

THE CHURCH OF THE EAST AND THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA
The Commitment to His Writings and its Implications for Dialogue

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The commitment by the Church of the East to the writings—particularly the biblical commentaries—of Theodore of Mopsuestia had its origins in the early fifth century, when the Persian School at Edessa adopted Theodore’s works as standard orthodox texts, translating them from Greek into Syriac and treating them as authoritative. When the school was closed and subsequently reconstituted at Nisibis, the new institution carried on the tradition of utilizing these works in the preparation of young scholars for service to the Persian church. The first head of the School of Nisibis, Narsai, spoke of Theodore in rapturous terms as the supreme expositor of the Holy Scriptures:

It is right to call him “Doctor of doctors”. . . .
All who have grown rich were made to abound from the treasury of his writings,
And from his commentaries they acquired the knowledge to interpret.
I learned from him too—I, who learned to stammer—
And by his acquaintance I acquired an acquaintance with the study of words.
His study was for me as a guide to the Scriptures,
And he lifted me up to an understanding of the books of the Spirit.¹

At Nisibis Biblical exegesis was considered the most important discipline, and its place in the curriculum was paramount. Following the footsteps of Narsai, generations of men, at Nisibis, Mount Izla, and elsewhere in the East, relied on Theodore’s commentaries as models of exegesis and sources of inspiration, and they developed a strong attachment and loyalty, not only to the writings, but also to the memory of the man who produced them. Many of these men became influential in the Church of the East, as educators, monks, and bishops, with some of them attaining the exalted rank of Catholicos-Patriarch.

In the hundred years between the Councils of Chalcedon and Constantinople II the ascendancy of the authority of Theodore in the East remained without serious challenge within the Church of the East. At the same time there was a recognition of, and reaction to, questions concerning Theodore which had been raised in the West. In an unauthorized—and later repudiated—Synod convened in 484 by the Metropolitan of Nisibis, Barsauma, the founder and patron of the School of Nisibis, a decree was issued condemning all who

¹ *Homilies of Mar Narsai*, Vol. 1 (Syriac), p. 279, Patriarchal Press, San Francisco, 1970.

spoke against Theodore and his writings. In spite of the subsequent repudiation of the synod, the decree survived and ultimately appeared with canonical sanction in a Patriarchal Synod in 605. After recognizing that “in various places” wicked men had begun to speak audaciously against this justly revered and saintly father, and after castigating such bold and headstrong men, the decree declares:

Therefore, if anyone ventures, secretly or openly, to calumniate or to revile this teacher of the truth and his holy writings, let him be anathematized by the truth.²

These sentiments expressed concerning Theodore and his detractors were widely and fervently held by the great majority in the East, and the rise of anti-Theodoran feeling in the West would be answered with a similar but opposite reaction in Persian territories. Any assault on Theodore’s reputation or legacy was bound to be met with a counter-attack of equal intensity.

In the fifth decade of the sixth century another element, this one potentially ominous, was introduced into the picture. The Byzantine Emperor Justinian, in his ultimately futile efforts to bring about the Constantinian ideal of theological unity throughout the empire, raised the “Three Chapters”³ controversy and pinned his hopes on achieving compromise by, among other things, the condemnation of Theodore’s person and writings. In 544 he issued an edict condemning the “Nestorianism” of Theodore. At the same time, in Persian territory a certain man, Mar Aba I, had been elected Catholicos-Patriarch whose personal strength of character and moral authority was such that he is credited by many, East and West, as having been the greatest Patriarch in the history of the Church of the East. The coincidence of these historical happenings may have had much to do with the hardening of attitudes toward Theodore and his legacy on both sides of the border.

Mar Aba was a scholar, formerly a teacher at Nisibis, and deeply influenced by the Biblical commentaries and other works of Theodore, and he

² *Synodicon Orientale* (hereinafter, *SO*), ed. J. B. Chabot, p. 211 (Syr. text), Paris, 1892.

³ The “Three Chapters” were the charges, or “headings”, brought against Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and Ihiba of Edessa by the emperor Justinian. They called for the condemnation of the person and works of Theodore, the writings of Theodoret against Cyril of Alexandria, and the letter of Ihiba to Mari the Persian. All were considered by the anti-Chalcedonian party as “Nestorian” (in the case of Theodore, he was considered the true father of “Nestorianism”), and their condemnation was set forth as an absolute condition of reconciliation between the Chalcedonian and anti-Chalcedonian sides.

was personally committed to protecting and defending them against their detractors. In 532, some eight years before his Catholicate began, he had made a journey to Palestine and Egypt with a colleague, Thomas of Edessa, and in Alexandria he had been permitted to explain the Scriptures using the commentaries of Theodore⁴. From there he and Thomas went on to Constantinople where Justinian attempted to meet with them to persuade them to condemn Theodore. At this point the Constantinian ideal was being stretched beyond the political boundaries of Byzantium in what might have been seen as an attempt to treat the Persian church as a matter of imperial concern. The political ramifications for those Christians living in Sassanid territory, if this overreaching by the western emperor should succeed, ought not to be underestimated. The administrative independence declared by the Church of the East in 424 was in part to avoid the appearance or suspicion of *political* sympathies with the Christian West—this after an extended period of fierce periodic repression by the Sassanian rulers. The diplomatic acumen that served Mar Aba so well after his election to the Patriarchate must certainly have alerted him at this time to the possible political and social consequences of imperial Byzantium meddling in Persian church affairs. Perhaps feeling under personal threat, and in any case wanting to avoid a confrontation with the emperor, he quickly left Constantinople and returned to the East.

After his election to the Patriarchate, at a synod convened in 544 (the same year as Justinian's edict), Mar Aba and the assembled bishops drew the line against the movement in the West to anathematize the teacher so celebrated and revered in the East. The last canon of a list of forty established (or re-established) in the synod states:

Our interpretation—that of all of us bishops in all the East—of the faith which was set forth by the three hundred and eighteen bishops, which we hold in our confession on our right and on our left, is that which was set forth by the holy and God-loving blessed one, Mar Theodorus, bishop and interpreter of the divine Scriptures.⁵

Serving as counterpoint to Justinian's edict, this canon officially established the Church of the East in defense of Theodore and outside the bounds of Justinian's influence, as well as in direct opposition to the latter's intentions. Quite aside from theological questions, this canon may thus have served the additional purpose of shielding the Persian Christians from possible suspicion in their

⁴ *Christ in Christian Tradition*, A. Grillmeier with Theresia Hainthaler, London/Louisville, Mowbray/Westminster John Knox Press, Vol. 2, p. 464.

⁵ *SO*, (appendix), p. 550.

homeland, particularly in light of the recent and future hostilities between Justinian's armies and those of the Persian emperor, Khusrau I.

The political implications lurking behind the broader picture have been stressed here, not to downplay the very real love and devotion that was felt for Theodore and his written legacy in the East, but to suggest that there were prudential considerations of no small consequence added into the mix of emotional and intellectual attachment so many had to the one they called "*The Interpreter*". These ever-present background elements should never be ignored in any assessment of the dynamics of movements and counter-movements within the church of Persia. Though muted on the rhetorical level, making them difficult to evaluate, they were always present beneath the surface and had their effect as a disincentive to harmony between East and West, and an incentive to drawing distinctions.

Following Constantinople II the decision to condemn the Three Chapters had little affect upon those it was intended to influence in the West, and no effect upon the Church of the East's commitment to Theodore of Mopsuestia's memory and written legacy. It was not until the appointment of Henana as head of the School of Nisibis in 570 that a real challenge to Theodore's eminence occurred. Henana came to view *The Interpreter's* exegetical works as suspect and preferred those of John Chrysostom instead. Since what we know of Henana's views comes to us largely from his enemies (most of his literary output was destroyed following his condemnation), his theology is hard to reconstruct with any degree of precision. It appears that his judgment of Theodore's Biblical commentaries had much to do with his negative analysis of Theodore's anthropology⁶. *The Interpreter's* understanding of man, from his creation to his future state, was a vital element in his treatment of Scripture, and his commentaries are shot through with analyses that reflect that understanding. Henana's own views on the human condition seem to have been more in tune with those of Augustine, and his views on Christology with those of Chalcedon (though he was also accused of associating with "Severans"). This necessitated for him a re-evaluation of the standard theological and exegetical texts, and their replacement with others more congenial with his own views.

Henana might conceivably have become an important figure in bridging the gap in understanding between East and West, but his rejection of Theodore put him beyond the pale as far as the Church of the East was concerned. In a synod held in 587, the same which produced a Christological confession which

⁶ The background of the differences between Henana and the church on the issue of Theodore is treated in the *History of the School of Nisibis*, by Arthur Vööbus, CSCO, Louvain, 1965, pp. 242-264.

was in harmony with the Chalcedonian definition (though it skirts the issue of *hypostasis*), Henana and his followers are severely chastised for their treatment of the Interpreter:

Along with other things which they say in their agitation against [Theodore], they also speak against the commentary in the spiritual sense which the Interpreter composed for the book of the blessed Job, a book written sophisticatedly and ostentatiously by one of the sophists—those who do not concern themselves with the truth, but contract and expand narratives with inventions which are fashioned from humbug, which is far from the truth, as is clear from a reading of the truth to all who consider [it] well—for except for a small portion of it, it is filled with explanatory words which are akin to blasphemy and falsehood. However, they have ventured to say, “Did not Moses write this book of the blessed Job?” and they have cheerfully accepted the humbug that they might have occasion to revile the teachers of the community. Therefore the tongue-tied and tiresome now strive against a man who, both in his life and in his death, was an instructor to the children of grace . . .⁷

Though Henana’s theological opinions were later condemned after conditions had become embittered in the struggle over Christology, it is noteworthy that this particular condemnation concerns itself only with Henana’s treatment of Theodore and his writings—particularly with his rejection of Theodore’s commentary on Job. From that time on there would be no room in the Church of the East for criticism of this Antiochean father.

In view of this long history of an uncritical defense of Theodore, the Church of the East would seem to have become so deeply invested in his defense as not to be able to entertain discussion of his putative weaknesses or the relative merits of his works. This, however, should not prove to be the case. Modern scholarship has sought, with scientific disinterestedness, to re-evaluate the person of Theodore and to credit the significance of his contributions to the ultimate resolution arrived at in Chalcedon. In light of these studies and their (more or less) dispassionate conclusions, the Church of the East is prepared to join, in a spirit of ecumenism, the discussion of Theodore and his work. So long as bitterness and rancor are denied a place in the scholarly forum, and honest inquiry continues, the church is prepared to participate in the discussion insofar as it is able to make a contribution.

The opening to dialogue with the other churches which the Church of the East has taken advantage of during the past few years and the self-examination

⁷ *SO*, pp. 187-188.

which has accompanied its involvement in ecumenical efforts have brought about less suspicion of the motivations of other Christians and more confidence in dealing with them and with the long-standing differences that have made relations difficult in the past. The reciprocal openness and sincerity of East and West, reaching out to one another in this dialogue setting provided by the Archdiocese of Vienna, is at the same time humbling and exalting, banishing the isolation which is the fruit of pride, and vanquishing the lethargy which is the offspring of defeat and demoralization. Vindication is no longer important; it is understanding the Church seeks—both for itself and for “The Interpreter” exalted in its memory.