

The Intellectual Legacy of Theodore of Tarsus

James Siemens

To any observer, Theodore of Tarsus must surely cast one of the sharpest possible silhouettes in the search for concrete links between the Eastern Christian world and the West between the apostolic period and the early Middle Ages. In biographical terms alone, Theodore is a figure who commands attention. Having been nurtured in Greek-speaking Asia Minor before spending time in the Syriac-speaking East, then moving on to Constantinople for study – possibly as a protégé of the teacher Stephen of Alexandria – should be enough to commend him. He then travelled to Rome, where he resided in a Greek monastery and probably became acquainted with Maximus the Confessor through his involvement in the then-fermenting monothelete controversy, before being appointed to the archbishopric of Canterbury in his sixties and embarking on one of the most successful archiepiscopal reigns in the history of the British church.¹ Yet, while it may be that we can say more about the life of Theodore now than ever Bede was able,² a sound historical and theological judgement on his influence could hardly be made without some access to his thought, and contention made with his ideas. Fortunately, this

¹ For biographical particulars see B. Bischoff & M. Lapidge, trans. & eds., *Biblical Commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian* (Cambridge, 1994), esp. pp. 5–81.

² Most of the details Bede provides are to be found in chapters 1 and 2 of book 4 of *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (*HegA*), although Theodore also receives mention later in book 4, together with an account of his death in book 5, chapter 8.

is a task that has been undertaken in recent years,³ and it is now possible to assert with some confidence that Theodore of Tarsus represents one of the most significant possible connections between Orthodox East and Latin West, with a discernible legacy that is at once cultural, exegetical, theological, and pastoral.

In a letter to one Heahfrith, the poet and bishop Aldhelm expressed exasperation at what he saw as the failure on his compatriots' part to recognise the particular advantages they enjoyed in the person of their archbishop:

Why, I ask, is Ireland ... exalted with a sort of ineffable privilege, as if here in the fertile soil of Britain, teachers who are citizens of Greece and Rome cannot be found, who are able to unlock and unravel the murky mysteries of the heavenly library to the scholars who are eager to study them? ... Britain, although situated in almost the outer limit of the western world, possesses, for example, the luculent likeness, as it were, of the flaming sun and moon, that is, Theodore, who discharges the duties of the pontificate and was from the very beginnings of his apprenticeship mature in the flower of the arts of learning.⁴

Contained within these words is invaluable contemporary (and local) corroboration for Theodore's achievements, although the equally complimentary words of Pope Agatho in response to the news that Theodore would not be able to take part in the sixth ecumenical council of the Church may surpass them for weight of authority: "We were hoping, therefore, that Theo-

³ See Bischoff and Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries*, together with the volume edited by Lapidge, *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on His Life and Influence* (Cambridge, 1995). See also C.V. Franklin, *The Latin Dossier of Anastasius the Persian: Hagiographic Translations and Transformations* (Toronto, 2004); J. Stevenson, *The 'Laterculus Malalianus' and the School of Archbishop Theodore* (Cambridge, 1994); and J. Siemens, *The Christology of Theodore of Tarsus: The Laterculus Malalianus and the Person and Work of Christ* (Turnhout, 2010).

⁴ "Letter V: To Heahfrith," in M. Lapidge & M. Herren, trans., *Aldhelm: The Prose Works* (Ipswich, 1979), 163.

dore, our co-servant and co-bishop, the philosopher and archbishop of Great Britain, would join our enterprise, along with certain others who remain there up to the present day.”⁵ Regardless of whose words we read, however, it is clear that Theodore commanded respect and admiration from many quarters, and that the familiar, positive record of Bede concerning Theodore’s accomplishments was entirely justified. Theodore was indeed a great scholar, whose comprehensive learning was expressed in the language of the classroom and of the pastorate, at least as much as, if not more than, that of the theological treatise.

Born in Tarsus in 602, it is reasonable to suppose that Theodore’s childhood there laid the groundwork for the Antiochene approach he would take to questions of exegesis and Christology.⁶ It is likely, meanwhile, that this formation will have been reinforced by a period spent studying in Antioch itself as, in spite of setbacks suffered by the city in the sixth century, there is reason to believe that it retained a connection to its intellectual past, and perhaps even remained a regional centre for education into Theodore’s time.⁷ It was his time in Syriac-speaking Edessa, however, that would appear to substantiate his early theological orientation. After all, there can be little doubt that Theodore did indeed travel there,⁸ and

⁵ εἶτα ἠλπίζομεν ἀπὸ Βρεττανίας Θεόδωρον τὸν σῦδουλον ἡμῶν καὶ συνεπίσκοπον, τῆς μεγάλης νήσου Βρεττανίας ἀρχιεπίσκοπον καὶ φιλόσοφον, μετὰ ἄλλων ἐκεῖσε κατὰ τὸν τόπον διαγόντων, ἐκεῖθεν τῇ ἡμετέρᾳ ἐνωθῆναι μετριότητι: *Concilium Vniversale Constantinopolitanum Tertium, Concilii Actiones I–XI*, ed. R. Riedinger, *ACO*, 2nd ser. 2.1, (Berlin, 1990), 132–33 (trans. M. Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries*, p.80).

⁶ The term “Antiochene” is used here advisedly, as a general indicator of certain assumptions in exegesis and Christology, and not by way of suggesting a rigid opposition to the Alexandrian school. It is an important term to use in Theodore’s regard, however, for the connections it illumines between his work and that of other authors from the eastern Mediterranean world to Mesopotamia.

⁷ For Antioch, see A. Palmer, ed. & trans., *The Seventh Century in the West Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool, 1993), 16. For a more general look at the subject of regional cities in this period, see J.F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century* (Cambridge, 1990), 92–172.

⁸ The commentaries from Canterbury, for example, record Theodore as saying, *cucumeres et pepones unum sunt, sed tamen cucumeres dicuntur pepones cum magni fiunt; ac saepe in uno pepone fiunt .xxx. librae. In Edissia*