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# *Transmitting Theodore to the Church of the East: The Contribution of Thomas of Edessa*

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*Thomas of Edessa (d.* c. *540), author of* Explanations of the Nativity *and* of Epiphany, *flourished as a teacher at the School of Nisibis in Sasanid Persia. By analysing his understanding of salvation history, exegesis and the idea of the human being as 'bond of creation', this article shows how Thomas took up and popularised concepts central to the theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia. The article posits that the Nisibene school theology of Thomas and others constituted – alongside liturgy, canonical decrees and biblical commentaries – one of the principal avenues by which Theodore's theology was transmitted to the Church of the East.*

The theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia, as is well known, has exerted a far-reaching influence upon the Church of the East.[1] Efforts to translate Theodore's writings into Syriac commenced

CChr.SG = Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca; CSCO = Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium: Subs. = Subsidia subseries; Syr. = Syriaca subseries; *JECS* = *Journal of Early Christian Studies*; *OCP* = *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*; *OrChr* = *Oriens Christianus*; *ParOr* = *Parole de l'Orient*; PO = Patrologia Orientalis; *ZAC* = *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum*

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[1] On the Church of the East generally see D. W. Winkler, *Ostsyrisches Christentum: Untersuchungen zu Christologie, Ekklesiologie und zu den ökumenischen Beziehungen der Assyrischen Kirche des Ostens*, Münster 2003, and C. Baumer, *The Church of the East: an illustrated history of Assyrian Christianity*, London 2006. Principal studies of Theodore's theology include R. Devreesse, *Essai sur Théodore de Mopsueste*, Vatican City 1948; F. G. McLeod, *The roles of Christ's humanity in salvation: insights from Theodore of Mopsuestia*, Washington, DC 2005, and *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, London 2009; and T. Jansen, *Theodor von Mopsuestia, De incarnatione: Überlieferung und Christologie der griechischen und lateinischen Fragmente einschliesslich Textausgabe*, Berlin 2009.

soon after the bishop's death in 428, and a substantial portion of his extensive *corpus* became available in Syriac over the course of the fifth century.[2] The reception of Theodore among East Syriac Christians took place principally through four different channels: poetry and liturgy; canons and decrees; exegesis; and school theology. The metrical homilies of the great poet Narsai, though he is much indebted to Ephrem as well, operated within Theodorean parameters and transmitted key concepts into the liturgy, as W. F. Macomber has observed.[3] Official endorsement of Theodore's theology by various East Syriac synods constitutes the second mode of reception: the council convened by Mar Aba in 543/4 was the first explicitly to approve his views, and later synods reaffirmed Theodore's theology and thereby enshrined his normative role.[4] In exegetical literature Theodore's heritage can be traced well into the medieval period in the commentaries of eminent biblical scholars such as Theodore bar Koni, Isho'dad of Merv or the author of the so-called

[2] N. Kavvadas observes that the *Sitz im Leben* of this translation project was the Edessan school; he considers Ibas of Edessa as the project's patron: 'Translation as taking stances: the emergence of Syriac Theodoranism in 5th century Edessa', *ZAC* xix (2015), 89–103. The endeavour to render Theodore into Syriac constituted 'an intentional, orchestrated venture, rather than a natural development' (p. 93). On the Syriac translations of Theodore see J.-M. Vosté, 'De versione syriaca operum Theodori Mopsuesteni', *OCP* viii (1942), 477–81, and P. Yousif, 'Traduzioni siriache de Teodoro di Mopsuestia', in G. Fiaccadori (ed.), *Autori classici in lingue del Vicino e Medio Oriente: atti del III, IV e V seminario sul tema: 'Recuperato di testi classici attraverso recezioni in lingue del Vicino e Medio Oriente'*, Rome 1990, 141–62.

[3] W. F. Macomber, 'The theological synthesis of Cyrus of Edessa, an East Syrian theologian of the mid sixth century', *OCP* xxx (1964), 5–38, 363–84 at pp. 5–6. On Narsai's reception of Theodore see N. Kavvadas, 'Narsais Homilie "Über die Väter, die Lehrer Diodor von Tarsos, Theodor von Mopsuestia und Nestorios"', *Sacris Erudiri* li (2012), 215–32, and F. G. McLeod, 'Narsai's dependence on Theodore of Mopsuestia', *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* vii (2007), 18–38. McLeod's article focuses on Christology and on the subject of Adam and Christ's humanity as God's image.

[4] Synod of Mar Aba, 543/4, canon 40: *Synodicon orientale: ou, Recueil de synodes nestoriens*, ed. J.-B. Chabot, Paris 1902, 550:20–4; trans. into German by O. Braun as *Das Buch der Synhados oder Synodicon orientale: die Sammlung der nestorianischen Konzilien, zusammengestellt im neunten Jahrhundert*, Vienna 1900; repr. Amsterdam 1975, 144–5. The Synod of Isho'yahb I in 585, canon 2, gives a lengthy *apologia* of Theodore: *Synodicon orientale*, 136–8; *Buch der Synhados*, 196–8. A few years later, in 596, the Synod of Sabrisho' once again affirmed the normativity of Theodore: *Synodicon orientale*, 196–9; *Buch der Synhados*, 282–6. The synods of 585 and 596 reflect the controversy that had arisen about the degree to which Theodore's thought ought to be regarded as authoritative and in which the Nisibene scholar Ḥenana, among others, was involved: G. J. Reinink, '"Edessa grew dim and Nisibis shone forth": the School of Nisibis at the transition of the sixth-seventh century', in J. W. Drijvers and A. A. MacDonald (eds), *Centres of learning: learning and location in pre-modern Europe and the Near East*, Leiden 1995, 77–89. Reinink (p. 80) regards Ḥenana less 'as an instigator of difficulties, but rather as an exponent of a historically complex cultural world'.

Diyarbakir commentary, all of whom adopted both Theodore's historically attuned and philologically oriented exegetical principles and many particular interpretations.[5] This article will concentrate on what may be considered the fourth avenue of transmission, namely school theology, and in particular on the writings of Thomas of Edessa, a teacher at the illustrious School of Nisibis in the sixth century.[6] Thomas's considerable contribution to this transmission process lay in formulating an accessible synthesis of Theodore's thought that was able to reach large swathes of the educated elite.

## *The life and works of Thomas of Edessa*

The few known details of Thomas's life are quickly recounted. As his epithet *urhaya* suggests, he hailed from Edessa, a major centre of Syriac

[5] Cf. L. Brade, *Untersuchungen zum Scholienbuch des Theodoros bar Konai: die Übernahme des Erbes von Theodoros von Mopsuestia in der nestorianischen Kirche*, Wiesbaden 1975; C. Leonhard, *Ishodad of Merw's exegesis of the Psalms 119 and 139–147: a study of his interpretation in the light of the Syriac translation of Theodore of Mopsuestia's commentary*, CSCO dlxxxv/Subs. cvii, Louvain 2001. Theodore bar Koni's use of Theodore of Mopsuestia's commentary on John is traced by F. Thome in *Studien zum Johanneskommentar des Theodor von Mopsuestia*, Bonn 2008, 10–13. A synopsis of the commentaries on John by Theodore and Isho'dad can be found in *The commentaries of Isho'dad of Merv*, ed. and trans. M. D. Gibson, with an introduction by J. R. Harris, i, Cambridge 1911, pp. xxxiii–xxxvi and passim in the margins of the translation. On the anonymous commentator's reliance upon Theodore see *Le Commentaire sur Genèse-Exode 9,32 du manuscrit (olim) Diyarbakır* 22, ed. and trans. L. Van Rompay, CSCO cdlxxxiii–cdlxxxiv/Syr. ccv–ccvi, Louvain 1986, esp. cdlxxxiv, pp. i–xii.

[6] The name 'school theology' is used here to refer to those writings by teachers at the schools of Nisibis, Seleucia-Ctesiphon and elsewhere that were composed with a clear didactic intent. On the history of the School of Nisibis and its routines, as well as on the East Syriac school movement more broadly see A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the beginning of wisdom: the School of Nisibis and Christian scholastic culture in late antique Mesopotamia*, Philadelphia, Pa 2006; A. Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, CSCO cclxvi/Subs. xxvi, Louvain 1965; U. Possekel, 'Selbstverständnis und Bildungsauftrag der Schule von Nisibis', *ZAC* xix (2015), 104–36; G. J. Reinink, 'The School of Seleucia and the heritage of Nisibis, the "mother of sciences"', in C. Noce, M. Pampaloni and C. Tavolieri (eds), *Le vie del sapere in ambito siro-mesopotamico dal III al IX secolo: atti del convegno internazionale tenuto a Roma nei giorni 12–13 maggio 2011*, Rome 2013, 115–31; and P. Bettiolo, 'Scuola ed economia divina nella catechesi della Chiesa di Persia: appunti su un testo di Tommaso di Edessa († ca 542)', in S. Felici (ed.), *Esegesi e catechesi nei padri (secc. IV–VII)*, Rome 1994, 147–57; 'Contrasting styles of ecclesiastical authority and monastic life in the Church of the East at the beginning of the seventh century', in A. Camplani and G. Filoramo (eds), *Foundations of power and conflicts of authority in late-antique monasticism: proceedings of the international seminar Turin, December 2–4, 2004*, Louvain 2007, 297–331; and 'Le scuole nella Chiesa siro-orientale: *status question[i]s* e prospettiva della ricerca', in Noce, Pampaloni and Tavolieri, *La vie del sapere*, 17–46.

Christianity then under Byzantine control, where he encountered the future catholicos Mar Aba (d. 552) around the year 520.[7] Aba, a native of Persia, had converted from Zoroastrianism and in consequence given up his successful career as a Sasanian government official to enrol at the School of Nisibis; after mastering the curriculum in record time, as his hagiographer marvels, Aba set out to tour the Mediterranean to visit the holy sites.[8] In Edessa he happened upon Thomas, a bilingual Christian intellectual who attached himself to the learned Persian and accompanied him on his travels to Alexandria, Athens and beyond.[9] In Alexandria they made the acquaintance of Cosmas Indicopleustes, who in his *Christian topography* extolled their erudition and confessed his own profound intellectual debt to Aba.[10] Having learned Greek, Aba offered expositions in this language in Alexandria.[11] Eventually, Thomas followed Aba into his Persian homeland where both took up teaching posts at the School of Nisibis. Thomas died some time prior to 540, while on a mission to Constantinople.[12]

Precisely how Thomas trained in his youth is not known, but since he so readily embraced the teachings of an East Syriac theologian one might surmise that he was already predisposed toward this theological perspective, perhaps by being involved in some form of loosely organised study circle that probably will have persisted even after the official closure of

[7] This date is approximate. Thomas died about 540, and his encounter with Mar Aba in Edessa probably occurred several decades previously.

[8] These details are recounted in the *Life of Mar Aba*, in *Histoire de Mar-Jabalaha, de trois autres patriarches, d'un prêtre et de deux laïques, nestoriens*, ed. P. Bedjan, Paris 1895, sections 1–6 at pp. 210–18, trans. into German in O. Braun, *Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer*, Kempten 1915, 188–92. The text is now also available in *Histoire de Mār Abba, catholicos de l'Orient; martyres de Mār Grigor, général en chef du roi Khusro Ier et de Mār Yazd-panāh, juge et gouverneur*, ed. and trans. F. Jullien, CSCO dclviii–dclix/Syr. ccliv–cclv, Louvain 2015.

[9] *Life of Mar Aba* 7 (Bedjan edn, 218–19; Braun trans. 192–3).

[10] Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian topography* II.2, in *Cosmas Indicopleustès, Topographie chrétienne*, ed. W. Wolska-Conus, SC cxli, Paris 1968, 307. Cosmas calls Aba by the Greek version of his name, Patrikios. For an English translation of Cosmas see J. W. McCrindle, *The Christian topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian monk*, London 1897; for a German translation see H. Schneider, *Kosmas Indikopleustes, Christliche Topographie; Textkritische Analysen, Übersetzung, Kommentar*, Turnhout 2010.

[11] *Life of Mar Aba* 7 (Bedjan edn, 218–19; Braun trans. 192). It has sometimes been stated that Thomas taught Aba Greek, an opinion first found in the *Chronicle of Seert* 27 (ed. and French trans. in *Histoire nestorienne (Chronique de Séert), seconde partie [I]*, ed. A. Scher, PO vii/2, 155–6) and taken over by later authors; however, the sixth-century *Life of Mar Aba* makes no such a claim. For further discussion see U. Possekel and J. F. Coakley, *Thomas of Edessa's Explanations of the Nativity and Epiphany*, Oxford 2020, 3–4, 13–16.

[12] This date can be inferred from the fact that Thomas in his treatises calls Aba 'exegete' (*mpashqana*) but does not title him catholicos, as one would expect him to do after Aba's elevation to this rank in 540. That Thomas died in Constantinople is recorded by Cosmas: *Christian topography* II.2 (Wolska-Conus edn, 307).

the School of Edessa in 489.[13] This conjecture of a continuance of Theodoreanism in the city receives additional support from the fact that Thomas's compatriot Cyrus of Edessa should likewise become a notable teacher in Nisibis.[14] The Theodorean tradition had dominated the theological discourse in fifth-century Edessa, despite being fiercely opposed in the early decades of the century by Bishop Rabbula (411/12–435/36),[15] and had given rise to the large-scale project to translate Theodore's *corpus*, an endeavour spearheaded by Bishop Ibas of Edessa (d. 457) that extended well into the 560s.[16] Commitment to the Mopsuestian's theology probably continued in Edessa for at least another generation or two after Ibas had initiated it. Examining more broadly the phenomenon of Edessan Theodoreanism, which even influenced certain Miaphysite leaders who had trained in Edessa,[17] N. Kavvadas points to

[13] On the closure of the School of Edessa see Becker, *School of Nisibis*, 70–5.

[14] For Cyrus' works see *Six Explanations of the liturgical feasts by Cyrus of Edessa: an East Syrian theologian of the mid sixth century*, ed. and trans. W. F. Macomber, CSCO ccclv–ccclvi/Syr. clv–clvi, Louvain 1974. On Cyrus' theological project see Macomber's introduction at CSCO ccclvi, pp. xiv–xxii, and 'Synthesis'; and Th. Hainthaler, 'Cyrus von Edessa und seine Erklärungen liturgischer Feste', in R. Voigt (ed.), *Akten des 5. Symposiums zur Sprache, Geschichte, Theologie und Gegenwartslage der syrischen Kirchen*, Aachen 2010, 43–57 (with a focus on his Christology). Cyrus' treatises proceed by and large in the same vein as those of Thomas, but they also have distinct features. Cyrus is, for example, less focused on pedagogical illustrations than is Thomas, and he is more critically disposed towards Judaism which Thomas, remarkably, hardly references.

[15] Rabbula's opposition to Theodore, after his *volte-face* from Antiochene to Alexandrian allegiance, is remarked by Barḥadbeshabba who claims that Rabbula ordered Theodore's books to be burnt: *Explanation of the foundation of schools*, ed. with French translation in *Mar Barḥadbšabba ʿArbaya, évêque de Ḥalwan, Cause de la fondation des écoles*, ed. A. Scher, PO iv/4, Paris 1908, 380–1; English translation in A. H. Becker, *Sources for the history of the School of Nisibis*, Liverpool 2008, 94–160. As several scholars have noted, Barḥadbeshabba's comments should not be taken as indication that most of Theodore's works were already available in Syriac translation at this point; any volumes committed to fire will likely have been in Greek; cf. L. Van Rompay, 'Quelques Remarques sur la tradition syriaque de l'oeuvre exégétique de Théodore de Mopsueste', in H. J. W. Drijvers and others (eds), *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984: literary genres in Syriac literature*, Rome 1987, 33–43, esp. pp. 36–7. Van Rompay points out (p. 43) that features of the Syriac versions of Theodore indicate a fifth-century translation. See also Kavvadas, 'Translation', 98–9, and G. G. Blum, *Rabbula von Edessa: der Christ, der Bischof, der Theologe*, CSCO ccc/Subs. xxxiv, Louvain 1969, 182–95.

[16] Kavvadas argues that the Syriac translation of Theodore's works must have been a collaborative endeavour that took several decades: 'Translation', 94f. On this see also Van Rompay, 'Quelques Remarques sur la tradition syriaque', 37. Kavvadas observes that according to the *Chronicle of Seert* II.1, 9 (Scher edn, 116–17) Maʿana of Rew Ardashir was still working on the translations of Diorore and Theodore in the period between about 457 and 484: 'Translation', 94 n. 15.

[17] Both Jacob of Sarug (d. 521) and Philoxenus of Mabbug (d. 523) studied in Edessa and were to some extent influenced by Antiochene theology (as exemplified by Diodore and Theodore), even though they ultimately would turn against it. See

three principal contributing factors for the ready reception of Theodore amongst Syriac intellectuals, namely the exegetical and cultural affinity between Edessa and Antioch; the academic interest in Theodore's scientifically more up-to-date commentaries; and certain ecclesio-political factors.[18]

Thomas applied himself as educator, translator and scholar. His works, of which ʿAbdishoʿ in his *Catalogue* lists *Explanations of the Nativity* and *of Epiphany*, an epistle on chants, disputations against heretics and an anti-astrological treatise,[19] had been presumed lost until in 1885 the priest Samuel Jamil discovered in Seert (today in eastern Turkey) a manuscript dating from the sixteenth century and containing thirteen previously unknown discourses on liturgical feasts, including Thomas's two Explanations.[20] This manuscript further contained six treatises by Cyrus of Edessa on the remaining dominical feasts, by and large reflecting sixth-century Nisibene school theology, and several other discourses on liturgical festivals.[21] Although the Seert manuscript (Chaldean Archiepiscopal Residence, MS 82) was lost – Macomber presumes that it was destroyed in 1915 together with the archbishop's domicile[22] – copies of it have survived and are now deposited in various Western libraries.[23]

Jacob of Sarug, *Letter* 14, in *Iacobi Sarugensis epistulae quotquot supersunt*, ed. G. Olinder, CSCO cx/Syr. lvii, Paris 1937, 58–9. See also L. Van Rompay, 'Humanity's sin in paradise: Ephrem, Jacob of Sarug, and Narsai in conversation', in G. A. Kiraz (ed.), *Jacob of Serugh and his times: studies in sixth-century Syriac Christianity*, Piscataway, NJ 2010, 199–217, and L. Abramowski, 'Die nachephesinische Christologie der edessenischen Theodorianer', in L. Greisiger, C. Rammelt, and J. Tubach (eds), *Edessa in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit: Religion, Kultur und Politik zwischen Ost und West*, Würzburg 2009, 1–9.

[18] Kavvadas, 'Translation', 96–103.

[19] ʿAbdishoʿ, *Catalogue* 63, in *Bibliotheca orientalis*, ed. J. S. Assemani, iii/1, Rome 1725, 86–7.

[20] Jamil found the manuscript in the library of the Monastery of Mar Jacob near Seert. The specifics of his find are detailed in the colophon that was included in his personal and subsequent copies (see n. 23 below), for example, Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, MS Hyvernat syr. 8, fo. 176r; translation in Macomber at CSCO ccclvi, p. v.

[21] Cyrus composed explanations of the Fast, Maundy Thursday, the Passion, the Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost: *Six Explanations*. Clearly, these were meant to continue the project of Thomas who had envisioned treatises on all the dominical feasts: Thomas, *Epiphany* 1.4; 5.7; Cyrus, *On the fast*, preface 1 (Macomber edn, 1:10–13). The other treatises in this manuscript are by Ḥenana of Adiabene on the Friday of Gold, Ḥenana on Rogation, Posi on the Fast, Ishai on a feast for the martyrs, and an anonymous explanation of a Marian feast.

[22] *Six Explanations*, CSCO ccclv, p. xii.

[23] Jamil immediately ordered a copy to be produced (MS Alqosh 155, dated 1886) from which in turn was made another copy (MS Alqosh 156, dated 1887): J. Vosté, *Catalogue de la bibliothèque syro-chaldéenne du couvent de Notre-Dame des Semences près d'Alqoš (Iraq)*, Rome 1929, 57–8. As soon as scholars took notice of Jamil's find, in quick succession further copies were produced for several notable Syriacists of the day: Baumstark, Hyvernat, Budge, Mingana and Diettrich. These copies are extant

In the more than 130 years since Jamil's discovery most of these tractates have been published,[24] but the writings of Thomas, although they constitute the oldest part of the collection, have been unduly neglected and to this day are only partially edited and entirely lack a modern translation. Whereas *On the Nativity* was published with a Latin translation in 1898 by S. J. Carr,[25] *Epiphany* has languished in manuscript form – circumstances that might account for the relative paucity of scholarly engagement with these important documents.[26]

The genre of Explanation (*ʿelta* in Syriac, pl. *ʿellata*)[27] will be familiar to many readers, but its main features may be briefly recalled here since this choice of literary form played no marginal role in the reception process of Theodore's thought. An Explanation was originally an oral discourse, presented on the very day of the festival to the assembled school community, that laid out the 'causes' of the particular feast day.[28] In their written form, each Explanation begins with a dedicatory preface, followed by a helpful overview of topics to be covered, intended as 'sign-posts on the road' as Thomas puts it.[29] After addressing the announced subjects in turn, an Explanation concludes with an admonition to good conduct, thus adding

and accessible: Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, MS Hyvernat syr. 8 (1889); British Library, London, MS Oriental 9360A (1894); Academy of Sciences, Oriental Institute, St Petersburg, MS Dietrich 7 (1894); Collegio Teutonico, Vatican City, MS Baumstark 44 (1897); Selly Oak Colleges Library, Birmingham, MS Mingana syr. 195 (1928). Stemma at *Six Explanations*, CSCO ccclv, p. xxiii. The first scholar to survey the content of these treatises was A. Baumstark, 'Die nestorianischen Schriften "de causis festorum"', *OrChr* i (1901), 320–42.

[24] For the treatises by Ḥenana and Ishai see *Traités d'Išaï le docteur et de Ḥnana d'Adiabène sur les martyrs, le vendredi d'or et les rogations*, ed. with French translation by A. Scher, PO vii/1, Paris 1909. The explanation by Posi and the anonymous treatise on the Marian feast still remain unpublished. On the latter see G. J. Reinink, 'The cause of the commemoration of Mary: author, date, and Christology', in G. A. Kiraz (ed.), *Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone: studies in honor of Sebastian P. Brock*, Piscataway, NJ 2008, 517–34.

[25] S. J. Carr, *Thomae Edesseni Tractatus de Nativitate Domini nostri Christi*, Rome 1898.

[26] A critical edition with English translation is forthcoming in Possekel and Coakley, *Thomas of Edessa's Explanations*. All references in this article are by chapter and section number of this edition. Earlier studies include Th. Hainthaler, 'Thomas of Edessa, Causa de Nativitate: some considerations', *ParOr* xxxi (2006), 63–85; U. Possekel, 'Thomas von Edessa über das Epiphaniefest: erste Anmerkungen zu einer unveröffentlichten Handschrift', in W. Kinzig, U. Volp and J. Schmidt (eds), *Liturgie und Ritual in der Alten Kirche*, Louvain 2011, 153–76; and Bettiolo, 'Scuola'. The treatise on Epiphany was the subject of an unpublished doctoral dissertation by P. Y. Patros, Rome 2007.

[27] Sometimes rendered as *causa* or 'cause' in older and Latinate scholarship.

[28] Thomas, *Nativity* 2.1–2; 3.1; 4.1; 9.1; *Epiphany* 6.1 and passim.

[29] Idem, *Nativity* 1.3.

a homiletic touch.[30] These Explanations aimed to discuss not the liturgical rite *per se* but the feast's theological content, the mystery underlying the celebration.[31]

The earliest author known to have delivered such Explanations was Mar Aba, Thomas's erstwhile travelling companion; yet these have not survived or, more likely, were never written down, so that the treatises of Thomas are the oldest extant texts in this literary genre.[32] In fact, the doubt with which Thomas in the preface regards his own ability to produce an adequate written version seems to go beyond a merely rhetorical, self-deprecating remark and supports the hypothesis that Aba's Explanations simply consisted of an oral exposition.[33] Although the genre of 'explanation' (which would become quite popular among later East and even West Syriac authors)[34] originated in the school setting and clearly was meant for instruction, Thomas's Syriac is not easy to read: the phrases are long and often convoluted, perhaps in imitation of Greek eloquence, a situation further complicated by the occasionally corrupt state of the received text.

[30] Discussion of the genre of Explanation may be found in *Six Explanations*, CSCO ccclvi, Macomber's introduction at p. vi; Hainthaler, 'Thomas of Edessa', 64–6, and 'The Causes of the Feast, a literary genre of the East Syriac Church, in the 6th century', *The Harp* xxiii (2008), 383–400; Becker, *School of Nisibis*, 101–7; and Possekel and Coakley, *Thomas of Edessa's Explanations*, 27–31.

[31] Cf. *Six Explanations*, CSCO ccclvi, p. vi.

[32] It is sometimes stated that Elisha bar Quzbaye was the first to have written 'Explanations'. This claim rests on the identification of Elisha bar Quzbaye, who according to Barḥadbeshabba's *Explanation* (Scher edn, 387) took on the 'work of exegesis' for seven years sometime in the first half of the sixth century, with Elisha the Interpreter (*mpashqana*) about whom ʿAbdishoʿ reports that he had composed an 'Explanation on the sessions and the martyrs (ܫܪܚܐ ܕܡܫܚܬܐ ܘܕܣܗܕܐ)' (*Catalogue* 90, Assemani edn, 166f.). While this identification is plausible enough, Elisha bar Quzbaye's directorship remains difficult to date as the sources do not agree on the details: Barḥadbeshabba, *Ecclesiastical history* 32 (Nau edn, 620) states that Elisha led the school for four years during Abraham's directorship. Moreover, as his discourses are no longer extant, it cannot be known if they conformed to the typical structure of the Explanations of the feasts. (The title *ʿelta* is attached also to other discourses that are clearly not Explanations in the sense considered here.)

[33] Thomas, *Nativity* 1.1–2; *Epiphany* 1.1–2. Thomas expresses his admiration for Aba in *Nativity* 1.1 and *Epiphany* 1.2.

[34] According to the library catalogue of ʿAbdishoʿ (cf. n. 19), thirteen other authors (besides those whose works are preserved in the manuscript from Alqosh) were known to have composed 'Explanations', of which only the Explanation by Barḥadbeshabba on the foundation of schools has survived; see the list in Hainthaler, 'Cyrus of Edessa', 48. On the Explanations by the West Syriac theologian Moses bar Kepha see J. F. Coakley, 'The *Explanations of the feasts* of Moše bar Kepha', *IV Symposium Syriacum*, 403–10.

*Transmitting Theodore*

Thomas's two Explanations show great internal coherence and do not exhibit any obvious signs of literal dependencies, be it on Ephrem, Narsai or Theodore. The relation between Thomas and Aba is difficult to ascertain, as very few of the latter's writings have come down to us. Overall, however – and this is a topic deserving further investigation – Aba's letters and canons contained in the *Synodicon orientale* seem to have quite a different thrust than do Thomas's Explanations.[35] Without appearing as mere paraphrases or summaries of Theodore, Thomas's Explanations reveal upon closer inspection a profound debt to the Interpreter. And this is precisely their great contribution: an independent synthesis of Theodore's theology, in this case applied to the liturgical feasts, presented in an accessible and didactically useful form and furnished with memorable illustrations.

An exhaustive analysis of how Thomas's Explanations served as a vehicle for the transmission of Theodore naturally exceeds the scope of this paper; discussion will therefore be limited to three distinct areas that each highlight broader features, namely, salvation history, exegetical technique and the idea of the human being as the 'bond of creation'.

*Salvation history*

*The 'good gifts'*

In his discourse on the Nativity, Thomas sets out with the seemingly superfluous question, Why do we observe this feast? To celebrate the birth of Christ, naturally; but not, he continues, on account of the novelty of the virgin birth, marvellous as it is, positing that the birth of Isaac, for instance, was more astonishing as he was born from a woman both barren and old; let alone the still more remarkable origin of Eve from a rib – and of a man at that – and of Adam from lifeless earth.[36] Rather, the Nativity is celebrated 'because of the ineffable good gifts (ܛܒܬܐ, *ṭabata*, literally 'good things') that have been conferred upon all creatures through Christ our hope'.[37] These good gifts, as the Nisibene teacher expounds at length, are the glory, peace and good hope announced by the angels to the shepherds near Bethlehem (Luke ii.14).[38]

[35] Aba's synodal canons and some letters are *Synodicon orientale*, 65–95, 540–50 (text) (Braun trans., 99–145). Beyond this, only a few excerpts survive in later biblical commentaries such as those by Isho'dad of Merv. See, for example, V. Berti, 'Mar Aba the Great on Exodus: fragments from the *Commentary* of Isho'dad of Merv and the *Christian topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes', *Cristianesimo nella storia* xxxviii (2017), 27–50. [36] Thomas, *Nativity* 3.1–3. [37] Ibid. 3.6. [38] Ibid. 4.1–9.

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The student of Theodore will at once recall the centrality of the concept of 'good things' (ܛܒܬܐ) in both the bishop's *Catechetical homilies* and his commentaries on the minor Pauline Epistles.[39] Already in paradise, he explains to the candidates for baptism, Adam could have obtained possession of these good gifts had he exercised his discernment.[40] In subsequent ages, the good gifts that are to come (ܛܒܬܐ ܕܐܬܝܢ) were foreshadowed in the Law.[41] In baptism, then, the believer comes to participate symbolically in these 'novel and grand good things' (ܛܒܬܐ ܚܕܬܬܐ ܘܪܒܬܐ) that took their beginning in Christ and that will fully be realised in the eschaton.[42] The Syriac version of the *Catechetical homilies* frequently employs the term *ṭabata* which no doubt must have corresponded to ἀγαθά, a term rendered as ܛܒܬܐ in the Peshitta (Romans iii.8; x.15),[43] and that in Theodore's Greek fragments as a rule refers to the goods revealed by Christ.[44] In the *Commentary on Romans*, however, the bishop conveys this idea of divine gifts with the word δωρεά,[45]

[39] For example, *Commentary on Colossians* i. 9–11, in *Theodori episcopi Mopsuesteni in epistolas B. Pauli commentarii: the Latin version with the Greek fragments*, ed. H. B. Swete, Cambridge 1880–2 at i. 258:7, and *Commentary on Galatians*, preface, ibid. i. 2:4–6. In *Commentary on Galatians* ii.15–16 Theodore references the 'good things to come' ('futurorum bonorum': Swete edn, i. 31:10). An English translation of these commentaries can be found in R. A. Greer, *Theodore of Mopsuestia: Commentary on the minor Pauline epistles*, Atlanta, GA 2010.

[40] 'And if he had had discernment, he would have remained with him who was for him the cause of all good gifts (ܛܒܬܐ), while truly he had their possession': *Catechetical homilies* 12.8, in *Les Homélies catéchetiques de Théodore de Mopsueste*, ed. with French translation by R. Tonneau, in collaboration with R. Devreesse, Vatican City 1949, 332:25–324:1. A German translation by P. Bruns is to be found in *Theodor von Mopsuestia, Katechetische Homilien*, Freiburg im Br. 1994.

[41] Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Catechetical homilies* 12.5 (Tonneau edn, 328:14–15).

[42] Ibid. 12.10 (Tonneau edn, 336:26–338:2); cf. 12.13; 12.20; 13.2; 13.4 and passim.

[43] In addition, the Peshitta uses ܛܒܬܐ to translate τὸ ἀγαθόν (Gal. vi.10) as well as τὸ καλόν (2 Corinthians xiii.7).

[44] Theodore, *Commentary on Ephesians* i.13–14 (Swete edn, i. 133:21); *Commentary on Jonah*, preface, in *Theodori Mopsuesteni commentarius in XII prophetas*, ed. H. N. Sprenger, Wiesbaden 1977, 169:8–20, esp. line 16, and passim. An English translation may be found in R. C. Hill, *Theodore of Mopsuestia, Commentary on the twelve prophets*, Washington, DC 2004, 185. The Latin version of Theodore's commentaries on the minor epistles of Paul usually employs *bona*; see the passages cited at n. 39 above or *Commentary on Colossians* ii.2b–3 ('et ut inenarrabilibus bonis communicetis': Swete edn, i. 283:12).

[45] Theodore, *Commentary on Romans* v.15; xv.16; v.17; vi.17, in *Pauluskommentare aus der griechischen Kirche, aus Katenenhandschriften gesammelt und herausgegeben*, ed. K. Staab, Münster 1933, 119:29; 120:4.9; 123:19 and passim. An English translation is to be found in C. D. Gregory, 'Theodore of Mopsuestia's commentary on Romans: an annotated translation', unpubl. PhD diss. Southern Baptist Theological Seminary 1992. Theodore also stresses the concept of 'gift' in *Commentary on John* i.12–13, where he speaks of the 'great gift' (ܛܒܬܐ ܪܒܬܐ) of the 'adoption as children' (ܬܣܡܝܟ ܕܒܢ):

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thereby staying close to Pauline language.[46] The word δωρεά, however, is normally rendered as ܬܒܬܐ in Syriac (and is translated as such in the Peshitta version of these Pauline passages),[47] so that it appears unlikely that δωρεά would have been the Greek term underlying the Syriac word *ṭabata*, so prominent in the *Catechetical homilies*.[48]

Thomas, as do the *Catechetical homilies*, clearly favours the expression 'good things' (ܛܒܬܐ) over 'gift' (ܬܒܬܐ): whereas 'gift' (ܬܒܬܐ) occurs only four times in his two treatises (that in total extend to more than one hundred pages), he uses 'good things' (ܛܒܬܐ) fifty times. Together with the evidence presented below, this suggests that Thomas was well familiar with Theodore's catechetical discourses.

### *God as pedagogue*

The fifth chapter of the *Explanation of the Nativity* raises the disconcerting question, 'Why have these good gifts not been revealed until now?' Was God perhaps previously too weak, Thomas interjects, or did malice prevent God from granting these gifts to the people of former times?[49] In the course of his response Thomas launches a salvation-historical excursus, asserting that it was neither on account of God's prior ignorance, nor God's weakness or malice, that Christ's coming did not occur at an earlier time, but because humanity, still in a childlike state (ܛܥܘܝܬܐ), was simply not yet ready.[50] Our author consistently advances the notion of God as a pedagogue who guides humanity through the process of growing up, and whose educational measures are appropriately suited to each developmental level of humankind at large.[51]

It is important to note here that this pedagogical imagery was in itself not a novelty imposed upon Syriac tradition by an interaction with Greek

*Theodori Mopsuesteni commentarius in Evangelium Johannis apostoli*, ed. J.-M. Vosté, CSCO cxv/ Syr. lxii, Louvain 1940, 33:10–11; Greek fragments ed. Devreesse, in *Essai*, 305–419; Eng. trans. of the Syriac version in M. Conti, *Theodore of Mopsuestia, Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Downers Grove, IL 2010.

[46] Romans v.15, 17. On the use of this word in the New Testament more generally see G. Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, i, Stuttgart 1932, s.v. δίδωμι.

[47] The Peshitta has, as expected, ܬܒܬܐ for the Greek δωρεά in Romans v.15–17; but on occasion it also renders the word χάρισμα as ܬܒܬܐ, for example in Rom. i.11, and 1 Cor. vii.7.

[48] Theodore on occasion employs the term *mawhabta*, 'gift' (for example, *Catechetical homilies* 13.16 [Tonneau edn, 394:12]), but *ṭabata* certainly dominates in these discourses.

[49] Thomas, *Nativity* 5.1–2.

[50] To designate the childish state of humanity at the beginning of human history, Thomas usually employs the noun ܛܥܘܝܬܐ. Alhough he does not use this word in the context under consideration here (*Nativity* 5.3), he often does so in similar discussions such as in *Nativity* 4.13 (ܛܥܝܢ ܛܥܝܢ), 6.1 (ܛܥܘܝܬܐ) or 7.10 (ܠܛܥܘܝܬܐ).

[51] Ibid. 5.3–8.

theology, but was previously latently present in native Syriac authors such as Ephrem (d. 373), preparing, as it were, the soil in which such imagery could grow fruitfully. In his *Commentary on Genesis* Ephrem asserts that Moses 'wrote about the natures that were created from nothing so that (the people) should know (ܢܕܥ)' that the elements are not self-existent beings, and that 'he wrote about the true commandments that had been forgotten, while adding those that were useful for the infantile state of the people (ܥܠܝܠܘܬܐ ܕܥܡܐ)'.[52] Although Thomas will use a different term for the childish state of humankind than does Ephrem, *shabruta* rather than *yaluduta*, the concepts are the same. While vocabulary specifically relating to school and teaching is less pronounced in Ephrem, he nevertheless regularly evokes God's pedagogical intentions when interpreting particular passages of Scripture. For instance, in his exposition of Genesis i.14–16 Ephrem makes some cosmological remarks intended to explain why the solar year is about eleven days longer than the sum of the lunar cycles. 'From that year, the descendants of Adam learned (ܐܬܠܡܕ) that henceforth to every year they should add eleven days.'[53] And in a remarkable passage in a *Memra on faith* the poet extols learning, hypostasising it and praising its many contributions to human life and society.[54] Ephrem's older contemporary Aphrahat, paraphrasing Galatians iii.23–4, describes the law as 'guardian and educator (ܦܕܓܘܓܐ)' until the coming of Christ.[55] These texts illustrate that the idea of pedagogy was not alien to native Syriac theology, and Syriac readers of Theodore could readily build upon it. This process was facilitated by the broader affinities between Edessan and Antiochene theological thought that come to the fore, for instance, in the person and writings of the Edessan native Eusebius of Emesa, and that constituted the basis for the ready reception of Theodore's thought at the School of Edessa, as Lucas Van Rompay has observed.[56]

[52] Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis*, prologue 4, in *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum commentarii*, ed. R.-M. Tonneau, CSCO clii/ Syr. lxxi, Louvain 1955, 3:26–8; 4:5–7; an English translation can be found in E. G. Mathews and J. P. Amar, *St Ephrem the Syrian, Selected prose works*, Washington, DC 1994.

[53] Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis*, ch. i, §25 (Tonneau edn, 22:11–12). The phrase 'from that year' refers to the very first year, in which this discrepancy did not occur because, Ephrem posits, the sun was created as on the fourth day (of the solar cycle) whereas the moon was created as on the fifteenth day (of the lunar cycle).

[54] Ephrem, *Memre on faith* v, 1–24, 169–224 in *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones de fide*, ed. E. Beck, with a German translation, CSCO ccxii–ccxiii/ Syr. lxxxviii–lxxxix, Louvain 1961, 36f., 4of. [text]).

[55] Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 2.3, in *Aphraatis sapientis Persae demonstrationes*, ed. J. Parisot, Patrologia Syriaca 1.1, Paris 1894, 52:15–17.

[56] Van Rompay stresses the continuity with the native Syriac tradition and considers the project to translate Theodore as a 'logical and natural process': 'Quelques Remarques sur la tradition syriaque', 35, 39. On the other hand, R. Macina regards

While there are thus native Syriac antecedents for the metaphor of God as pedagogue, Thomas inherits his particular understanding of salvation history probably as a process of gradual improvement directly from Theodore's *Commentary on Genesis*.[57] Overall, however, Theodore does not emphasise this idea nearly as much nor as consistently as does Thomas, who gives it much greater prominence and some unique twists. Rather, not seldom does the bishop of Mopsuestia favour a more traditional understanding of salvation history according to which humanity increasingly became subject to sin until the coming of Christ. This latter view prevails in the extensive fragments of his *Commentary on Romans*, running to more than sixty pages in Staab's Greek edition. Yet elsewhere, such as in the commentary on the minor Epistles of Paul, Theodore on occasion advances a pedagogical view of salvation history. He inserts in the *Commentary on Galatians* a long exposition on the proper understanding of 'righteousness based on faith' versus 'righteousness based on works', in the course of which he elaborates the Law's function as an educational measure, designed to assist humans in their training of virtue.[58] The pedagogical model of salvation history, then, does not predominate in Theodore's extant *corpus* as it would later preponderate among Nisibene teachers. As Macomber has remarked, Theodore does not entirely resolve the tension between these two models. Competing views emerge in particular in regard to Adam's state before the Fall, and the Interpreter wavers somewhat between regarding it as a state of childlike innocence and understanding it as a situation of immortal bliss from which sin ejected the first humans.[59] Vestiges of this ambivalence can be found in the writings of Nisibene scholars, and Thomas can set side by side the idea that death entered through sin and the view that God designed humanity as passible and mortal at the beginning and would,

this translation project as a turning point and emphasises the distinction between Theodore and Syriac theologians in his 'L'Homme à l'école de Dieu: d'Antioche à Nisibe: profil herméneutique, théologique et kérygmatique du mouvement scoliaste nestorien', *Proche-Orient Chrétien* xxxii (1982), 86–124, 263–301; xxxiii (1983), 39–103 at xxxii. 268–71. See also Becker, *School of Nisibis*, 113–25, and Kavvadas, 'Translation', 96–103.

[57] *Theodori Mopsuesteni fragmenta syriaca*, with Latin translation, ed. E. Sachau, Leipzig 1869, 1–34 (text). See also R. Tonneau, 'Théodore de Mopsueste, Interpretation (du livre) de la Genèse (Vat. Syr. 120, ff. I–V)', *Muséon* lxvi (1953), 45–64, and T. Jansma, 'Théodore de Mopsueste, Interprétation du livre de la Genèse: fragments de la version syriaque (B.M. Add. 17,189, fol. 17–21)', *Muséon* lxxv (1962), 63–92.

[58] '[God] gave us this present mortal life, as I have said, for the training of virtues and the teaching of what is right for us to do ('ad exercitationem uirtutum et doctrinam illorum quae nos conueniunt facere') … [God] gave us various laws for our help': Theodore, *Commentary on Galatians* ii.15–16 (Swete edn, i. 24–32 at 26:9–11 and 26:23–24; Greer trans. 39–51).

[59] Macomber, 'Synthesis', esp. pp. 10–28, 376–7.

after a process of education and development of rationality in this world, 'make us partake in immortal and immutable life'.[60]

In both of his discourses, Thomas fully embraces the pedagogical model of salvation history; yet rather than simply excerpting passages from Theodore or paraphrasing him, he presents his own synthesis, based on the bishop's commentaries and homilies, and applies it to the subject of the liturgical feasts. Thomas also advances the concept in a number of ways, for instance by mapping precisely the stages of salvation history (from Adam to Noah, Noah to Abraham, and so forth) onto the school curriculum: just as the pupil learns first the alphabet, then spelling and reading, next the Psalms, and finally studies commentary, thus also God taught the generations according to each developmental stage.[61] Moreover, Thomas furnishes charming illustrations, such as an amusing passage about a teacher and his assorted bunch of distracted pupils, in order to instantiate the crucial point that each generation will be judged on its own terms:

> And it is just as, hypothetically, when a man has ten pupils who are all at one stage of learning, (namely) the alphabet; and one of them should neglect his learning and go out to play in the dirt, and another should begin to eat and drink, paying no attention to his reading; and another should lie down and sleep; and others again should indulge in vain talk and empty chatter together and pay no attention to the command of their [teacher]; while the rest are learning as they should and most importantly honouring the education that (comes) in learning according to the will of their master. At the time when they are required to recite, they (who misbehaved) are punished: not because they had not learned to read and understand the meaning of the Scriptures but because they did not recite the alphabet at the level, so to speak, of their fellows. Thus God too, the Lord of all, when he enters into judgment and into recompense for the actions of human beings, does not demand from the people of Adam's time why they did not circumcise, nor from those of Noah's time why they did not keep the Sabbath; but in short, in each generation he makes demands by the standard of those within it, requiting each according to his actions corresponding to the time in which he lived and the laws given by God in his days.[62]

Pedagogical paradigms such as these, popularised by Thomas, exerted substantial influence upon later East Syriac authors such as the Nisibene teacher Barḥadbeshabba who in the early seventh century penned an *Explanation of the foundation of schools* that casts the entire history of

[60] *Nativity* 7.6. For a similar tension in the writings of Cyrus of Edessa see Macomber, 'Synthesis', 375–7 and passim.

[61] *Nativity* 5.3–7. Study of the alphabet corresponds to the generations from Noah to Abraham; spelling and reading correlates with the time from Abraham to the exodus, and so on.

[62] Ibid. 5.9.

humankind as a succession of schools;[63] or the well-known eighth-century systematiser of the mystic tradition, Joseph Ḥazzaya, who quite similarly consistently employs the paradigm of God as the divine educator in his treatise *On providence*.[64] Remarkably, Joseph even uses the very same illustration of the school curriculum as does Thomas, according to which the pupil advances from learning the alphabet, to reading, to studying Psalms, to writing out a volume and finally to interpreting Scripture.[65]

*Exegesis*

Theodore is rightly renowned for his historically oriented, scholarly exegesis.[66] The *Explanations of the feasts*, to be sure, are not exegetical pieces, yet they often engage with Scripture and their debt to Theodore's biblical interpretation is tangible throughout.

That Thomas's exegesis stands firmly in the Theodorean tradition can be illustrated from *Epiphany*. In good scholarly fashion Thomas clarifies at the outset the terminology – why, anyhow, do we call this feast that commemorates Jesus' baptism 'epiphany' (*denḥa*), a term that normally denotes the sunrise. He explains that just as the sun shines forth at dawn, so Christ, the 'sun of righteousness' (Malachi iv.2 (= iii.20 LXX)), appeared at the time of his baptism.[67] In order biblically to validate the name *denḥa*, Thomas then sets forth scriptural passages containing metaphors of morning, light and darkness, such as: 'For the kingdom of heaven is like a man who went out in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard' (Matthew xx.1); or, 'The light is shining in the darkness but the darkness does not overcome it' (John i.5),[68] summing up as follows:

> If, then, we call our Lord 'sun', and the knowledge of the proclamation of the gospel 'light', and the beginning of his gospel 'morning', then according to the affinity of these names we rightly call his manifestation at the beginning of his gospel the 'shining forth' (*denḥa*); this which occurred at his baptism by John. Therefore we name this feast – although in fact it is of a baptism – 'of the

[63] Barḥadbeshabba, *Explanation* (Scher edn, 327–97). See also A. H. Becker, 'Bringing the heavenly academy down to earth: approaches to the imagery of divine pedagogy in the East Syrian tradition', in R. S. Boustan and A. Y. Reed (eds), *Heavenly realms and earthly realities in late antique religions*, Cambridge 2004, 174–91.

[64] Joseph Ḥazzaya, *On providence* 11, 12, 22, 51, 67 and passim in *Joseph Hazzaya, On providence*, ed. N. Kavvdas, Leiden 2016.

[65] Joseph Ḥazzaya, *On providence* 67 (Kavvadas edn, 92–4). There are other notable parallels between Joseph and Thomas, as well as with other Nisibene school treatises, that deserve further investigation.

[66] On Theodore's exegetical method see Devreesse, *Essai*, 53–93, and McLeod, *Roles of Christ's humanity*, 20–57.

[67] *Epiphany* 3.1. On Christ as the sun of righteousness see M. Wallraff, *Christus verus sol: Sonnenverehrung und Christentum in der Spätantike*, Münster 2001, 21–2, 48–59 and passim.

[68] Thomas, *Epiphany* 3.1–4.

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Epiphany (*denḥa*)', in accordance with (calling) the proclamation of the gospel 'light', and the beginning of his gospel 'morning', and Christ the 'sun of righteousness'.[69]

In a similar fashion, Theodore had commented on John i.4–5, expounded Ephesians v.8 and interpreted Romans xiii.12, describing the appearance of Christ with metaphors of dawn and light. The word 'day' in Romans xiii.12 ('the night is far gone, the day is near') he took as indication that the time of Christ's coming marks the end of 'the time of ignorance'.[70]

In the following chapter of *Epiphany*, Thomas concerns himself with the question, 'Why did our Lord wait some thirty years from his birth until his baptism?',[71] a topic allowing him once again to elaborate his understanding of salvation history and to furnish it with further details.[72] This chapter also reveals that his exegetical method is entirely Antiochene in character. After detailing the pedagogical intent in the creation narrative – ideas that will recur later in the writings of Barḥadbeshabba[73] – he returns to the issue at hand: why baptism at the age of thirty? Granted that it was pedagogically useful to have Jesus grow up like an ordinary person, being born, nursed, wrapped in swaddling clothes and so on, lest Docetism should prevail – why should he not have been baptised as a fifteen-year old? This, Thomas asserts, citing Romans and Galatians in support, was to demonstrate Christ's complete obedience, perfect righteousness and fulfilment of all laws[74] – biblical phrases and ideas resonating strongly in Theodore's commentaries as well.[75] Thomas acutely observes that the teenage years tend to be a time during which 'the raging heat of youth is

[69] Ibid. 3.3.

[70] Theodore, *Commentary on John* i.4–5 (Vosté edn, 28:28–30:14); *Commentary on Ephesians* v.8 (Swete edn, i. 178); *Commentary on Romans* xiii.12 (Staab edn, 163:19–26).

[71] *Epiphany* 4.1.

[72] Thomas concedes that, surely, it would have been possible for God to make Jesus appear as fully grown in the blink of an eye, just as God had made Adam and Eve, but observes that this might have exacerbated the problem of docetism. Although he does not name them, Thomas here seems to allude to the Julianist movement that was widely spread in the sixth century: A. Kofsky, 'Julianism after Julian of Halicarnassus', in B. Bitton-Ashkelony and L. Perrone (eds), *Between personal and institutional religion: self, doctrine, and practice in late antique eastern Christianity*, Turnhout 2013, 251–94; U. Possekel, 'Julianism in Syriac Christianity', in P. Bruns and H. O. Luthe (eds), *Orientalia Christiana: Festschrift für Hubert Kaufhold zum 70. Geburtstag*, Wiesbaden 2013, 437–57.

[73] Barḥadbeshabba, *Explanation* (Scher edn, PO iv/4, 348–54). On Barḥadbeshabba's engagement with Aristotelian thought see M. Perkams, 'Das Wissen des Nichtwissens in der Schule von Nisibis: Philosophie in Barḥaḏbšabbā von Ḥalwāns *Die Ursache der Gründung der Schulen* (um 590)', *Phasis* xviii (2015), 166–90.

[74] Thomas, *Epiphany* 4.5; he cites or alludes to Rom. v.19, Gal. iii.13; iv.5.

[75] Theodore, *Commentary on Galatians* iii.12–13 (Swete edn, i. 41–4; Greer trans. 65–7).

stirred up and drags (one) off to perform hateful acts'.[76] That Jesus lived through adolescence without yielding to any passions demonstrates beyond doubt 'our Lord's obedience, righteousness, and victory over everything'.[77] In this section Thomas once again enhances his narrative with a vivid example taken from daily life: just as a pot of water situated over a hot fire is bound to bubble over unless the heat from below is assuaged by a cold fluid added to the vessel from above, so also the heat of youth will spill over into some sin 'unless a perfect will should become for him the recipient of complete grace, so that thereby he might cool and quench the heat of desires in the time of his youth'.[78] A similar metaphor recurs in Barḥadbeshabba's *Ecclesiastical history*.[79]

Thomas concludes this section by pointing out why thirty was a particularly apposite age, rather than, say, twenty-four, for it expressed appreciation for 'the former (customs) among the Israelites'[80]: in the Book of Numbers it was thirty-year old men who had carried the vessels of the tabernacle. This type of reflection, quite unlike how Ephrem in his symbolic theology relates the two testaments, is inspired by Theodore's commentaries that similarly characterise the coherence between the Hebrew Bible and the events related in the New Testament. Theodore stresses that the first covenant had the purpose of preparing the Israelites for the advent of the Messiah while simultaneously meeting contemporary needs, while highlighting the superiority of those latter events.[81] Generally keen to avoid any kind of allegory, Theodore considers the purpose of the astonishing life of the prophet Jonah 'to prevent it being thought novel (καινόν)' what would occur later with the coming of Christ.[82]

The subsequent inquiry, into why Epiphany is celebrated twelve days after Christmas, offers Thomas opportunity for grammatical analysis of the biblical text. But first, in a remarkable passage, he curiously opposes what we might call the religious-historical hypothesis of the origin of

[76] Thomas, *Epiphany* 4.7. [77] Ibid. [78] Ibid. 4.8.

[79] Barḥadbeshabba, *Ecclesiastical history* 32, in *L'Histoire de Barḥadbešabba ʿArbaïa, seconde partie*, ed. F. Nau, PO ix/5, Paris 1913, 617:9–10. This remark occurs in his praise of the saintly Abraham of Bet Rabban. [80] Thomas, *Epiphany* 4.11.

[81] 'The God of both the old and the new covenant is one, the lord and maker of all things, who with one end in view made dispositions for both the former and the latter … In this way the events in olden times were found to be a kind of type (τὸν τρόπον τύπος) of what came later, containing some outline (μίμησιν) of them as well as meeting needs at the time, while suggesting by the events themselves how far they were inferior to the later ones': Theodore, *Commentary on Jonah*, preface (Sprenger edn, 169:8–10, 170:8–11; Hill trans. [slightly adapted], 185–6).

[82] Theodore, *Commentary on Jonah*, preface (Sprenger edn, 169:15–20; Hill trans. 185). Similar passages occur passim in the preface to *Commentary on Jonah*.

Christmas: not possibly, he asserts, could the Church have adopted a previously pagan festival and transformed it into a Christian holiday.[83]

As for the twelve days, he also dismisses the conjecture, apparently voiced by some, that Jesus must have been exactly thirty years and twelve days old at the time of his baptism. This rationale, which on the face of it should appeal to a historically-minded exegete, Thomas nevertheless refutes on biblical grounds by a close analysis of the word 'about' (ܟܡܐ, rendering in the Peshitta the Greek ὡσεί) in Luke. He interprets Luke iii.23, Jesus was 'about thirty years old', by reference to the pericope of the transfiguration in Luke and Matthew. 'For this (word) "about" is the same as he (Luke) used in another place: "About eight days after these words Jesus took Simon and James and John, and he went up to the mountain to pray" (Luke ix.28)'; whereas Matthew specifies that it was 'after six days' (Matt. xvii.1).[84] To reconcile the two gospel accounts, Thomas posits that Luke's 'about eight days' must have included the partial first and last day (i.e., when the words were spoken and when Jesus ascended the mountain) and thus means 'less than'.[85] *Ergo*: Jesus must have been less than thirty years old at the time of baptism. This attention to philological argument Thomas inherits from Theodore. Although no commentary on these verses from the bishop's pen is known to this author, Theodore elsewhere engages in comparable grammatical commentary, for instance when he elucidates the use of the word ἵνα in Paul's Epistles.[86]

And yet – why twelve days? Thomas once again has recourse to the customs of old and asserts that people were already positively disposed towards this number: twelve tribes of Israel, twelve Apostles and so forth.[87] Furthermore Theodore often linked the Old and New Testaments in such fashion. As would Thomas, Theodore posited that God had prepared the people for the designation 'Son of God' by calling some Old Testament heroes 'sons of God'.[88]

The most pronounced exegetical debt to Theodore, perhaps, emerges in the prolonged discussion of Jesus' baptism. The principles already observed – close attention to language and to the accuracy of the historical narrative – once again prove decisive, but new dimensions appear as well.

[83] Thomas, *Epiphany* 5.2. On the origin of Christmas see, for example, H. Förster, *Die Anfänge von Weihnachten und Epiphanias: eine Anfrage an die Entstehungshypothesen*, Tübingen 2007.

[84] Thomas, *Epiphany* 5.4.

[85] Interestingly, Ishoʿdad of Merv in his *Commentary on Matthew* xvii.1 will later reach the same conclusion: he remarks that Luke speaks 'according to the custom of physicians' and thus includes the partial first and last days (Gibson edn, ii (1911), 113; trans. i. 67).

[86] Theodore, *Commentary on Romans* vii.4, vii.13 (Staab edn, 124, 129f.).

[87] Thomas, *Epiphany* 5.8.

[88] Theodore, *Commentary on John* i.49 (Vosté edn, 53:17–22); Greek fragments in Devreesse, *Essai*, 318.

Thomas begins this segment by asserting that there are exactly three God-given baptisms: Jewish ritual washings, John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke iii.3), and Christian baptism.[89] Clearly, Jesus could not have been baptised with the first kind of baptism, he argues, because the Church considers not external matters but internal things as pure or impure.[90] Rather surprisingly, Thomas proceeds to cite Psalm xlv.13, 'All the glory of the king's daughter is within', with the clear intention of interpreting 'the king's daughter' as the Church. Yet this quotation does not mark a sudden embrace of allegorical exegesis; rather, Thomas again follows in the footsteps of Theodore of Mopsuestia for whom this Psalm was among the very few that he considered messianic[91] and who, as would Thomas, understood this verse as referencing the Church.[92]

But neither, Thomas continues, could Jesus have received John's baptism, a position previously favoured by John Chrysostom in a homily on Epiphany, who asserted (against the biblical testimony of Mark i.4 and Luke iii.3) that John's baptism granted neither forgiveness of sin nor the Holy Spirit but simply served to admonish the people and effect their moral improvement.[93] Since Jesus needed no forgiveness of sins, Chrysostom preached, it was the Johannine baptism that he received.[94] More attuned in this regard to the biblical text than the eloquent bishop of Antioch, Thomas observes that John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sins. Yet Jesus had no need of this, Thomas insists, and offers as scriptural support 1 Peter ii.22 ('He committed no sin'), further noting that 'he who takes away the sin of the world' (John i.29) required no assistance from John.[95] John's words to Jesus in Matt. iii.14, 'I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?', further buttress his assertion that Jesus did not need John's baptism.[96] The underlying exegetical method, once again, is strictly historical: the text of Scripture establishes the narrative.

[89] Thomas, *Epiphany* 8.2–4.

[90] Ibid. 8.5.

[91] Theodore, *Commentary on the Psalms*, Psalm xlv, preface, in *Le Commentaire de Théodore de Mopsueste sur les Psaumes (I–LXXX)*, ed. R. Devreesse, Vatican City 1939, 277:8–11; translated in R. C. Hill, *Theodore of Mopsuestia, Commentary on Psalms 1–81*, Atlanta, GA 2006, 555 (includes a reprint of Devreesse's text).

[92] Theodore, *Commentary on Psalms*, Psalm xlv.10, explicitly identifies the 'daughter' as 'church' (Devreesse edn, 292; Hill trans. 585). The commentary on Psalm xlv.13 takes pains to challenge and reject the interpretation of 'daughter' as a woman (Devreesse edn, 295:15–28; Hill trans. 591).

[93] John Chrysostom, *De baptismo Christi* 2–3, *PG* xlix (1862), 363–72 at cols 366–7. On this sermon see E. Ferguson, 'Preaching at Epiphany: Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom on baptism and the Church', *Church History* lxvi (1997), 1–17, and *Baptism in the Early Church: history, theology, and liturgy in the first five centuries*, Grand Rapids, MI 2009, 547f.

[94] John Chrysostom, *De baptismo Christi* 3, *PG* xlix. 367.

[95] Thomas, *Epiphany* 8.6.

[96] Ibid. 8.7.

Not content with simply showing that if Jesus' baptism was neither A nor B it must have been C, Thomas proceeds to give positive proof of why Jesus was baptised with Christian baptism, in the course of which discussion emerges a more complex exegetical technique. By Christian baptism, as Thomas elaborates, a person becomes partaker in the death and resurrection of Christ, receives the grace of the Holy Spirit and obtains intimacy (ܒܝܬܝܘܬܐ, *baytayuta*) with the holy Trinity.[97] This naturally raises the question why Jesus should have been baptised at all, seeing that he already possessed all these qualities. Thomas marshals biblical passages to this effect: the angel's words at the Annunciation reveal that the Holy Spirit was with Jesus from the beginning ('The Holy Spirit will come and the power of the Most High will overshadow you': Luke i.35). Paul's statement, 'He in whom dwells the entire fulness of Divinity bodily' (Colossians ii. 9), signals that Jesus already had intimacy with the divine. And as far as death and resurrection are concerned, Thomas rhetorically queries, 'Who died prior to him (Jesus) and rose to life immortal, so that he (Jesus) might be made a partaker (in it) when he was baptised in the likeness of the death and resurrection of that (former) one?'[98] Citing from Colossians and Isaiah he notes that Jesus is 'the first-born of the dead' (Col. i.18) and 'the father of the world to come' (ܐܒܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܕܐܬܐ) (Isaiah ix.5(6) LXX).[99]

After embarking upon yet another salvation-historical excursus,[100] Thomas resolves the apparent difficulty that the biblical testimony appears to contradict his theology by first positing that we have three births – bodily from a woman into this world, symbolically by baptism into the Church and spiritually from Sheol into the kingdom of heaven – and then linking these births in a kind of typology.[101] Jesus received baptism, Thomas continues, to confirm faith in us that there exists indeed an integral connection between baptism and resurrection. As these were connected in Jesus, so they will be for us.

This is not the kind of typological exegesis that Ephrem had relished.[102] For Thomas, as for Theodore, a typological reading is possible only under certain highly restricted conditions, requiring, as Frederick McLeod put it,

[97] Ibid. 9.2. [98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid. This passage from Isaiah is cited also by Cyrus, *On the fast* 7.3 and *Ascension* 4.8 (Macomber edn, 27:22, 148:25–26). The Peshitta manuscript 7a1 (Milan Ambr. B21 inf) has the reading 'father of the world to come'; MS 6h5 (BL, MS Add. 14,432) has it in the margins; and it is found in certain Septuagint manuscripts, whereas the Hebrew reads *'abi'ad*, 'eternal father'. [100] Thomas, *Epiphany* 9.3–11.

[101] Ibid. 9.13.

[102] A survey of Ephrem's theological method can be found in S. Brock, *The luminous eye: the spiritual world vision of Saint Ephrem*, Kalamazoo, MI 1992.

that … the type and its archetype must be explicitly acknowledged as being actual persons, places, or events whose relationship is historically verified in and by the Scriptures. This can be used as a reliable standard because God … has revealed these to be 'organically' bonded to each other as a seed is to its flowering plant.[103]

A fine example of such typology is precisely Theodore's understanding of baptism, as articulated in the *Catechetical homilies* and elsewhere. In his address to the catechumens, the bishop of Mopsuestia explains that in baptism one receives the gift of immortality, and becomes with Christ the co-inheritor of good things to come (ܒܝܪܬܐ ܕܛܒ̈ܐ ܕܐܬܝ)[104] and a citizen of heaven.[105] In baptism a person receives these gifts as a type (τύπος, ܨܠܡܐ) and they shall be fully realised in the world to come.[106] The baptised, Theodore explains, are inscribed (ܡܬܟܬܒܝܢ) into heaven.[107] Theodore refers to this yet-to-be-fully realised gift as a 'pledge' (ἀρραβών, ܥܪܒܘܢ): 'For if we received (as) a pledge of those good gifts to come the grace of the Holy Spirit, from which we now have received the use of these mysteries, we also expect to take delight in those future things to come.'[108] This participation in the good gifts to come is granted by means of sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ. To illustrate this as yet imperceptible transformation, Theodore points to how a human being in the womb gradually takes shape from an embryo; likewise in baptism the seed is planted, and the person acquires in potentiality immortality, incorruptibility and unchangeability, to be fully actualised later, yet nevertheless already now effecting a transformation.[109]

This same rationale Thomas presents to his Nisibene students, taking up Theodore's typological understanding of baptism as well as the comparison with the development of an embryo; yet stressing more than did Theodore to his catechumens the link between the baptism of Jesus and that granted by the Church:

By the same logic we too, if baptism had begun with us, while there was no one (yet) who previously was first baptised and afterwards died and rose from the dead – just as he also rose up from the water after he was baptized – we would

[103] McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia,* 21, cf. 'Narsai's dependence', 23.
[104] Theodore, *Catechetical homilies* 13.12 (Tonneau edn, 388:16).
[105] Ibid. 13.14 (Tonneau edn, 392:11–13).
[106] Ibid. (Tonneau edn, 391–3, esp. 392:9–11); 1.4 (Tonneau edn, 6:15–24).
[107] Ibid. 1.5 (Tonneau edn, 10:7–13), cf. 1.4 (Tonneau edn, 6:26–8:3 and passim).
[108] ܘܐܝܟ ܐܦ ܚܢܢ ܐܢ ܟܕ ܗܘܬ ܡܥܡܕܢ ܒܪ̈ܝܫ ܡܕܡ ܕܒܟܪ ܐܬܥܡܕ ܘܒܬܪ̈ܝܗ ܡܝܬ ܘܩܡ ܡܢ ܡ̈ܝܬ̈ܐ ܐܦ ܗܘ ܕܐܦ ܩܡ ܡܢ ܡ̈ܝܐ ܡܢ ܕܐܬܥܡܕ ibid. 14.6 (Tonneau edn, 414:14–17; cf. 414:10–11 and passim); cf. *Commentary on Ephesians* i.10 (Swete edn, i. 127:18–128:5; 130:18–131:5); i.13–14 (Swete edn, i.133–4).
[109] Theodore, *Catechetical homilies* 14.9–10 (Tonneau edn, 418–24). For a nuanced discussion see F. G. McLeod, 'The Christological ramifications of Theodore of Mopsuestia's understanding of baptism and the eucharist', *JECS* x (2002), 37–75.

not be assured that the types which we depict in baptism will be accomplished in reality. But now that our Lord was baptized and rose up from the water, and after these events died and rose from the dead, as he had signified beforehand in his baptism, we believe without doubt that what happened to him will also be accomplished for us ourselves.[110]

In his reading of Scripture, then, Thomas is thoroughly shaped by Antiochene exegesis: the precise meaning of the biblical word matters, the historical narrative counts, and typology and a messianic interpretation of the Psalms are employed only rarely and under special and restricted circumstances; there is no hint of allegory anywhere.

*The human being as 'bond of creation'*

The final example here of how Thomas transmits Theodore's theology is the concept of the human being as the 'bond of creation'. In his conspectus of salvation history presented in his *Explanation of the Nativity*, Thomas interposes, 'Why did God not create us like angels?' and observes first that angels, like humans, are subject to an inclination.[111] This 'inclination' (ܡܫܬܠܝܢܘܬܐ, *meštalyanuta*) is the ability of a rational being to experience certain desires and intents, and the freedom to act upon them or not to act upon them. The 'inclination' thus is at the outset morally neutral – it is the capability to act either righteously or to sin – but in effect the term acquires negative connotations since human beings after the Fall tended towards sin. The 'inclination' thus constitutes an integral part of rational and especially of human existence.[112] The concept of 'inclination', so central to the theology of Thomas, also features prominently in the commentaries of Theodore. In his exposition of Romans, Theodore normally employs the Greek word ῥοπή, but forms of the verb τρέπω, 'to turn', also occur although more often in the negative.[113] In the Syriac *Catechetical homilies* we usually find, as in Thomas, *meštalyanuta*,[114] a word not contained in the Peshitta New Testament.[115]

[110] Thomas, *Epiphany* 9.14. [111] Idem, *Nativity* 7.1. [112] Ibid. 5.12–14.

[113] ῥοπή occurs at *Commentary on Romans* 5.21; 6.12–14; 7.5; 7.25 and passim (Staab edn, 121:7.9; 122:20; 125:25; 133:14). In his *Commentary on Romans* v.21 and vi.6 (Staab edn, 120:30–121:2; 121:31–122:2), as well as in *Catechetical homilies* 12.8 (Tonneau edn, 334:11–13), Theodore remarks that this inclination to sin increased over time. Macomber observes that the Greek word corresponding to *meštalyanuta* is τρεπτότης: 'Synthesis', 10 n. 1. In *Commentary on Romans* vii.25 and viii.2, for instance, Theodore uses the negative form, ἀτρέπτος (Staab edn, 133:15.20.29); *Commentary on Matthew* i.21, in *Matthäus-Kommentare aus der griechischen Kirche: aus Katenenhandschriften gesammelt und herausgegeben*, ed. J. Reuss, 61, Berlin 1957, fragment 5, p. 98, line 1.

[114] For example, *Catechetical homilies* 12.8 (Tonneau edn, 334:12).

[115] This aspect of Theodore's theology may also have influenced the concept of *yaṣra* in Narsai: A. H. Becker, 'The "evil inclination" of the Jews: the Syriac *yatsra* in Narsai's metrical homilies for Lent', *Jewish Quarterly Review* cvi (2016), 179–207, esp. pp. 198f.

Thomas then proceeds with a fascinating didactic explanation: the human being is, unlike the angels, constituted 'from the whole creation of things visible and invisible'[116] so as to teach both humankind and the angels that despite the manifoldness of creation there is only one God, the maker of everything visible and invisible. Whereas former revelations, suited to children, occurred through parts of creation such as fire or a cloud,

> now, however, that [God] has wished to show forth complete salvation to the whole of creation, and it has been his intention to accomplish a teaching complete in everything, he has rightly taken the bond of all creation (ܟܠܗ ܒܪܝܬܐ ܩܫܪܐ), a human being, complete in body and in soul. And in him all creatures, visible and invisible, are bound together.[117]

Readers of Theodore will immediately perceive this idea of the 'bond' (σύνδεσμος) as a constitutive element of his theology. In the preface to his *Commentary on Genesis*, extant in a Syriac version as well as in Greek fragments, the bishop of Mopsuestia explains that

> God assembled [the human being] from an invisible, rational and immortal soul and from a visible and mortal body. And the former has resemblance to invisible natures, but the latter relates to visible things. For in that God wished to gather all creation into one thing, therefore – although creation was established from separate natures, it should be gathered into one bond (ܚܕܐ ܩܫܪܐ ܕܟܠ) – [God] created this creature who in its nature is related to all creation.[118]

Theodore rehearses this idea throughout his *corpus*, such as in his *Commentary on Romans* where he designates the human being as 'the common bond of creation' as well as 'the pledge of friendship' to all things.[119] In the *Commentary on Colossians*, the Mopsuestian describes the human being as joined to all by kinship, uniting in himself all parts of creation, both visible and invisible.[120] For Theodore, as for Thomas, the coherence of all creation, visible and invisible, is of central soteriological significance, as has in particular been highlighted by McLeod, and it is

[116] Thomas, *Nativity* 5.20.
[117] Ibid. 7.1.
[118] Theodore, *Commentary on Genesis*, preface (Sachau edn, 7:18–24). The Greek fragments are in *Catenae graecae in Genesim et in Exodum*, II: *Collectio Coisliniana in Genesim* ed. F. Petit, CChr.SG xv, Turnhout 1986, fragment 71 at pp. 69–70, esp. lines 26–34; cf. F. Petit, 'L'Homme créé "à l'image" de Dieu: quelques fragments grecs inédits de Théodore de Mopsueste', *Muséon* c (1987), 269–81. I thank Professor Lucas Van Rompay for this reference.
[119] *Commentary on Romans* viii.19 (Staab edn, 137:18–19; 138:21).
[120] *Commentary on Colossians* i.16 (Swete edn, i. 267–70; Greer trans. 379–81). Theodore uses almost the same terminology in *Commentary on Romans* viii.19 (Staab edn, 137–8).

realised in the human being.[121] Yet here, too, Thomas goes beyond Theodore in applying and illustrating the core ideas didactically.

One curious corollary to Thomas's discussion is his reflection on Christ encompassing all creation. For Theodore, the notion that Christ in assuming a human being also encompasses all creation is a key soteriological idea. And although Thomas does not in these treatises name Christ the 'bond of creation', this crucial notion underlies the argument. In particular, the Nisibene teacher clarifies that although Christ 'was formed without sexual relations and born from the Virgin Mary', he nevertheless shares in the nature of both men and women, and that 'there is a part of each of them in him' since Mary was constituted of both.[122]

The idea that in the human being, as Thomas puts it, 'all creatures, visible and invisible, are bound together'[123] is none other than understanding man as a microcosm, a subject that was met with keen interest at the School of Nisibis. Shortly after Thomas, a teacher named Michael dedicated an entire treatise to the topic of the human being as microcosm,[124] employing formulations reminiscent of Thomas when he described how the whole of creation, visible and invisible, is joined together in the human being, explaining that 'all creatures were united in one vessel, the common human being. One is his creator; one is the house and one is its master-builder; one is the image and one is its fashioner'.[125]

The instances featured above, to which others could easily be added,[126] demonstrate that Thomas draws extensively upon Theodore's large *corpus*, embracing his pedagogical model of salvation history, his exegetical principles and his concept of the human being as 'bond of creation'. But Thomas does not slavishly follow the great interpreter; instead, he synthesises, expands and illustrates as he recasts Theodore's theology in the new genre of Explanation, rendering it easily accessible and thereby meeting a

[121] See McLeod, *Roles of Christ's humanity*, 102–23.
[122] Thomas, *Nativity* 9.4.
[123] Ibid. 7.1.
[124] The text is accessible in manuscript form only. An overview of the content may be found in G. J. Reinink, 'George Warda and Michael Badoqa', in H. Teule and others (eds), *The Syriac Renaissance*, Louvain 2010, 65–72, esp. pp. 69–73. For detailed analysis of the relation between Ahudemmeh, Michael and the thirteenth-century poet George Warda, all of whom took up the subject of 'man as microcosm', see G. J. Reinink, 'Man as microcosm: a Syriac didactic poem and its prose background', in A. Harder, A. A. MacDonald and G. J. Reinink (eds), *Calliope's classroom: studies in didactic poetry from antiquity to the Renaissance*, Leuven 2007, 123–49.
[125] BL, MS Or. 4071, fo. 56b, lines 14–16.
[126] Other key themes or features in which Thomas draws on Theodore include the concept of 'household membership' or 'intimacy' (ܡܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ) with the Divine, the adoption as sons/children, and the author's habit of interspersing his discourse with self-reflective remarks on the task of the writer or speaker. On these themes see Possekel and Coakley, *Thomas of Edessa's Explanations*, 34–8.

need felt by other teachers as well. Abraham of Bet Rabban, head of school in the mid-sixth century, for his part applied himself to condensing into a pedagogically suitable form Theodore's complicated commentaries, the Greek style of which the Constantinopolitan patriarch Photius would still find highly objectionable in the ninth century.[127]

The Explanations by Thomas, Cyrus and others, alongside now lost works such as Abraham's epitome of Theodore's extensive biblical interpretations, constitute what contemporary sources designate 'the tradition of the school' (ܡܫܚܠܡܢܘܬܐ ܕܐܣܟܘܠܐ, *mashlmanuta d-eskole*). This 'tradition' constituted the hallmark of Nisibene theological education, the core curriculum as it were that shaped generations of East Syriac scholars, bishops and monastic leaders. This 'tradition of the school' should not be envisioned as a static set of doctrines; rather it was an emerging and at times pluriform body of teaching.[128] Barḥadbeshabba, who wished to co-opt the fifth-century School of the Persians in Edessa as the precursor of the Nisibene academy,[129] used the expression also with respect to learning at the Edessan school, characterising its *mashlmanuta* as the orally transmitted teachings, to be distinguished from the 'interpretation of the Interpreter', that is Theodore.[130] The essence of this 'tradition', then, was exegesis, not Christological doctrine.[131] Thomas too alludes to this 'tradition' when in the final admonition in *Nativity* he exhorts his audience to heed his teachings and to conduct themselves virtuously:

[127] Barḥadbeshabba, *Ecclesiastical history* 32 (Nau edn, 622:5–9; Becker trans., *Sources*, 78). On Abraham's contribution see also A. Vööbus, 'Abraham de-Bēt Rabban and his rôle in the hermeneutic traditions of the School of Nisibis', *Harvard Theological Review* lviii (1965), 203–14. Photius famously denigrates Theodore's style as 'unclear' (ὄυτε λαμπρός) and repetitive (ταὐτολογεῖ δὲ τὰ πλεῖστα) in *Bibiotheca* 38, in *Photius, Bibliothèque*, ed. R. Henry, i, Paris 2003, 23.

[128] The subject of the different strands that constituted the 'tradition of the school' in the late sixth and early seventh centuries, and how under threat from miaphysite expansion in the Persian realm they came to be in open conflict with one another, leading to deep division within the scholastic community, is explored in G. J. Reinink, 'Tradition and the formation of the "Nestorian" identity in sixth- to seventh-century Iraq', *Church History and Religious Culture* lxxxix (2009), 217–50, esp. pp. 238–50.

[129] Barḥadbeshabba, *Explanation* (Scher edn, 381–3).

[130] Ibid. (Scher edn, 382:12–13). An East Syriac manuscript (BL, MS Add. 12,138, dated 899 CE) on how correctly to point and pronounce biblical words and on other grammatical topics references in a note on the last page 'the tradition of the masters of the school' (fo. 312r); cf. W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac manuscripts in the British Museum*, i, London 1870, 107. On the 'tradition of the school' see also Van Rompay, 'Quelques Remarques sur la tradition syriaque', 38–42.

[131] This is clear, for example, from Barḥadbeshabba, *Explanation*, who remarks that Elisha bar Quzbaye, head of school in the mid-sixth century, composed *inter alia* 'commentaries (*mashlmanwata*) on all the books of the Old (Testament)' (Scher edn, 387:5–7). See also Reinink, 'Tradition', 231, 238, 241 and passim.

And it is right for us … that our way of life should be more excellent and pure in devotion to God than (that of) other people, taking care for both the reading of the Scriptures and their interpretation and the teaching that is in the festivals and the reasons for them (on the one hand), and (on the other) virtuous conduct that is pleasing to Christ our Lord.[132]

Remarkably, this passage instantiates that not only exegesis, but also the proper understanding of the liturgical feasts constituted the Nisibene *mashlmanuta d-eskole*.

Alongside liturgy, canons and commentaries, the school theology as it was taught in Nisibis and elsewhere played a vitally important role in transmitting Theodore's heritage to the East Syriac Church. Thomas's Explanations mark one of the earliest Syriac efforts systematically to apply the great Interpreter's theology to the subject of the liturgical feasts. The school context in which these treatises were situated, and the fact that they would be repeated annually on the day of the celebration, ensured their enduring impact.

[132] Thomas, *Nativity* 11.1.