

2-3-2007

Book Review: Theodoret of Cyrus

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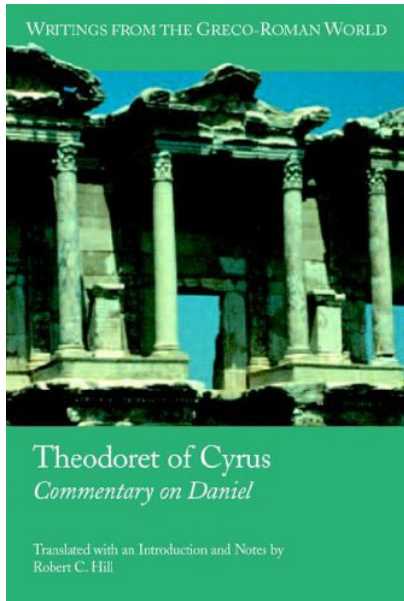
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RBL 02/2007



Hill, Robert C.

Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on Daniel

Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Greco-Roman World 7

Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature; Leiden: Brill, 2006. Pp. xxxiv + 329. Paper/cloth. \$39.95/\$155.00. ISBN 1589831047/9004130519.

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In the volume at hand, Robert C. Hill has produced an invaluable contribution for the study of Old Testament interpretation in the early church. Theodoret (ca. 393–ca. 460), the bishop of Cyrus, wrote copiously on the Old Testament, so his works provide excellent examples of biblical interpretation in Antioch. Moreover, since his commentary on Daniel is the only surviving instance of an interpretation of the book by an Antiochene father, Hill's work is of particular importance.

The format of this volume is especially helpful, above all for those interested in dealing with the Greek text. Hill's readable translation is placed facing Theodoret's Greek text, which is that of J. P. Migne's *Patrologia graeca*. As of yet, there is no modern critical edition of Theodoret's *Commentary on Daniel*. In addition to the benefit of having the Greek text at hand and numbered consistently in both the Greek and English texts, Hill's footnotes within the translation provide both reference information (e.g., scriptural references) as well as explanations of and challenges to Theodoret's commentary. These notes, which Goldingay fittingly describes as "acerbic and droll" in a back-cover endorsement, are most useful to the reader.

The most valuable aspect of the book for those who are unfamiliar either with Theodoret or Antiochene interpretation is Hill's critical introduction (xi–xxxiv). Hill begins with a rather short summary of Theodoret's life and works, which serves merely as an introduction and would need to be augmented for a reader unfamiliar with Theodoret and the Antiochene fathers. Hill recognizes this fact and refers the reader to other, more comprehensive works. For his purposes in setting the circumstances that prompted Theodoret's commentary, particularly in regard to his apologetic *skopos*, the brief biographical introduction suffices. Thus, Hill's attention is given primarily to an evaluation of the commentary and to an explanation of Theodoret's (faulty) interpretations. These observations and critiques, although not treated comprehensively here, fall along the following major lines of thought.

First, Hill concludes that Theodoret was ill-equipped for the task of interpreting Daniel because he did not appreciate the apocalyptic genre of the text and consequently read the book through the eyes of misinterpreted New Testament texts. That is to say, Theodoret misread Daniel because he misread portions of New Testament apocalyptic, such as Matt 24. With his failure to recognize the true character of the book, which Hill believes is “symptomatic of flaws in their [i.e., Theodoret and his peers] exegetical formation,” Theodoret's only recourse was to a historical, literalist interpretation. According to Hill, this historical reading of Daniel had both positive and negative effects upon the *Commentary*. Whereas negatively Theodoret was ill-equipped to read Daniel in light of its genre, Hill acknowledges positively that Theodoret excelled “in his readiness ... to provide the background of his text for the benefit of the readers” (xxx).

Second, Hill believes that Theodoret's inability to read Daniel correctly provided the foundation for Theodoret's *skopos*, which was to accredit Daniel as a prophet. This purpose grew out of the contemporary milieu in which Theodoret wrote, namely, during a time when Jewish interpreters insisted on placing Daniel in the Writings and not among the other major prophets. Theodoret thus felt that such an understanding was a complete disavowal of the book's prophetic character. Since Theodoret's introduction makes this clear in no uncertain terms, Hill rightly spends much time analyzing this aspect of the commentary, and he critiques Theodoret for not thinking of the text as anything more than “prospective prophecy” (xxiii). Accordingly, it is this literalist, historical mode that prevents Theodoret from appreciating the haggadic and apocalyptic material and from understanding the author's purpose.

Third, Theodoret's exegetical deficiencies were compounded, according to Hill, by his ignorance of the Hebrew language. Being bound to a Greek version of the book, at times Theodoret follows an improper understanding of the text that would have been easily

corrected with a cursory knowledge of the Hebrew term in question. Such issues are explained appropriately in Hill's notes (e.g., 151 n. 130).

Fourth, Hill observes that Theodoret, who is so vehement in his preface that Daniel was a prophetic book, does not generally go directly to a christological interpretation as might be expected. Hill points out those passages that Theodoret does interpret in reference to Christ, but he also acknowledges that these interpretations are primarily in response to Jewish exegesis to the contrary (xxx). This is an interesting characteristic of Theodoret's writing that deserves more explanation than Hill could make in this volume.

Finally, Hill discusses briefly the significance of Theodoret's *Commentary*. On the one hand, the *Commentary* is valuable because it is the lone representative of an Antiochene study of Daniel, and as such it has "particular significance in the history of exegesis" (xxxiii). On the other hand, since Theodoret spends an inordinate amount of time defending the prophetic character of Daniel, his *Commentary* provides a unique example of the Antiochene understanding of the nature and role of biblical prophecy.

In light of this summary, I hesitantly and humbly offer the following questions, which serve less as a criticism of Hill's evaluation of Theodoret's commentary than as some issues that I believe were not treated comprehensively due to the brevity of the critical introduction. Hill believes that Theodoret, being exegetically challenged in handling apocalyptic literature, completely missed the overall purpose for the book of Daniel, which was "to encourage Jews suffering persecution under Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the mid-second century" (xxiii). However, since Daniel is apocalyptic literature, should its purpose be limited to a single historical time period, or would it be applicable in more than one historical setting? If apocalyptic is not limited by its time or setting, then Daniel would give encouragement to any reader regardless of the reader's setting. Thus, Hill, who cries foul when Theodoret interprets the book in light of his own historical situation, seems to be limiting the author's purpose to a single historical occasion. This is not to say that Hill's criticisms of Theodoret are wrong, only that some treatment of this issue seems to be warranted.

Furthermore, Hill does not comment on the manner in which Theodoret was reading Daniel within the community of faith. He approaches this in speaking of some portions of the commentary that most likely originated in homilies. Hill also believes that Theodoret's misreading of the New Testament caused him mistakenly to read Daniel as prophecy and that Theodoret's commentary was intended as an apologetic against Jewish treatment of the book. However, he does not comment (sufficiently, in my opinion) on how Theodoret's presuppositions about Christ, specifically about Christ "according to the Scriptures," influenced the way he read the book of Daniel. Within his commentary on

the text of Daniel, he seems to deal less with an apologetic for the prophetic character of the book and more with simply explaining the text as he understands it in light of the Christ-event. There is no doubt that Theodoret read Daniel neither as apocalyptic literature nor as set within an intertestamental historical setting, but a more thorough examination of the influence of the community of faith on his interpretation would be an added bonus to an already excellent work.

With his insightful introduction, readable translation, and fitting notes, Hill has provided a valuable tool both for the study of the Old Testament as well as for the study of early Christian (specifically Antiochene) interpretation. Thus, Hill's purpose of contributing "to a greater appreciation of the way the Old Testament was read in Antioch" (see his acknowledgements) is definitely fulfilled.