

DOES SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST THEOLOGY OWE A DEBT TO THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA?

ROYAL SAGE

La Sierra College, La Sierra, California

Implied in the title-question of this article is, of course, the answer "Yes." If Seventh-day Adventist theology is understood as based upon certain presuppositions regarding the hermeneutics of Scripture, it will be seen that the indebtedness postulated is significant indeed.

Recent years have seen a dramatic re-evaluation of the position of the great bishop (392-428) of Mopsuestia. As Frederic Hood remarks in his Foreword to the pacemaking *Theodore of Mopsuestia* by Rowan Greer (of which the present article, had it taken a different turn, might well have been a review):

Those more competent to speak than I tell me that in the world of scholarship the star of Theodore is rising. No longer is he regarded as a 'Nestorius before Nestorius': but rather he seems to be resuming the venerable status as a great Antiochene, which he enjoyed before the Fifth General Council.¹

Adventist Principles of Interpretation

What hermeneutical standards are regarded by Seventh-day Adventists as basic to understanding the Bible? The classical Protestant position is adopted, that theology is to be based upon Scripture. The very first proposition in the Adventist statement of "fundamental beliefs" asserts "that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament were given by inspiration of God, contain an all-sufficient revelation of His will to men, and are the only unerring rule of faith and practice (2 Ti 3: 15-17)."² A number of Biblical passages are then adduced for each of the 22 statements.

¹ Rowan Greer, *Theodore of Mopsuestia* (Westminster, 1961), p. 5.

² *Church Manual* (Washington, D.C., General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1951), p. 29.

Adventist literature at times becomes very specific as to what is or is not legitimate in methods of Biblical interpretation. In the official textbook for Adventist college classes in fundamental Biblical teachings, prepared by T. H. Jemison under the auspices of the Department of Education of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, are found such ideas as these: "Every passage of Scripture should be considered in its context if it is to be correctly understood" ³ (this is understood to include *historical* context ⁴); and "The Bible interprets all of its essential symbols." ⁵ These statements follow a delineation of spiritual prerequisites for Bible study (to be expected in a movement much of whose stance is traceable to pietistic influences). A similar list of rules is to be found in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*. ⁶

A literal, grammatical, contextual hermeneutic is explicitly preferred in a widely circulated work by the late Carlyle B. Haynes, popular Adventist writer:

. . . We believe the most fitting and trustworthy method of interpreting Holy Scripture will be found in what has come to be known as 'the literal and historical method.'

By this is meant the method which concerns itself with the simple and grammatical meaning of words, letting historical relationships and bearings throw what light they will upon these meanings.⁷

Rejection of Allegorization

Implicit in the foregoing standpoint is a rejection of allegorization which minimizes or even rules out the historical and literal approach to Scripture, and which is associated especially with Origen and the School of Alexandria. This

³ T. H. Jemison, *Christian Beliefs* (Mountain View, California, 1959), p. 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶ F. D. Nichol, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C., 1953-57), IV, 656.

⁷ Carlyle B. Haynes, *God's Book* (Nashville, Tenn., 1935), p. 215-

condemnation becomes explicit, e.g. in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* introduction to Song of Solomon, in which irony is used as one weapon against allegorization,⁸ and a critique is offered:

The folly of such a method is that it assumes a license for figurative interpretations without providing criteria to control it. It offers as the validity of an interpretation only the imagination of its exponent. True, there may be a general attempt to make conclusions conform to the analogy of Scripture, but the attempt is too weak to hold the interpreter's imagination in check.⁹

Ellen G. White, whose writings are accepted in Adventist circles as having authority subsidiary only to the Bible, takes the identical position:

The truths most plainly revealed in the Bible have been involved in doubt and darkness by learned men, who, with a pretense of great wisdom, teach that the Scriptures have a mystical, a secret, spiritual meaning not apparent in the language employed The language of the Bible should be explained according to its obvious meaning, unless a symbol or figure is employed.¹⁰

Only on the basis of such Bible interpretation could the Adventist church, with its literalistic acceptance of the Sabbath, the Second Advent and kindred doctrines have arisen at all. In fantastic ways allegorization quickly fits Sunday observance, for example, into Scripture; the epistle of Barnabas is an exceedingly early witness to this fact.¹¹

Allegory and Its Attractions

Against the background of Origen and his school, Theodore's contribution will stand out most vividly. For there were undoubted attractions in the allegorical method. Interpreting

⁸ Nichol, *op. cit.*, III, 1110-1111.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1111.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, California, 1911), pp. 598, 599; cf. by the same author: *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 173; *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C., 1941), p. 39; *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, Tenn., 1923), p. 407; *Evangelism* (Washington, D. C., 1946), p. 358.

¹¹ ANF, I, 127-128.

the deities and their dubious actions in a figurative sense had saved the Iliad and the Odyssey for religious instruction to the more sophisticated Hellenistic era.¹² It has become a commonplace to say that Philo of Alexandria performed the same service for the Old Testament. Certainly it was the "easy way out" in explaining passages which, taken literally, seemed offensive, particularly from the viewpoint of those who accepted the presuppositions of much of Greek philosophy regarding the Divine nature, etc.

Philo, like some present-day fundamentalists, was a believer in the verbal inspiration of Scripture *in toto*. Hence his recourse to allegory, his insistence that not the literal but a deeper level set forth the true meaning. Platonically, the bare words were considered to be but shadows of bodies; the real truths as the soul. Practically all the Pentateuch was allegorical. The majority of men were deprecated, for they could not see beyond the literal meanings.¹³

As a matter of fact, only an allegorical hermeneutic saved Song of Solomon for the Old Testament canon at Jamnia. Conservative Jews had been scandalized by a literal understanding of this book.¹⁴ But with his figurative interpretation Akiba championed it: "The entire age from the beginning until now is not worth as much as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel."¹⁵

In turn Origen of Alexandria, profoundly influenced by Platonism and Gnostic speculations, became the Christian Philo and sponsored a school of interpretation which predominated for more than a millennium. Like Philo and Clement, also of Alexandria, Origen in the famous Book IV of his *De Principiis* maintains that the letter of Scripture is a

¹² G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woolcombe, *Essays on Typology* (Naperville, Ill., 1957), pp. 50 ff.

¹³ E. C. Blackman, *Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia, 1957), pp. 83, 84.

¹⁴ Crawford Howell Toy, "Song of Songs," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, XI, 446, 467.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, quoting Mishna *Yadaim* III, 5.

concealing shadow.¹⁶ "The multitude" are "unable to understand profounder meanings,"¹⁷ but Origen goes even farther than Philo and finds *three* senses: the bodily or literal, the "psychical" (moral or experiential), and the spiritual—the hidden mystery for the discerning few; the simple majority could benefit only from the first two senses.¹⁸

It should be observed that Origen, too, seemed to proceed from the view that all of Scripture is divinely inspired as to the very words¹⁹ (would this be "dictation" rather than "inspiration"?). Seventh-day Adventist theology rejects this theory as an unrealistic oversimplification, while not denying that, for example, divine composition as such actually exists, as in the case of the Decalogue; it tends rather to think in terms of thought-inspiration and progressive revelation.²⁰

Though Origen depreciated the literal in the Bible, denying any corporeal sense at all to certain passages of Scripture,²¹ it would be untrue to say he denied historicity to the Bible. He protested the contrary, and in fact that "the passages that are true in their historical meaning are much more numerous than those which are interspersed with a purely spiritual signification." Commandments were to be literally obeyed, though a deeper meaning might be possible.²²

Nevertheless the practical results of the School of Alexandria were to bequeath to the Middle Ages a preference for allegorization. Blackman observes:

Origen's spiritual sense was subdivided into allegorical and anagogical, and this with the literal and moral gave a total of four senses. The stock illustration is the exposition of Jerusalem, which signified, literally, the actual city in Palestine; morally the faithful soul; allegorically, the Church militant on earth; anagogically, the Church

¹⁶ ANF, X, 286.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 305.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 299 ff.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 286-288, 291, 295.

²⁰ White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. v-vii; *Selected Messages* (Washington, D. C., 1958), I, 15-23.

²¹ ANF, X, 303.

²² *Ibid.*, 323-325.

triumphant in Heaven A fair summary of what the fourfold sense implied is contained in the medieval Latin couplet which runs: 'The letter of Scripture gives plain teaching, the moral sense is about what you are to do, the anagogic about what you may hope, the allegoric about what you are to believe.' It was the latter two senses which received most attention, though the importance of the literal sense was not entirely forgotten, as Pepler and Smalley have recently shown, . . .

The Title 'Allegories of Sacred Scripture' or something similar is very frequent in the works of medieval theologians. They are really collections of allegorical interpretations, some perhaps being the original work of the individual author, but mostly they consist of interpretations carried forward from earlier scholars.²³

Antioch and Theodore

It is quite commonly known that opposed to the exegetical method, anthropology, Christology, and soteriology of the School of Alexandria was the School of Antioch. ". . . the school stood on the basis of the Nicene orthodoxy. It was marked by a degree of literalism in its exegesis of Scripture quite in contrast to the excessive use of allegory by the Alexandrians."²⁴

True, a "School" of Antioch can not be said to have existed in the same technical sense as the School of Alexandria. Nevertheless a theological tendency centered there, a strong Christian teaching tradition emphasizing a literal exposition of Scripture, to be traced at least as far back as Theophilus of Antioch at the end of the second century. Perhaps this can be partly accounted for by the influence of the strong Jewish community in Antioch, with its more conservative Palestinian type of exegesis.

Under Diodorus of Tarsus (?-394), teacher of both John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia, this tendency began to reach its peak.²⁵ Appreciation for Chrysostom has persisted without interruption; of him "Thomas Aquinas is

²³ Blackman, *op. cit.*, pp. 111, 112.

²⁴ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York, 1959), pp. 132, 133.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

supposed to have said that he would rather possess his homilies than be master of Paris.”²⁶

But among this group Theodore, “the ablest exegete and theologian of the Antiochian school,”²⁷ seems to stand supreme. J. H. Srawley is thus on record:

As an independent thinker and systematic theologian he was the greatest of the Antiochenes . . . In his subjective criticism of the Canon of Scripture, his insistence on the primary meaning of OT prophecy, and his endeavour to bring out the full historical meaning of Scripture, he represents the climax of Antiochene teaching.²⁸

Rowan Greer points out that Theodore was above all a *Biblical* theologian. In an age when dispute raged over technical creedal words not found in Scripture, he was seeking to build a theology from the Bible itself, using the imagery of Scripture. Greer’s excellent work offers multiple examples of this fact.

For instance, though Theodore arrived at what the Church has viewed as a heterodox Christology, his illustrations of the union of the Divine with the human—God’s dwelling in the Temple, the union of man and wife, and that of body and soul—were all taken from the Bible.²⁹ His doctrine of the Spirit is grounded not primarily on the Creed but on Scripture:

Each one of us is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, according to the doctrine of our Fathers, which is derived from the teaching of our Lord, so that it should be made clear and manifest to all that our blessed Fathers handed down to us the doctrine of the true faith by following the order of Christ. Even the words of the creed contain nothing but an explanation and interpretation of the words found in the teaching of our Lord.³⁰

²⁶ Blackman, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

²⁷ Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

²⁸ J. H. Srawley, “Antiochene Theology,” James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York, 1917), I, 584-593.

²⁹ Greer, *op. cit.*, pp. 59, 60.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29, quoting Theodore’s *Catechetical Commentary on the Nicene Creed*, ed. A. Mingana (“Woodbrooke Studies,” V, Cambridge, 1932), p. III.

Typology vs. Allegory

Allegorization downgraded and even destroyed historicity and literalness. The Antiochenes saw it as primary. Harnack summarizes:

The distinction between Alexandrian—Origenistic—and Antiochene exegesis does not consist in the representatives of the latter having rejected wholesale the spiritual meaning. They rather recognised it, but they tried to determine it typically from the literal meaning They set up definite rules for the discovery of the literal meaning as well as for that of the typical and allegorical sense (*theōria*, not *allēgoria*), which lay not in the words, but the realities, persons, and events designated by the words.³¹

Theodore's utter rejection of the allegorical method as elucidated by Origen may be vividly seen in the way the two men viewed Gal 4: 21 ff., where Paul likens Hagar and Sarah to the two covenants. The Apostle's words are *ἀτινά ἐστιν ἀλληγορούμενα* ("which are being allegorized"). For Origen this had been a key passage to prove that "those who do not understand" the Law were those "who do not reflect that allegories are contained under what is written," etc.³²

For Theodore, however, this very passage demonstrated the opposite of Origen's minimizing and destruction of history. What Paul meant by allegorizing was not what the Alexandrians meant. Rather: "He called 'allegory,' the comparison with present things of things which have already happened, by way of juxtaposition" (note, also, his emphasis on Paul's *ὡσπερ* of Gal 4: 29; "just as" plays up the literal, making the whole affair more in the realm of what would presently be termed typology).³³ The Antiochenes Theodoret and Chrysostom maintained precisely the same point.³⁴

³¹ Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma* (Oxford, 1897), III, 201.

³² *ANF*, X, 306-307.

³³ *In Epistolam ad Galatas* IV. 24 (MPG, LXVI, 908c): ἀλληγορίαν ἐκάλεισεν τὴν ἐκ παραθέσεως τῶν ἤδη γεγονότων πρὸς τὰ παρόντα σύγκρισιν ὡσπερ γὰρ, φησὶν, ὁ Ἰσμαὴλ κατὰ σάρκα γεγέννηται, οὕτως καὶ ἐνταῦθα ὁ νόμος τοῦς ὑπ' αὐτὸν ἐβούλετο πολιτεύεσθαι, καὶ τὴν ἐκεῖθεν δικαίωσιν δέχεσθαι· [καὶ ὡσπερ ὁ Ἰσαὰκ κατὰ χάριν γενέννηται . . . (Translation by the present writer).

³⁴ Lampe and Woollcombe, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

How closely the S.D.A. hermeneutic follows Theodore's line rather than Origen's may be observed in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary's* evaluation of the same Pauline passage:

The historical events were not allegorical when they took place, nor even when Moses recorded them. It is Paul who makes an allegory out of them, for the express purpose of illustrating the lesson of faith and freedom versus works and bondage. He does not say that these things *were* an allegory, but that they *are* one—that is, that he is making an allegory out of them as he relates the story.³⁵

The Debt

The Seventh-day Adventist debt to Theodore of Mopsuestia is not so much in the realm of his theological conclusions. Adventists, e.g., have not rejected Job nor Canticles from the Canon as he did,³⁶ for his nor any other reasons. Comparison and contrast of the Adventist understanding of man and the question of his freedom, of the union of divinity and humanity in Christ, of the nature of salvation, and of kindred topics would be fruitful and rewarding. Today's renewed appreciation of Theodore is partially due, no doubt, to his constant endeavor to preserve genuine humanity, both in the incarnation of God the Son and in what happens to man himself in salvation. As Greer remarks, it is anachronistic to condemn his theology by a standard (Council of Chalcedon, A.D. 451) set 23 years after his death.³⁷ It is true that he was the teacher of Nestorius, and in the condemnation of Nestorianism, in particular by the Second Council of Constantinople in A.D. 553, his exegetical writings were condemned and largely destroyed. (Only in the last century have adequate sources again become available, though it is definitively argued that quotations of Theodore which had meanwhile been preserved in hostile sources were accurate enough except for matters of fairness to context.³⁸)

³⁵ Nichol, *op. cit.*, VI, 971.

³⁶ Theod. Mops., *In Jobum* (MPG, LXVI, 697 f.); *In Cantum Cantorum* (MPG, LXVI, 699 f.).

³⁷ Greer, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.* and following pages.

It is rather to the spirit and method of Theodore that Adventist theology is indebted. The question remains how and whether, within the historical process, an emphasis on a grammatical and historical hermeneutic would have been preserved to the Church of a later day had it not been for the contributions of Theodore and Chrysostom and the Antiochenes and their appreciators in general. If the allegorizing tendency had been unopposed by leaders of stature, whence would have come the impetus for Reformation exegesis and theology? But through Chrysostom and Theodoret,³⁹ through Adrian's *Introduction to the Divine Scriptures* (A.D. 425), through Paul of Nisibis and the derived *Instituta regularia* of Junilius Africanus (c. 550),⁴⁰ through Cassiodorus' *De Institutione divinarum literarum*,⁴¹ Theodore's methods were mediated to the West. In the West, in South Gaul, Cassian, a pupil of Chrysostom, carried on; and under the name of St. Ambrose a Latin translation of some of Theodore's commentaries on Paul passed into currency.⁴² Blackman points out, "The delayed legacy of the Antiochene school will be noticed in Luther's exaltation of what he called the 'grammatical' sense, and in the historical comments of Calvin, though we shall see it disappear again under the new Biblicism of Reformed theology."⁴³

As it is, hermeneutical principles advocated most strongly by Theodore are those which, *mutatis mutandis*, have undergirded all conservative Protestant Biblical theology, including that of Seventh-day Adventists. Thus the debt, if hidden, is yet real. Its hiddenness *in re* Theodore in particular may lie in the lack of specific appreciation and acknowledgment.

Only confused theology can result from vague hermeneutics. For those who would base their theology upon a literal, grammatical, historical understanding of Scripture, a study of the Mopsuestian's sharp tools will repay the effort.

³⁹ Srawley, *op. cit.*, p. 586.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 592, 593; Blackman, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁴¹ Srawley, *loc. cit.* ⁴² *Ibid.* ⁴³ Blackman, *loc. cit.*