CHAPTER 21

The School of Antioch and Its Opponents*

The Origin of the School of Antioch

In the Christological controversy that so deeply divided the Church in the fifth century, ecclesiastical and imperial politics did much to make the controversy bitter and intractable. Arguments about the correct interpretation of Biblical texts was what dominated the debates of the assembled bishops, however. Bible-based theology was the central issue. The Alexandrians’ hostility to the theological views held by the Antiochenes was a principal driving force, and Theodoret, who was bishop of the relatively unimportant city of Cyrrhus, thus came to be at the centre of the controversy. He was not only an apologist and ecclesiastical historian, but also a prolific commentator on the Bible. As such, he was the principal living theologian of the Antiochene party.

Christian commentators on the Bible did not feel free to produce their own interpretations. They felt bound by exegetical traditions. Insistence on the literal meaning of the Bible was characteristic of the School of Antioch, while the Alexandrians insisted on the validity not only of typological, but also, and abundantly, of allegorical interpretations.

The Antiochene tradition of biblical exegesis is known as the School of Antioch, but it was actually a succession, rather than a formal school. The

* This article was not published previously.
3 A. M. Shor, Theodoret’s People: Social Networks and Religious Conflict in Late Roman Syria, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 2010.
5 The authors of the School of Antioch, as well as Ephrem the Mesopotamian, did in practice make a distinction between typological interpretations of biblical passages as foreshadowing New Testament events and Christian concepts and the much freer allegorical interpretation. While they employed the first, they avoided the second.
commentaries of Diodorus († c. 390), Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 360–428),\(^7\) and Theodoret of Cyrrhus (c. 393–457) clearly belong to this succession, but its origins are much less clear. Recently it has even been suggested that the exegetical tradition originated with Diodorus († 391/2), the teacher of Theodore of Mopsuestia,\(^8\) who was a strong supporter of Meletius, the Nicene contender for the see of Antioch, and an eloquent opponent of the Homoians who in the reign of Constantius controlled of the city’s churches.\(^9\) John Chrysostom, the greatest Antiochene of them all, was certainly influenced by Diodorus since he had spent some time as a student at Diodorus’s *asceterion*.\(^10\) But he did not initiate the tradition in his *Theodoret’s People*. Shor has ignored Eusebius of Emesa (c. 300–c. 359), who was much older than Diodorus, yet evidently already belonged to the same tradition, as Jerome had already observed;\(^11\) Jerome’s assessment appears to be essentially correct. No more than a few fragments of Diodorus’s commentary on *Genesis* have come down to us,\(^12\) but such as they are, they confirm a definite relationship to the commentary of Eusebius of Emesa.\(^13\) They also show

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\(^8\) Theodore was a pupil both of the Antiochene sophist Libanius and of Diodorus (Socrates, *HE*, 6.3; Sozomen, *HE*, 8.2), as was John Chrysostom.


