioch during the third and fourth centuries has been the subject of much scholarly attention. For that reason, and due to constraints of space, we shall only outline its essential character, in order that we might better understand the underlying logical connections between Theodore's proto-Nestorian Christology and his partial-dynamical view of inspiration. And the key to comprehending this Antiochene's Christology is understanding the metaphysical dualism upon which it is founded. For Theodore, Jesus Christ is consubstantial with mankind as to his human nature, and he is consubstantial with God as to his divine nature, but these two natures cannot, by definition, be merged together without doing violence to the basic principle that Christ is fully God and fully man. A merger of natures signals the creation of some new, mixed substance, making Christ into a sort of demigod; thus does Arianism rear its head again. To avoid this basic problem, Theodore taught that Christ's natures remain distinct. He is perfect God and perfect man in two distinct natures. And at this point we must note that, despite Cyril's rejection of this idea, in fact Theodore's view on this issue is that which prevailed at Chalcedon, and which we profess today as the orthodox elaboration of Christ's two natures.

The problem arose in his teaching on the nature of the union of these two natures. In his *Catechetical Homily on the Nicene Creed*, we read his fundamental premise on this issue:

It is well known that the one who is eternal and the one whose existence has a beginning are greatly separated from each other, and the gulf found between them is unbridgeable... It is not possible to limit and define the chasm that exists between the one who is from eternity and the one who began to exist at a time when he was not.⁷¹

For Theodore, all talk of an essential – that is, substantial, or *hypostatic* – union of the natures in Christ must be rejected. He understood *hypostasis* to be the individuated expression of a *physis* (or “nature,” a defining set of attributes), which itself is the generalized expression of the *ousias* (“essence,” the primal substance itself). This accorded with the conciliar view of the Trinity, for example, by which God is said to be one *ousias* (one essence, or substance) in three *hypostases* (three individuated expressions of that essence, or persons).

⁷⁰ Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 14, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 264.

⁷¹ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Nicene Creed*, ed. and trans. A. Mingana (Cambridge: Heffer, 1932), 45, quoted in McLeod, *The Image of God*, 134.

Theodore, then, to his own thinking, was only being consistent when he taught that the human nature of Jesus was essentially distinct from the divine nature of the Son-Logos. Because he understood *hypostasis* as referring to the concrete instance of a nature (in the sense that a person is a concrete instance, a particular expression, of human nature), and because, according to his fundamental understanding concerning the radical “other-ness” of God, he insisted that the divine and human natures could not be *hypostatically* joined without corruption of the divine, Theodore held that there is an inhering dualism in Christ’s person. Accordingly, he taught that we must think of Christ’s union not as a hypostatic one (that is, of substance) but as a *prosopic* one (that is, of manifestation and benevolence). *Prosopon* means “face,” “role” (referring to drama as well as to social status), or “person,” in the societal-functional sense – i.e., what one does. And the concept he used to explain how this *prosopic* union came to be and remains intact is “assumption.”

Quoting again from his Commentary on the Nicene Creed, he wrote, “He who assumed is God and only begotten Son, but the form of a slave; he who was assumed is man.”⁷² The divinity of Christ is the *verbum assumens* (the Logos who assumed) and Jesus as to his humanity is *homo assumptus* (the man who was assumed). But this “assumed” man retains a complete and autonomous human nature which is able to grow in discernment. This is crucial in terms of understanding Theodore’s entire christology, in that “he never admitted that this one person [Christ] is none other than the incarnate Logos in whom there are two natures united in harmonious *hypostasis*. His Christ was not a person metaphysically dependent on the incarnated Logos.”⁷³ In a sense, Theodore got stuck on the *hypostasis* as a metaphysical term, which, for him, denoted the concrete instance of a specific being or nature, whereas the Fathers at Chalcedon understood the term more functionally, affirming the Word to be the subject of all that is said of Christ’s humanity.⁷⁴

But this matter is no mere quibble over terminology, because Theodore would derive from his philosophically-grounded conception of the union the distinctly heterodox view that our salvation is effected because and to the extent that the man Jesus *cooperated* with the Son-Logos in their union. Christ functions as the image of God – the true image to which we, in our own uniting of the spiritual and material worlds in our beings, are only pointers, types – who binds all creation to the totally transcendent divinity. The means by which that true imaging is effected – that true imaging which has already begun to and will finally and fully recapitulate the universe in him – is the *prosopic* union, and the way that works in turn is by the obedience of the *hypostasis* of Jesus’ human nature to that of the Son-Logos. It is by perfect obedience that we are saved,

⁷² Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Nicene Creed*, 89, quoted in Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 18.

⁷³ Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 138.

⁷⁴ McLeod, *The Image of God*, 135.

because by Jesus' (the man's) perfect obedience, the bond between God and man is restored, and we commune with God through his image, Christ.⁷⁵

Thus, in rejecting as philosophically untenable the concept of hypostatic union, Theodore "opted for the idea of a uniquely graced union where the Word's and Jesus' natures and wills function as one in Christ."⁷⁶ He believed that the union was one of "good pleasure" (*eudokia*), by which there was and remains a perfect unity of will between the outpouring benevolence of the "assuming" Son-Logos and the obedience of the "assumed" man. Nestorius, Theodore's pupil, would later refer to the union of Christ's natures in one *prosopon* as a "voluntary union," that is, as being contrary to a natural one. It referred to a union based on the voluntary harmonization of two wills into one, not according to essence, but according to sheer free submission. The Son-Logos is son by nature. The man Jesus is son by grace. And the basis of this latter sonship is "good pleasure" in response to the man's free obedience. Here is a quote from Theodore on this matter:

It is fitting to say that the indwelling has come about by good pleasure (*eudokia*). Good pleasure is said to be the highest and most sublime act of God's will which He will exhibit when pleased with those who have been devoted and are still devoted in their dedication to Him, since this [saying] about being well and sublimely pleased with them has been received and found in Scripture."⁷⁷

Thus the cooperation of Jesus the man with God, manifested in his living out a life in perfect obedience to the divine will – an obedience which was enabled and reinforced by the grace of the Son-Logos which assumed him – becomes the model which we are to emulate in our own lives. We can gradually attain to eternal life as sons of God by manifesting the same obedience to the divine will as had Jesus, though in our case the enabling grace is not the direct assumption by the divine hypostasis but the benefits of access to God through Christ, the image of God and bond of creation, which the obedience of his fully human free will had facilitated.⁷⁸ Jesus as to his humanity, then, differs from our possible relationship with the Son-Logos, as a son by grace, only in degree. We will not "become" divine, but only true sons, obedient and conforming to God's image; but then, Jesus' humanity wasn't God, either. In a very real sense, we, like Jesus the man, can, if enabled by grace, so obey God's will as to merit our own salvation; like Jesus the man, our obedience draws God's "good pleasure," such that we are gradually transformed, like Christ, to an immortal and

⁷⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: a History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) 234.

⁷⁶ McLeod, *The Image of God*, 87.

⁷⁷ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Fragmenta Dogmatica*, PG (66), 973, quoted in McLeod, *The Image of God*, 158.

⁷⁸ McLeod, *The Image of God*, 137.

incorruptible state. In short, our cooperation with God is that by which we, like our Lord, may be “assumed” unto salvation.

Zaharopoulos refers to Theodore as a “moralistic metaphysician,”⁷⁹ and we can observe that his Christological outlook meshes very neatly with Pelagius’ moralist anthropology to create a full blown doctrinal system which emphasizes human free will as its grounding presupposition..⁸⁰ Theodore’s views on Scriptural inspiration, by which the Bible is seen to be the product of human free will responding faithfully to and recording truthfully the initial divine revelation, is clearly related to his view of salvation, by which it is seen, again, as the product of human free will responding obediently to the Son-Logos who would assume us through Christ the true image. And both of these are grounded, in turn, in his christology, by which the union of hypostatic-natures in Christ is a collaborationist effort, whose success is dependent on the obedience of the grace-enabled human free will to the divine will. In summary, Theodore’s presuppositions – on the radical other-ness of God, which cannot permit the clear teaching of Scripture with regard to the Incarnation to prevail (by which “the Word became flesh” must be uncomfortably restated as “the Word assumed flesh”), and on the ultimate reality and necessity of human free will, which rejects God’s sovereignty as incompatible with either human authorship of the Bible or salvation itself – ultimately undermine his entire system.

6. CONCLUSION

It is interesting to note that the Pelagian apologist, Julian of Eclanum, took refuge with Theodore when he was driven from his see, and there came under the influence of the great exegete. Although Pelagius himself did not seem to accept the Antiochene principles of Scriptural interpretation, holding (like Origen) that whatever conflicted with his sense of justice should be interpreted allegorically, Julian began the fusion of Theodore’s “metaphysical moralism” with Pelagian moralism, incorporating the Antiochene principles of Scriptural interpretation to the shared worldview founded on human free will. He would later write commentaries on the prophets and Job, and in them would attack Origen and Jerome for their use of allegory.⁸¹ And, as we mentioned near the beginning of this paper, Theodore had shortly before his death received Nestorius, his former pupil at the *Asketerion*, about-to-be bishop of Constantinople, and soon-to-be exiled heretic. We see, then, Theodore’s living connections with the twin heresies of the fifth century that emphasized too much

⁷⁹ Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 139.

⁸⁰ Indeed, Theodore refuted “those who maintain that sin is a part of our nature,” writing a treatise (now lost but for fragments) against Augustine’s defense of original sin in the Pelagian controversy. See Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 3, *The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1966), 413.

⁸¹ Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 16.

the role of human free will, whether in terms of Christology, inspiration, salvation, or all three.

That said, however, we must still grant that Theodore's exegesis, in anticipating the grammatico-historical method of Protestantism by over one thousand years, was an extraordinary development in the history of the Church. And the condemnation of that method by the Church might be reasonably viewed as a tragic mistake. Yet perhaps with a view toward the provenance of God for his Church, we might apprehend otherwise, realizing that retaining Theodore's sound exegetical method may not have been worth the price of legitimizing the errors which so deeply pervaded his theological system. In him, we jump directly from an over-reliance upon allegory to an over-reliance on the normative, human role in the critical aspects of the Christian faith, and we may wonder at times if in Theodore we are encountering the world's first "Higher Critic." Perhaps, in the final analysis, the establishment of Church doctrine along surer principles during this critical period outweighed its need for a better exegesis, so that when the grammatico-historical method would be developed anew by the Reformers, it would be done so upon the sure foundation of a millennium of orthodoxy with regard to plenary inspiration.

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