

The *Pœnitentiale Theodori* in Theological Perspective: Soteriological Aspects of Confession according to Theodore of Tarsus

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That one of the more famous penitentials of Anglo-Saxon England should be attributed to Theodore of Tarsus, the seventh-century archbishop of Canterbury, is a curious fact of pastoral and theological history. Theodore, who, as his title implies, emerged from Greek-speaking Asia Minor and, by at least the 640s, could be found in Rome – likely resident at the Greek monastery of St. Anastasius – after four decades of cosmopolitan experience and education gained across the eastern Mediterranean world, extending as far east as Edessa.¹ Nowhere in his background, though, was penitence approached in quite the way it was in Britain when he took up the archiepiscopal see in 669. Indeed, it has been suggested that Theodore might have been expected to be unfriendly to the use of penitentials, considering his usual position vis-à-vis Irish practices.² He was not opposed, however, and instead

¹ All biographical details drawn from B. Bischoff & M. Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries from the School of Theodore and Hadrian* (Cambridge, 1994), 5–81.

² T. Charles-Edwards, “The Penitential of Theodore and the *Iudicia Theodor*” in *Archbishop Theodore*, ed. M. Lapidge (Cambridge, 1995), 143. See also J.T. McNeill & H. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance* (New York, 1990), 185, n. 146. For a positive description of Theodore’s acceptance of the penitential tradition, see T. O’Loughlin & H. Conrad-O’Brian, “The ‘Baptism of Tears’ in early Anglo-Saxon Sources,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 22: 82.

earned the description of the *discipulus Umbrensius* as one whose penitential guidance caused “not only many men but also women, enkindled by him through these [decisions] with inextinguishable fervour, burning with desire to quench this thirst, [to make] haste in crowds to visit a man of extraordinary knowledge for our age.”³ It may well have been simply that the Insular tradition of individual penitence seemed most pastorally expedient to Theodore; yet it would be more likely, in light of the biographical and theological evidence, that he found in the tradition something quite congenial to his own christological understanding. It is the latter possibility that we shall explore here.

Prior to a flurry of scholarly activity surrounding Theodore of Tarsus in the early 1990s marking the thirteen hundredth anniversary of his death,⁴ and perhaps more especially the release of Michael Lapidge and Bernard Bischoff’s edition of the biblical commentaries from Canterbury,⁵ the idea that this scholarly figure – whom in 680 Pope Agatho called the “philosopher and archbishop of Great Britain”⁶ – had left firsthand textual evidence on which to base any understanding of his thought, was scarcely given consideration. Certainly there was the penitential that bore his name, but as it enjoyed no

³ *Multi quoque non solum viri, sed etiam feminae de his ab eo inextinguibili feruore accensi sitim hanc ad sedandam ardentem cum desiderio frequentari huius nostri nimirum saeculi singularis scientiae hominem festinabant*: from the preface of *Poenitentiale Theodori*, A.W. Hadden & W. Stubbs, eds. *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents relating to Great Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 1964), 176–77; J.T. McNeill & H. Gamer, eds. & trans., *Medieval Handbooks of Penance* (Columbia, NY, 1990), 183.

⁴ Compiled in the volume, *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on His Life and Influence* (Cambridge, 1995).

⁵ B. Bischoff & M. Lapidge, eds., *Biblical Commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian* (Cambridge, 1994).

⁶ Recorded in *Concilium Vniuersale Constantinopolitanum Tertium, Concilii Actiones I–XI*, ed. R. Riedinger, *ACO*, 2nd ser. 2. 1 (Berlin, 1990), 132–33, and reflecting the pope’s desire that Theodore should come to Rome to lend his support to the Orthodox cause against the Monotheletes: “We were hoping, therefore, that Theodore, 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” (trans. M. Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries*, 80).

contemporary (or near-contemporary) corroboration⁷ and claimed, after all, to be a record of Theodore's thoughts on penitence and nothing more,⁸ it was hardly going to generate excitement as a means by which one could gain access to his theological worldview. In any case, even now, the penitential genre can not be said to have won over very many theologians for the insight it provides into the doctrine of Christ and his work. But that scholarly activity surrounding Theodore's life and work in the 1990s changed everything. Suddenly, scholarship had at its disposal a significant collection of biblical glosses from Theodore's school at Canterbury and – perhaps most important for our purposes – a single, unbroken text attributable to Theodore's own hand, from which a Christology could be derived that was well-developed indeed, called the *Laterculus Malalianus*. Considering that for so long any approach to Theodore's penitential has either had to be undertaken without insight into its instigator's own authentic mind on theological matters, or at best read in light of the narrative description of his pastoral work proffered by Bede, that we should have access to such a pivotal work as the *Laterculus* as a point of access to the *Pœnitentiale Theodori* is grounds to pay it serious attention now.

The *Laterculus* is a work of Theodore's hand⁹ based on an original Greek chronicle text by the Syrian John Malalas, with a substantial addition of commentary on the life and work of Christ.¹⁰ Although replete with suggestions of the author's learning throughout, it is in this latter section, ranging between

⁷ J.T. McNeill & H. M. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance* (New York, 1930, 1990), 180: "But Bede's *History* and the writings of near-contemporaries of Theodore offer no corroboration of his connection with a penitential."

⁸ As opposed to his own writing. See the *discipulus Umbrensius*'s preface to *Pœnitentiale Theodori*.

⁹ First proposed by Jane Stevenson in *The Laterculus Malalianus and the School of Archbishop Theodore* (Cambridge, 1994) and accepted by such scholars as Michael Lapidge, Carmela Viricillo Franklin, and Michael Herren. Stevenson's case for Theodoran provenance was extended in my *The Christology of Theodore of Tarsus: The Laterculus Malalianus and the Person and Work of Christ* (Brepols, 2010).

¹⁰ Jane Stevenson calls it an "exegesis of the life of Christ": *The School of Archbishop Theodore*, 3.