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The Cure of Souls at Antioch:

A Response to Robert Hill on Theodoret of Cyrus as Spiritual Director

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This paper addresses Robert Hill's critique of Theodoret of Cyrus's deficiency as a spiritual advisor. His position is outlined most clearly in a 1999 article, "A Spiritual Director from Antioch [Theodoret's Psalms Commentary]." There he writes:

Theodoret did not cast himself in the role of a guru, leading his readers through the dark night of the soul . . . he is reluctant to get beyond the historical or Christological or eschatological sense he gives a psalm to apply it with any intimacy to the lives of his flock. . . . Perhaps fewer than a dozen times does the bishop move from the historical or eschatological application he is giving to a psalm to tease out its significance for his readers's lives: they are left to bridge the gap themselves.¹

This is not the only place that comments to this effect appear. In an April 2000 article, Hill mentions Theodoret's "fascination for marginal

¹ Robert Hill, "A Spiritual Director from Antioch," *Pacifica* 12 (1999): 186–87.

figures” in addition to his deficiency as a spiritual director.² In the introduction to his 2000-01 English translation of Theodoret’s massive *Interpretatio in Psalmos* (a translation for which he is owed a great debt of gratitude!), Hill presented similar charges against Theodoret’s spiritual leadership with a sort of running commentary of his own in the footnotes, noting Theodoret’s deficiency as a spiritual director in the appropriate psalms.³ In his NAPS 2002 paper, Hill is more magnanimous to Theodoret when comparing him to Diodore’s and Theodore’s hermeneutical perspective which overemphasized “to *historikon*,” thereby confining the Psalms’s meaning to the Old Testament.

“Spirituality is a casualty of the commentators’s mode of interpretation,” he writes.⁴ “Theodoret will come to realize the spiritual impoverishment this approach can produce.”⁵ Hill continues on in a final section on “limited spiritual guidance on the Psalms,” comparing favorably Theodoret’s and Chrysostom’s hermeneutical moderation and attempts to incorporate some interpretations of spiritual value for readers or hearers, respectively, to Diodore’s and Theodore’s “bare historicism.” In a 2003 article comparing the resulting commentaries of the four Antiochenes on Psalm 41(42), Chrysostom alone emerges as praiseworthy for application of the psalm to the lives of his audience, Theodoret being classed a “desk

² Robert Hill, “Theodoret, Commentator on the Psalms,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 76 (2000): 91, 98, 101, 104.

³ Robert Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Psalms*, 2 vols. Fathers of the Church 101-102 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2000-2001).

⁴ Robert Hill, “His Master’s Voice: Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Psalms” (paper presented at the North American Patristics Society, Chicago, IL May 2002), 7.

⁵ Hill, “His Master’s Voice,” 8.

commentator” along with the other two exegetes. Hill indicates that this difference of genre is the cause of Theodoret’s restraint in personal, spiritual application.⁶ The “preacher” can expound on personal application, while the desk theologians are bound by exegetical and ascetical inhibitions.⁷

By contrast to Hill’s view of Theodoret’s spirituality, Yvan Azéma, the critical editor of Theodoret’s epistolary corpus, made the following comment in his introduction to his own work: “Among all his activities, there was one which Theodoret practiced with particular zeal, and this was spiritual direction.”⁸ Again, a difference of genre could possibly account for these competing views of Theodoret’s spirituality: Azéma’s comments were occasioned by his treatment of Theodoret’s personal, intimate writings, while Hill’s comments were occasioned by his treatment of a technical exegetical work.

In addition, it seems that the two translators’s expectations and understandings of a spiritual director may differ. Hill seems to require one main criterion: personal application of Scripture to the lives of the readers. His expectation in the Psalms commentary is that Theodoret will assume the role of a spiritual director who has a personal, intimate relationship with his disciple, an expectation for which he (Hill) cannot be faulted. After all, as Irénée Hausherr writes in his classic study of spiritual direction in the Eastern Church, the chief concern of the spiritual director (or spiritual father or mother) is the *personal*

⁶ Robert Hill, “Psalm 41 (42): A Classic Text for Antiochene Spirituality,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 68 (2003): 26, 30, 33.

⁷ Hill, “Antiochene Spirituality,” 33.

⁸ Yvan Azéma, trans., *Theodoret of Cyrus: Correspondance*, Sources chrétiennes 40 (Paris: Les Éditions Du Cerf, 1955), 57.

relationship which develops between one experienced master and one disciple who wishes to profit.⁹

Azéma seems to have a broader understanding of Theodoret's spirituality, taking at face value what he finds in the correspondence.

To bring to souls badly informed or troubled by doubts the clarity which they lack, to strengthen a flagging will, to propose in a difficult case a solution which is in keeping with the principles of reason and moral laws . . . to redress erroneous opinions or to reprimand when there has been a fault, to reignite a zeal which seems to be flickering, these are some of the tasks which are imposed on Theodoret in his role as director of conscience (spiritual director).¹⁰

He continues: "Throughout these letters of moral direction, Theodoret always reveals himself as a guide to whom one can appeal in tragic moments, and who, with devotion, brings to some what he believes to be the truth, to others delineates their duties, and to others he furnishes words of condolence."¹¹

I would like to propose that Theodoret does indeed qualify as a spiritual director—even on Hill's terms—and that he offers spiritual direction both directly and indirectly. Direct application is given in a number of Psalms, some even admitted by Hill, though he simultaneously laments the inadequacy of that direction. Some of the

⁹ Irénéé Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, translated by Anthony P. Gythiel, Cistercian Studies Series 116 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 1–2.

¹⁰ Azéma, *Correspondance*, 57–58.

¹¹ Azéma, *Correspondance*, 58.

Psalms in which Theodoret specifically intended an application include Psalm 4 on prayer, Psalm 14 on trusting in God despite injustice, Psalm 18 which refers to recent fifth-century invasions from the north and east, Psalm 24 on moral virtue, Psalm 25 on his audience's various life states, Psalm 30 on the Christian response to death, Psalms 31 and 32 on sin, repentance and prayer, Psalm 35 on righteous suffering and Christian love, Psalms 39, 47, and 51 on the passions, Psalm 69 on hope and prayer, and many others besides. Nonetheless, Hill concludes in his April 2000 article, "there are others [limitations] that may be highlighted by readers expecting more from this pastor in the way of moral principle and spiritual guidance. Theodoret never moralizes, rarely applies a Psalm to his readers' lives, and does not pretend to mysticism; he would resist any claim to guru status. . . . If the Psalms offer more and deserve better, he could not give it."¹²

An examination of his personal correspondence reveals that Theodoret was able to give spiritual direction and application. The themes which appear in the letters as spiritual themes involve the movements of the soul, as he dwelt on how to curb and overcome the passions, thus cultivating a life of Christian virtue or *aretēs*. For example, in an intimate consolatory letter to the newly-widowed Alexandra, Theodoret wrote empathetically about controlling the passion of grief, giving direction and simultaneously showing pastoral love:

Had I only considered the character of the loss which you have sustained, I should have wanted consolation myself, not only because I count that *what concerns you concerns me*, be it agreeable or otherwise, but because I did so dearly love that admirable and

¹² Hill, "Commentator on the Psalms," 104.

truly excellent man. But the divine decree has removed him from us and translated him to the better life. I therefore *scatter the cloud of sorrow from my soul*, and urge you, my worthy friend, to *vanquish the pain of your sorrow (or grief) by the power of reason*, and to *bring your soul in this hour of need under the spell of God's word*. Why from our very cradles do we suck the instruction of the divine Scriptures, like milk from the breast, but that, when trouble falls upon us, we may be able to *apply the teaching of the Spirit as a salve for our pain?*¹³

These same themes are treated in various Psalms. Middle Stoic virtue ethics manifested themselves in the episcopal tradition of spiritual guidance in terms of movements of the soul involving the struggle between reason and the passions, often advocating the ideal of *apatheia* (tranquility or complete balance of the passions). Psalm 51 is a good example of this kind of spiritual teaching.

Now, we learn from this [David's sin with Bathsheba] . . . that nature tends to stumble when troubled by passions; yet victory lies with the mind-set (*gnōmē*), making use of effort to lend assistance . . . With [passions] and what springs from them, reason (*logismō*) is in combat, and if victorious, it is celebrated and crowned with a victor's laurels, but if defeated, it is deserving of shame and liable to punishment.¹⁴

In Psalm 6, Theodoret even used the Platonic charioteer motif to speak of this tension:

¹³ Theodoret *Epistulae 14 to Alexandra* (SC 98).

¹⁴ Theodoret *In Psalmos 50 (51):5* (PG 80:1244–45; trans. Hill, FC 101, 297–98).

Under the influence of weakness, sin overcomes. After all, if the reasoning faculty within us were not weak, the passions would not rebel; to put it another way, provided the charioteer is firm, and steers and controls the horses skillfully, there is no occasion for bucking.¹⁵

Spiritual direction also used wellness metaphors. Theodoret may not be overt, but traditional images of God as healer and physician of souls, and language of sin and the human sinful condition as requiring surgery and healing pervade Theodoret's commentary, particularly the penitential Psalms. In Psalm 6, David's sin is a wound (*traumatōn*) for which the remedy (*pharmakion*) is repentance and the cure (*therapeia*) is forgiveness. In Psalm 4, Theodoret says the psalmist "was correct in bidding us pass in review what was said or done during the day, and in obliging us to heal (*therapein*) our wounds (*traumatōn*) with the remedy (*pharmakō*) of repentance."¹⁶ Incidentally, the use of medical metaphors by Theodoret is acknowledged by Hill, who refers to them neatly as "traditional," but he implies that they may be trite. However, Timothy Ware insists that the spiritual director as *doctor* was by far the primary image used in the East from the fourth century forward, and Theodoret often used this kind of language of himself when writing consolatory letters.¹⁷ In my estimation, two factors may account for Theodoret's brand of spirituality: method and audience. Here we shall only have time to deal with method.

¹⁵ Theodoret, *In Pss* 6 (trans. Hill, FC 101: 74).

¹⁶ Theodoret, *In Pss*. 6 and 4 (trans. Hill, FC 101: 74-75; 65).

¹⁷ Timothy Kallistos Ware, introduction to *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, by Irénée Hausherr, xii-xiii; For example, *Letter 15 to Silvanus the Primate* (NPNF² 3:255).

A Method of Mimesis

Theodoret frequently indicates an indirect application by means of concrete mimetic exemplars, both positive and negative. The use of exemplars fulfills Theodoret's intent to deal with ethical themes that arise in the text, themes of virtue and vice, which certainly were the concern of a spiritual director. He used positive exemplars such as David, Josiah, and Hezekiah to teach on Christian love (Psalms 35 and 141), loyalty to God in the face of idolatry (Psalms 101 and 139, Josiah being proffered as a "model of perfection"), and the effectiveness of fervent prayer (Psalm 14). He also set forth negative exemplars such as Rabshakeh and/or Sennacherib, Saul, and Absalom to teach about atheism and unbelief (Psalm 14 and 53, for the words of Sennacherib and Rabshakeh are those of the fool who says in his heart that there is no God, drawing an explicit comparison to Julian the Apostate), the tragedy of betrayal by a beneficiary (Psalm 140 and 142), and he uses the story of Absalom in Psalms 3 and 7 to teach about hoping in God despite injustice (even at the hands of a fratricide and parricide like Absalom). The use of concrete models whose historical situation is an integral part of the lesson given illustrates another aspect of Theodoret's method: noble or reprehensible deeds, and those who accomplish or perpetrate them respectively, constitute the substance of a narrative's intended *mimēsis*.

In Theodoret's province of Syria, teaching through historical narrative was commonplace, and D. S. Wallace-Hadrill indicates that Syrians especially emphasized the importance of teaching through narrative. Commenting on two Syriac narratives,¹⁸ Wallace-Hadrill sets forth the ancient authors' belief that "a doctrinal point can be

¹⁸ The *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Barhadbešabba and the *Pseudo-Dionysian Chronicle*.

demonstrated by historical exposition: the facts have only to be stated for the truth of the doctrinal issue to be manifest to the reader. The record speaks for itself.”¹⁹ Wallace-Hadrill emphasizes that the author of the *Pseudo-Dionysian Chronicle* believed that the very point of a historical narrative was to admonish:

The events are enough by themselves, and if the events did not teach us a lesson, the events were a waste of time. And indeed the author does not point [out] any moral but leaves the events to teach their lesson. The effectiveness of the method can be overestimated, but it is characteristic of the Antiochene and Syrian presentation of their case and it is analogous to their understanding of the scriptural record.²⁰

Indeed, Azéma comments that Theodoret was saturated by Biblical culture, and that he saw in the sacred text a “nourishment and an irreplaceable instrument for personal formation and moral direction. Persuaded that the Scripture speaks to all situations, and that it is capable of enlightening the theologian as well as informing one’s conduct, he referred to it incessantly.”²¹ This method analysis just confirms Hill’s point, but *my* point is that the *ancient* audience *understood* what Theodoret intended and did not *expect* explicit application, so that Theodoret can hardly be faulted for being more oblique in the eyes of a *modern* audience.

¹⁹ D. S. Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 66 (see chapter 3, “Historiography in the Eastern Church”).

²⁰ Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch*.

²¹ Azéma, *Correspondance*, 65.

Theodoret's mimetic technique was grounded in Hellenistic *paideia* and in Middle Stoic virtue ethics, both of which had found their way into Christian spirituality and theological anthropology by the fourth century. A good example of the combination of Christianity and virtue ethics is the use of David (the exemplar par excellence in the Psalms) to teach on Christian love in Psalms 34 and 35. Theodoret insists that the Scriptures provide for "us" the best virtues of David as an example (archetype), and he proceeds to explain how David manifested Christian charity towards the belligerent Saul, even before the law of love (i.e., the Gospel requirement of love of enemies) had been issued. Throughout the commentary, David demonstrates magnanimity toward his enemies. He embodies the four cardinal virtues: temperance, prudence, fortitude and justice/ righteousness (*sōphrosunē*, *phronēsis*, *andreia*, and *dikaiousunē*).²² Besides the traditional virtues, David also embodied characteristically Christian virtues such as love of neighbor. In Psalm 34, Theodoret says that David "proposes himself . . . as a model (*archetupon*)" for Christians.²³ In this exemplary capacity, David adheres to the forms of Christian virtue such as purifying the tongue, shunning evil and seeking peace. Theodoret goes further to teach on Christian ethics, specifically here, love and true friendship: "The peaceable person entertains peace towards everyone, not purloining the neighbor's property furtively, not committing homicide, not undermining marriages, not speaking evil, not doing

²² Theodoret, *In Psalmos* 7:4-5 (PG 80:908; trans. Hill, FC 101, 78). The exception, of course, is the famed sin against Bathsheba and Uriah, when David's passions overcame his reason. The sin appears in all the Penitential Psalms, as well as in all Psalms set in the context of Absalom's pursuit of his father (an example of the enduring consequences of his sin). David is commendable, however, for his sincere repentance.

²³ Theodoret, *In Psalmos* 33 (34):5 (PG 80:1104; trans. Hill, FC 101, 208).

evil, doing favors, showing respect, sharing, lending support, sharing dangers and struggles—such is unalloyed love and genuine friendship.”²⁴ Psalm 35 likewise shows David vis-à-vis Saul living by the New Testament law of love rather than the Old Testament law which allowed hatred of enemies. Theodoret comments on David’s prayer for the shaming of his enemies,

The inspired author was adopting the way of life sanctioned by the Law, not by the Gospels. Now, the Law speaks plainly of loving the neighbor and hating the enemy. By contrast, Christ the Lord, to show virtue in its perfection, said, “. . . Love your enemies and bless those who persecute you.” . . . Now, for proof that in keeping with the Gospel requirements, even [David] did not take vengeance on those who wronged him, listen to him saying, “If I repaid in like fashion those rendering me evil, let me then end up empty-handed before my foes” . . . and he did not say this without doing it: he put his words into practice, and the actions are clearer than the words. . . . Now, I was obliged to recount these events because of those who boast and quote the case of the divine David, so that they may have the best values of David as a beneficial model (*archetupon*).²⁵

The same point appears in Psalm 141, where David is again pursued by Saul. Through his prophetic charisma, David knew the law of love would supersede the old law, and therefore he preferred to act in accordance with love. Theodoret remarks, “Foreseeing the evangelical way of life, however, he preferred to live by it, and he prays he will

²⁴ Theodoret, *In Psalmos*, 33 (34):13-14 (PG 80:1108; trans. Hill, FC 101, 210). A similar list is found in Psalm 118 (119):64 (PG 80:1841; trans. Hill, FC 102, 259).

²⁵ Theodoret, *In Psalmos*, 34 (35):28 (PG 80:1120; trans. Hill, FC 101, 217).

take no excuse for sin.”²⁶ The Psalms were intended for the spiritual guidance of faithful Christians, and Theodoret allowed David to serve an exemplary function for them. Christians (or any reader of the commentary) were to imitate David’s example.

Theodoret’s use of mimetic exemplars answers Hill on two counts: first, it casts a positive light on Theodoret’s usage of “marginal figures,” confirming Theodoret’s commitment to Antiochene principles of historical exegesis, for these figures spring directly from the text and its context. Rabshakeh, Sennacherib, Mephibosheth, Shimei, and others appear in the books of 1 and 2 Kings which were understood as the background to the histories of David and Hezekiah. Second, Theodoret’s use also demonstrates his skill as a spiritual director after all, one who does not teach virtue solely as an abstract ideal to be cultivated by Christians, but rather one who offers models which *embody* virtue for the benefit of the reader, even if that benefit is offered in “concentrated form.”

²⁶ Theodoret, *In Psalmos*, 140 (141):4 (PG 80:1949; trans. Hill, FC 102, 339).