

The prophecy against Nineveh

Divine pedagogy and hermeneutics in Theodore of Mopsuestia's *Commentary on the book of Jonah*

Introduction: Theodore the literalist and the extraordinary Jonah

During his lifetime, Theodore of Mopsuestia, a distinguished disciple of Diodore of Tarsus, was regarded as a literalist. His "Commentary on the Twelve Prophets" is the only work that has survived in its entirety in the original language. Its most recent edition is by Hans Sprenger, and its latest translation is by Robert Hill, which we will quote in this talk. In this work, Theodore's literalism encounters resistance: the book of Jonah.

Among the twelve minor prophets, the book of Jonah stands out. It contains no prophecy but belongs to the narrative genre. Rolf Jacobson and Michael Chan describe it as follows: "Presented in the form of a legend, Jonah clearly employs humor, satire, and exaggeration." For them, the Book of Jonah is a didactic parable about divine compassion.

While the narrative genre does not resist a historico-literal interpretation, the satirical dimension and certain implausible aspects of the story prevent Theodore from simply applying his historico-literal method of interpretation. In order to solve this problem, the Antiochene writer uses different and very contrasting methods. This contrast is particularly clear between the prologue and the body of the commentary. So, in this paper, we will examine these methods which Theodore uses to understand this text.

1. A first solution: reading Jonah through the lens of types

In order to understand the general meaning of the book, the preface of "In Ionam" offers a first explanation: God teaches the unity of His plan of salvation by announcing the benefits of the second covenant within the first one: Jonah is a figure (τύπος) of Christ. This relationship is traditional and can be found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. After theorising the process known as typology, Theodore explains the relationship between Jonah and Christ:

In this quotation¹, which you can see on the slide, Theodore includes the two elements of typology: Jonah's stay in the sea monster and Christ's stay in death, the salvation for Nineveh, and the salvation for the Gentiles. In this way, God not only announces the coming of

¹ Then, after remarkably keeping him [Jonah] safe inside the sea monster for three days and nights, he brought him to the city [Nineveh](...), and caused him to preach repentance, and become a source of salvation for all in that place, so that from the comparison we might not lack faith in Christ the Lord's being kept incorrupt for the same number of days, rising from the dead and providing all nations in general with salvation by way of repentance and enjoying immortal life. (transl. R. Hill, p. 188)

Christ but also consoles the prophets who despair at the vices of their contemporaries. The Book of Jonah is thus explained... and that's it. But...

2. A contrast : the body of the commentary and its literal explanations

As I say before, the body of the commentary is completely at odds with the interpretation of the preface. This verse-by-verse commentary merely exposes or does not expose their meanings while remaining close to the text. Theodore approaches the verses in different ways.

a. Short commentaries

For some verses, Theodore merely paraphrases the text. Such is the case with Jonah's prayer in chapter 2 or with the storm in Jon 1:11:

"It goes on, 'The sea as continuing to work up bigger waves', bringing out that the storm was increasing, a fact those on board could not ignore." (transl. R. Hill, p. 197)

For others, like the conversion of the sailors in Jon 1:16, he simply explains:

"It then goes on, 'They sacrificed to the Lord and made vows (v. 16) (...) in the sense that they (...) devoted themselves to the worship of God, promising in future to join His service (...).'" (transl. R. Hill, p. 198) (yes, they wouldn't make a sacrifice on a ship)

b. Long explanations

In other cases, Theodore elaborates more. Jon 1:3 provides a beautiful contrast.

On the one hand, Theodore finds it unnecessary to explain the location of Tarshish, although he reviews the hypotheses of his predecessors. For him, as we can see on the slide, this detail doesn't affect the overall meaning of the narrative and so it's not important.

For my part however, I consider this entire chase after detail (*ἀκριβολογίαν*) to be irrelevant to the subject in hand in so far as the account by the prophet is just as equally beyond question, no matter which city you think it to be. (transl. R. Hill, p. 194).

Yet in general *akribeia* is a key feature of his historico-literal exegesis

This attitude may also explain why Theodore does not concern himself with the prophet's origin or the time of his preaching.

On the other hand, Theodore takes great care to explain the phrase "he fled from the face of the Lord" by invoking the concept of God's dwelling in Israel.

it said, not He fled from God, but *from the face of the Lord*: the prophet did not see himself fleeing from God, considering him to be lord and maker of all thing, and believing him to be present everywhere. (transl. R. Hill, p. 194-195).

The following commentary explains that the face of God is actually the place of His appearance, Mount Zion. This attention to words is unusual for Theodore.

c. No need to explain

While he meticulously explains certain expressions, the Interpreter completely bypasses the extraordinary things (παράδοξως). The growth of the gourd vine, the arrival of the worm, and the east wind in Chapter 4 don't trouble him. More remarkably, he even renounces explaining Jonah's ejection by the sea monster.

It would, in fact, be a mark of extreme folly, after such extraordinary things happened to him (...) to pry into the prophet's egress from the sea monster, and to think that could grasp it by human reasoning (...). (transl. R. Hill, p. 200)

Theodore refuses to explain this phenomenon in any rational way. For Theodore, Jonah's ejection from the fish and his previous stay in its belly are extraordinary events, and therefore, inexplicable. Here are the limits of an historical-literal method.

3. A third method: the “increased letter”

a. The prophecy against Nineveh

But, when it comes to understanding the extraordinary conversion of the Ninevites, Theodore goes beyond these limits. In fact, in Jonah 1:2, God sends the prophet to Nineveh with the order to « preach in it » without specifying the content of the message he is to deliver. Theodore argues that the biblical text is elliptical in this respect.

There is a “gap” in the biblical text which Theodore fills by referring to Jonah 3:4: ‘Three days more and Nineveh will be destroyed’. But here too, according to our author, the text is elliptical, because Jonah must have added that the city would not be destroyed if its inhabitants repented; the threat would only be carried out if there was refusal. This condition was also part of the divine message from the beginning of the mission—an addition to the biblical text— because:

It would have been futile for him [Jonah] to threaten destruction if it absolutely had to happen, since there would have been no point in the threat; (Transl. R. Hill, p. 194)

Similarly, in his commentary on chapter 3, Theodore revisits and expands on Jonah's prophecy.

The verse, *The men of Nineveh believed in God*, also brings out that he did not carelessly say only, *Three days more, and Nineveh will be destroyed*: they could never have believed in God on the basis of this remark alone, (...). Rather, it is obvious he (...) delivered the message of destruction, calling them to repentance. (transl. R. Hill, p. 202).

For Theodore, it is crucial to reconstruct the prophecy faithfully: Jonah is a messenger from God preaching repentance, and failure to heed his message would result in the destruction of Nineveh. Moreover, the response of the Ninevites implies that the prophet's message contained a call—whether explicit or implicit—to conversion.

The text says, in fact, *Who knows if God will repent, yield to supplication, and turn from his anger, and we shall not perish?* (v.9) This could not have been said by them unless they had been instructed by statements of the prophet. (transl. R. Hill, p. 202-203)

Such an interpretation, although surprising, is compelling, and the reader is inclined to follow the Interpreter.

b. Jonah's complaint

But, when Theodore attempts to explain why Jonah tried to flee and why he is distressed upon to see the Ninevites converted and spared, his justification becomes much less compelling. According to Theodore, Jonah is upset because he appears to be "a sham and a charlatan."

he was alarmed at the thought that he was likely to gain the reputation for being a sham and charlatan for threatening that destruction would occur in three days, whereas nothing happened. (transl. R. Hill, p. 203)

His prediction did not come true and he became discouraged. Furthermore, Jonah knew from the beginning that God is merciful and that He had never really intended to carry out His threat. This is precisely why, according to Theodore, Jonah wanted to flee from his mission as soon as God assigned it to him. Consequently, it must be accepted that the prophet only proclaimed the destruction of Nineveh, without mentioning the possibility of repentance.

This explanation does not suffice if, as Theodore does, we turn the announcement of imminent destruction into a call for repentance.

c. The reason for Jonah's flight

Let us go one step further: in the last part of his commentary, Theodore paints an unflattering picture of Jonah, portraying him as primarily concerned with preserving his own reputation. This contrasts sharply with the prologue, which presents Jonah as a type of Christ. Here, Theodore offers a very different interpretation of Jonah's attempt to flee and a different scope to his preaching.

Hence the blessed prophet realized from the events of the time that Jews would be shown to be deserving of extreme punishment (...). (...) he lamented that by comparison with the Ninevites they were obviously liable to punishment in the present situation, and later would suffer complete rejection by comparison with the nations (...). (transl. R. Hill).

If Jonah's message, both here and in the body of the commentary, is a call to repentance addressed to the Ninevites, his mission, which is ultimately successful, takes on a broader significance. It foreshadows the reception of the Gospel by the Gentiles, while the rebellious Israelites, as a consequence of their obstinacy, would be deprived of part of their land and, ultimately, entirely rejected from divine favour. This is precisely why, according to Theodore, Jonah is reluctant to undertake his mission.

Conclusion: The divine pedagogy to unify the interpretations

This contrasting commentary might suggest that the *In Ionam* lacks coherence. However, Theodore is merely developing different dynamics, each serving different purposes. The prologue and the body of the commentary adhere to two different traditions, as we saw. This is evident when Theodore explains the reason for Jonah's attempt to flee. Furthermore, the method of the increased letter reveals a third dynamic that contrasts with Theodore's literal interpretation: according to this approach, Jonah should not worry about his reputation, because his prophecy anticipated divine repentance.

While different dynamics can be observed throughout the commentary, they adhere to different methods (typology, literalism, increased letter) and themes that serve the purpose of divine teaching.

Thus the first lesson, that Theodore notes in the prologue, is the one God imparts to readers about the unity of His design and the salvation granted through conversion: the Ninevites and the Gentiles are converted and saved, while the unbelieving Jews condemn themselves.

The second dynamic resonates with the theme of salvation through conversion and is revealed by the 'increased letter'. Theodore emphasises extending Jonah's prophecy to show that God also acts as a teacher through Jonah. He not only threatens condemnation but also offers a way out of it. Salvation cannot be the result from divine intervention alone; human effort is necessary for the fulfilment of one's salvation. This emphasis on voluntary conversion is the second lesson developed in this commentary.

Finally, the third dynamic is part of a more literal understanding of the book of Jonah. It centres on the prophet's reluctance and his complaint. In both cases, Jonah shows resistance to God. Nevertheless, God accompanies his prophet from the moment he is sent on his mission to the aftermath of its completion. Through actions, such as in the episode of the storm, God teaches him about His omnipresence, and through words, as in the episode of the gourd, He demonstrates His compassion. The divine attitude towards the reluctant prophet teaches him about the Lord's goodness.

In summary, these three dynamics, although divergent, serve a common purpose: divine pedagogy. This unifies the commentary while allowing each dynamic to express its own lesson, thus revealing the rich meanings of this book through the Interpreter's pen.