Research Article

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Theodoret of Cyrus and His Exegetical Predecessors: A Study of His Biblical Commentary Prefaces

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Abstract: In this article, I examine the biblical commentary prefaces of Theodoret of Cyrus (d. 458), particularly the exegete's presentation of his self-image in relation to his predecessors in the Greek exegetical tradition. I contend that in addition to its introductory function, the biblical commentary preface provided the context in which the exegete could rhetorically style himself *vis-à-vis* the prior tradition, articulating his own skills, credentials, and distinctive interpretive approach. Of Theodoret's nine biblical commentaries, I focus particularly on the prefaces of his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, *Commentary on Daniel*, *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*, *Questions on the Octateuch*, and *Commentary on the Psalms*, given that in these five, we find Theodoret remarking explicitly on the prior interpretive tradition. I demonstrate that at times Theodoret engages with the prior tradition with a critical tone, and at others, he shows respectful deference to his predecessors. In every case, however, his comments serve the rhetorical end of presenting himself as both an authoritative exegetical *inheritor* and *curator* of the prior interpretive tradition. The overarching argument of this article then is that Theodoret fashions his own identity as an exegete by making his relative late appearance on the exegetical scene work to his advantage, claiming that an authoritative interpreter of scripture is one who inherits and curates the exegetical legacy and traditions of the prior tradition. In other words, Theodoret overcomes the (rhetorical) problem that others have previously produced commentaries on the biblical book by claiming that the true authoritative interpreter is in fact one who knows both scripture and the prior tradition intimately, and that the exegete's role at this stage in the tradition is to faithfully transmit the most fitting comments of others.

Keywords: Theodoret of Cyrus, patristic exegesis, biblical commentary prefaces

1 Introduction

By the fifth century, the Christian biblical commentary preface was a rather formulaic introduction to the commentary, in which the author set out the main questions about the text. That is, one typically finds in such introductory material discussions of a specific biblical book's subject, its usefulness or value, its obscurity, authenticity, title, issues of authorship, chronology, order, chapter divisions, and the book's historical context.¹ One also tends to find a discussion of the author's aim in writing the commentary, a

¹ In this period, the length, themes, and arrangement of the features of the preface were not necessarily set in Christian commentary literature, and one finds a great deal of variation among the many witnesses to this part of the biblical commentary. Though the topics presented in the biblical commentary preface are ultimately derived from the Alexandrian tradition of

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discussion of his interpretive approach, a presentation of his own self-image, and often, what Origen scholar, Alfons Fürst, has described as “a dispute with forerunners and censors.”²

In this article, it is these last two components, the exegete’s presentation of his “self-image” and his “dispute with forerunners and censors,” on which I wish to focus in a selection of the biblical commentary prefaces of Theodoret of Cyrus (d. 458).³ I will focus in particular on the manner in which this fifth-century interpreter articulates his place within the prior Greek exegetical tradition in this context. I contend that by this stage in the tradition especially it was particularly necessary for the exegete to present his own self-image in relation to his many predecessors, as he constructed his introductory comments. In addition to its introductory function, the biblical commentary preface also provided the context in which exegetes could rhetorically style themselves *vis-à-vis* the prior tradition, articulating their own skills, credentials, and distinctive interpretive approach, thereby justifying their exegetical projects in light of the weight of the prior tradition.

My focus on this particular aspect of Theodoret’s biblical commentary prefaces is therefore an examination, broadly speaking, of his reception of his predecessors. I will not focus on his actual use of his predecessors’ interpretations of specific biblical passages⁴ – perhaps a more traditional mode of what we might call reception history – but on the *manner* in which he presents his engagement with, and use of, previous authoritative interpreters as he fashions his own image. It is my thesis that Theodoret’s presentation of himself and his predecessors in his prefaces provides a window into how at least one fifth-century Christian exegete dealt with the fact that he came to the interpretive arena rather late in the enterprise, and how he made use of conventional rhetorical strategies as he sought to justify his production of yet another (authoritative) commentary on a biblical text.⁵

I have chosen to focus specifically on Theodoret’s location within “au terme d’une longue tradition” (described as such by one of the foremost scholars of the fifth-century exegete, Jean-Noël Guinot) and before the rise of the catena tradition in the sixth-century.⁶ While Theodoret certainly had near-contemporaries who performed the same kind of rhetorical self-presentation *vis-à-vis* the prior tradition in their biblical commentary prefaces, the bishop of Cyr presents a worthy case for study. Due to Cyr’s position as a noted inheritor of the Antiochene exegetical tradition,⁷ much of the previous attention paid to his prefaces

philosophical commentary prologues, and they therefore share many features with the prefaces to other kinds of early Christian literature, there is no one identifiable model to which these authors rigidly adhere. For previous work on the patristic biblical commentary preface, see Hadot, “Les Introductions aux commentaires exégétiques,” 99–122; Neuschäfer, *Origenes als Philologe*, 57–84; Heine, “The Introduction to Origen’s Commentary on John,” 3–12; Skeb, *Exegese und Lebensform*, 68–119; Fürst, “Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy,” 13–32; Lunn-Rockcliffe, “Prologue Topics and Translation Problems,” 33–47; Lorrain, *Le Commentaire de Théodoret de Cyr*, 92–108. For an even longer view on the literary preface, see Alexander, *The Preface to Luke’s Gospel*.

2 Fürst, “Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy,” 18.

3 While biblical commentary prefaces certainly share features with other literary prefaces of the period, I have chosen to limit my study to the prefaces of the commentaries, as it is here that early Christian authors, including Theodoret, reflect explicitly on their specific place within the interpretive tradition. Throughout this article, however, I will make reference to those instances within Theodoret’s non-commentary works in which he makes rhetorical claims that are similar to those of his commentary prefaces.

4 This work has been thoroughly conducted by others. See, for example, Guinot’s, *L’Exégèse de Théodoret de Cyr*; and “Les Questions sur l’Octateuque et les Règles,” 177–214. See also Lorrain, *Le Commentaire de Théodoret de Cyr*, 143–216. Lorrain focuses on Theodoret’s use of Chrysostom’s exegetical treatment of Romans in particular given the nature of his probable other sources, such as Origen’s *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, extant only in Latin, and that of Theodore of Mopsuestia, which exists only in fragments.

5 Other commentators, such as Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Theodoret’s Antiochene predecessors Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, and on the Latin side, Jerome, can also be found to make a kind of rhetorical defence for their production of a commentary in the light of the previous work of others. See such comments for example in the following prefaces: Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum Canticorum*, praef. (WGRW 13:2–3, 11–2); Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentarii in XII prophetas*, praef. (Pusey, 1–2); Jerome, *Commentariorum in Evangelium Matthaei*, praef. (SC 242:66, 68–70). Further study of patristic biblical commentary prefaces would require a comparison with contemporary non-Christian Greek and Latin commentary prefaces. (For example, Tiberius Claudius Donatus’ preface to Virgil’s *Aeneid*; the preface to Macrobius’ *Saturnalia*; Proclus’ preface to his commentary on Plato’s *Timeaus*.) However, such a comparison is beyond the scope of the present article.

6 Guinot, *L’Exégèse de Théodoret de Cyr*, 811.

7 See for example, Hill, *Reading the Old Testament in Antioch*, 123–33. For two discussions that call the straightforward placement of Theodoret in the Antiochene school into question, see: O’Keefe, “A Letter that Killeth;” Guinot, “Theodoret of Cyrus,” 163–93.

has been primarily focused on his self-positioning *vis-à-vis* the Alexandrian-Antiochene, or allegorical-historical, binary.⁸ This is certainly understandable, but I contend that these prefaces deserve more attention in their own right, given that there is much more at play than the exegete's weighing in on the extremes of allegorical and historical-literal interpretive approaches.

Theodoret, like other early Christian exegetes, articulated the challenge of presenting his interpretive work as both faithful to the received tradition and, at the same time, necessary enough to warrant patronage and publication,⁹ and he used the traditional rhetorical tropes of Aristotelian judicial rhetoric – in a form that resembles the exordium – to do so. That is, the section of his prefaces that included his self-presentation and his disputation with forerunners and censors tended to include the following components: an address of the unnamed accusers, an evocation of the difficulty of the interpretive enterprise with a corresponding call for divine assistance, a self-defence, which included several strategies, such as recourse to biblical *exempla* and argumentation, and an appeal to a patron.¹⁰

We will examine how Theodoret worked with each of these elements within our analysis of the following five of his nine commentary prefaces, in approximate chronological order:¹¹ Theodoret's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, *Commentary on Daniel*, *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*, *Commentary on the Psalms*, and *Questions on the Octateuch*.¹² It is in these five prefaces¹³ that we find Theodoret remarking explicitly on the prior interpretive tradition within his self-presentation and self-defence.¹⁴ We will see that at times he discusses his predecessors in a critical light, at other times, in a somewhat uneasy tone, and at others still in respectful deference. In every case, however, his comments serve the rhetorical end of presenting himself as both an authoritative exegetical *inheritor* and *curator* of the prior interpretive tradition. The overarching argument of this article is that Theodoret uses the commentary preface to fashion his own identity as an exegete by making the fact that many before him had

⁸ See for example, Hill's translator's "Introduction," to the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 7–14; Guinot, *L'Exégèse de Théodoret de Cyr*, 264–73.

⁹ Guinot puts it this way: "L'interrogation paraît d'autant plus légitime que Théodoret lui-même éprouve à plusieurs reprises, dans les préfaces de ses commentaires, le besoin de justifier son travail. A quoi bon, en effet, reprendre après tant d'autres exégètes, souvent illustres, l'interprétation des mêmes textes?" Guinot, *L'Exégèse de Théodoret de Cyr*, 66.

¹⁰ See Lorrain's helpful discussion of this formulaic section of Theodoret's prefaces. She focuses in particular on the preface to his *Commentary on the Pauline Epistles* in *Le Commentaire de Théodoret de Cyr*, 92–108, and works with Pernot's work on the exordium in *La Rhétorique de l'éloge*, 301–5. Lorrain does not include the rhetorical strategy of an appeal to a patron in her analysis, but as we will see, it is one that Theodoret makes frequent use of in the prefaces of my study. (This is of course not to deny that Theodoret was the recipient of genuine patronage.)

¹¹ See Hill's discussion of the chronology of Theodoret's writings in his translator's "Introduction" to the *Commentary on the Psalms*, 3–4.

¹² I have chosen to include *Questions on the Octateuch* despite the fact that the text, which takes the form of "question and answer," is not exactly the same style and format as a biblical commentary, and this for two reasons: (1) it is the biblical text of the Octateuch that is the subject matter, which gives rise to the questions and answers discussed in the work; (2) recent scholarship has demonstrated the degree to which there is overlap between Question and Answer literature and the biblical commentary. That is, one dealt with particularly difficult biblical passages using this format, and many biblical commentators make use of the format within sections of their commentaries. See the helpful discussion of Perrone in "Questions and Responses," 198–209.

¹³ I will make use of the following editions: Theodoret, *Explanatio in Canticum canticorum*; *Explanatio in Daniele*; *Explanatio in XII prophetas minores* (ed. J. P. Migne, PG 81:27–214, 1255–988); *Interpretatio in Psalmos* (ed. J. P. Migne, PG 80:77–1998). In the case of the Daniel commentary, I have made use of Hill's English translation, which includes a reproduction of Migne's Greek text: Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on Daniel*. The same is true of the *Quæstiones*: Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Questions on the Octateuch*. I have also made use of the following English translations of Theodoret's works, unless otherwise noted: *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Psalms*, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Song of Songs*, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*.

¹⁴ I will therefore not deal with the prefaces to his commentaries on Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Lamentations, nor will I deal explicitly with the preface to the Paul commentary, for his comments there resemble those of his Twelve Prophets commentary very closely, and the Pauline preface has been thoroughly dealt with by Lorrain in her study of Theodoret's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Lorrain, *Le Commentaire de Théodoret de Cyr*, 92–142). Lorrain dedicates an entire chapter to the preface, with a particular interest in the exegete's presentation of his exegetical method. She does, however, deal with the highly rhetorical first part of the preface to the Pauline epistles, highlighting the rhetorical tropes with brief comparisons to his other commentary prefaces, as noted above, and to this aspect of her study I will refer throughout this article.

produced commentaries work to his advantage: he claims that an authoritative interpreter of scripture is one who is not only able to deal appropriately with scripture, but who is also able to skillfully curate the exegetical traditions of one's predecessors in the form of a new commentary *text*. That is, the authoritative exegete is one who comments on the biblical text – *vis-à-vis* the prior tradition – in book form, not simply in the public setting of the school or liturgical setting.¹⁵ As with his predecessors, on whom his interpretation of scripture depended, Theodoret's production of written commentaries on these biblical texts is his mode of stating definitively his own interpretive authority.

2 *Far from being theft, such material is an inheritance from our forebearers*

Let us begin with Theodoret's preface to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. There are two notable ways in which Theodoret discusses his place within the prior exegetical tradition in this preface. The first is to refute an unnamed minority of previous commentators on the book, whom he accuses of misunderstanding the text because of an overly "literal" approach, and to simultaneously align his own approach with that of the "blessed majority." The second is his explicit acknowledgement and description of the manner in which he has used the commentaries of these esteemed predecessors, and his related request that his reader understand the benefit of the exegetical task he has undertaken despite, or perhaps because of, his thoroughgoing use of previous interpreters' comments.

We will start with the first. By the time Theodoret comes to the task of producing an exegetical commentary on the Song of Songs, probably sometime before the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE,¹⁶ he feels the need to defend both the text's canonicity and the requirement that it be understood in a spiritual manner, despite the fact that, by this time, it had already been included in canonical lists and the majority of commentators seemed to read the text spiritually.¹⁷ In fact, we might describe this preface as an extended defence of a decidedly spiritual interpretation of the Song of Songs. This issue is not our main concern, though it provides the context for one of the key ways in which Theodoret represents his own position in relation to the prior tradition.

As mentioned above, Theodoret first addresses a minority of commentators, whom he accuses of "misrepresenting (διαβαλλόντων) the text due to their understanding it as either "a factual account of [Solomon] and the Pharaoh's daughter" or as material concerned with a royal wedding.¹⁸ In both cases, the central issue is that they "believe it not to be a spiritual book (πνευματικὸν εἶναι τὸ βιβλίον οὐ πιστευόντων),"¹⁹ giving it instead "a corporeal interpretation (σαρκικῶς νενοηκότες)."²⁰ Some have speculated that Theodoret has Theodore of Mopsuestia in view here, though he does not name him directly.²¹ However, given our general knowledge of Theodore's great influence on Theodoret,²² this may well explain

¹⁵ Of course, Theodoret was an authoritative interpreter who both produced exegetical texts and interpreted scripture in a liturgical setting, and like many commentaries from antiquity, it is likely that his were the result, in some way or another, of his oral teaching. I am indebted to "Reviewer 4" of this article for the suggestion that the authoritative exegete's identity included his being an author of interpretive texts. Cf. Ludlow, "Texts, Teachers and Pupils," in which she argues that Gregory of Nyssa portrays his process of writing as the means by which he moves from being the pupil of his older siblings, Basil and Macrina, to taking on his own identity as a teacher.

¹⁶ Hill, "Introduction," to his translation of *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 3–4.

¹⁷ In fact, many of these authors defended its canonicity on the condition that it be understood spiritually. For a discussion of the canonicity of the Song of Songs in this period, see Barton, "The Canonicity of the Song of Songs," 1–7. For its treatment within Christian interpretation more broadly, see Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved*; and Shuve, *The Song of Songs*.

¹⁸ *Explan. in Cant.* (PG 81:29; Hill, 22).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Explan. in Cant.* (PG 81:33; Hill, 24).

²¹ Guinot, *L'Exégèse de Théodoret de Cyr*, 264; Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 22n.9.

²² As demonstrated by Guinot, *L'Exégèse de Théodoret de Cyr*, 631–799.

why he felt the need to address this minority in the face of what he portrays as an overwhelming majority of interpreters that already read the Song spiritually. These interpreters, Theodoret continues, ought to have acknowledged that “the blessed fathers (οἱ μακάριοι Πατέρες), who ranked (συντεταχότες) this book with the divine scriptures, included it in the canon as being spiritual (πνευματικὸν κανονίσαντές τε αὐτὸ), and judged it to be befitting the church,” and that “the blessed fathers,” in any case, “happen to be much wiser and more spiritual than they.”²³ Following immediately after this statement is an extended set of arguments in defence of the book’s rightful place within the canon.²⁴

Having defended the Song’s canonicity and a spiritual reading of it, Theodoret then proceeds to align himself with this “blessed majority” who ascribe a specific meaning to both, saying: “let us interpret the book of the Song of Songs in a similar way and, abandoning those falsified and harmful opinions, let us follow the holy fathers (τοῖς Πατράσιν ἀκολουθήσωμεν), recognize one bride speaking to one groom, and learn from the holy apostles who is the bridegroom and who the bride.”²⁵ The fathers he has in view here must certainly include Origen and his sympathizer Gregory of Nyssa, both of whom famously identified the bride as the church and the groom as Christ, though most others, including those in the Latin tradition, subsequently took this line of interpretation as well.²⁶ The exegesis of the majority of previous interpreters has given Theodoret the necessary authority to justify his interpretive position *vis-à-vis* his Antiochene heritage.

Here we should pause to note that Theodoret names neither those whom he accuses of misrepresenting the text, nor those of the “blessed majority” with whom he wishes to align himself.²⁷ While one might simply explain this by the fact that his readers are well aware of the characters involved, and thus it was not necessary to name them, it is also highly likely that leaving them unnamed is a rhetorical move on Theodoret’s part. With respect to the unnamed minority from whom he wishes to distance himself, leaving them unnamed is perhaps a way of further discrediting them.²⁸ With respect to the “blessed majority,” leaving them unnamed is, I suggest, a rhetorical move that allows Theodoret to refer to a large group of prior interpreters, whose work his interpretation is aligned with and which he has mastery over. In this case, it thus serves to contribute to his authoritative self-presentation as one whose work is in keeping with the heeded majority, and as one who knows the authoritative prior tradition thoroughly.

Now that Theodoret has aligned himself with the (unnamed) “blessed majority,” he must, however, deal with another potential issue, namely: his use of previous interpreters’ texts.²⁹ We have here what I understand to be an instance of his rhetorical performance of uneasiness concerning the contributions of his predecessors, for he advises his readers not to “charge us with theft” (μὴ κλοπὴν ἡμῶν κατηγορεῖν) if

²³ *Explan. in Cant.* (PG 81:29; Hill, 22).

²⁴ Indeed, this discussion amounts to approximately 8 columns of Migne’s Greek text. Theodoret provides such arguments as Ezra’s rewriting of the scriptures, including the Song, after they had been destroyed in the Babylonian exile; the fact that “Many of the ancients also commented on it (Πολλοὶ δὲ αὐτὸ τῶν παλαιῶν καὶ ἡρμηνεύκασιν);” those who did not comment on it directly quoted it as scripture in their writings; the fact of many other things included in the Old Testament of a figurative nature (PG 81:32; Hill, 23).

²⁵ *Explan. in Cant.* (PG 81:44; Hill, 30).

²⁶ Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved*, 20–48. The apostle Paul himself initiated this interpretive trajectory, which Theodoret also indicates, with such comments as those found in 2 Cor 11:2, “I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” Theodoret provides other scriptural support for his position as well, citing such passages as Matt 9:15 and John 3:29.

²⁷ We should also note that he does not name any of his predecessors or accusers in the five prefaces we examine here.

²⁸ Cf. Lorrain, *Le Commentaire de Théodore de Cyr*, 96.

²⁹ It is not the aim of this article to demonstrate Theodoret’s great debt to Origen, though even in his preface one is unable to avoid the Alexandrian’s presence. Two discussions in particular should certainly remind us of the commentary of the Alexandrian. First, the title of the book itself, and second, the hierarchy of the three “wisdom writings,” Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs as appropriate to believers on a kind of “ladder” from the moral, physical, and mystical teachings of these three texts respectively.

³⁰ I have translated ἡ κλοπή as “theft” rather than keeping with Hill’s “plagiarism,” which, while it perhaps amounts to the same thing, is a rather anachronistic term for the fifth century.

in his commentary they should find “something said by the fathers (τι τοῖς πατράσιν εἰρημένον).”³¹ Theodoret then admits directly to having found in their writings “the basis for clear exposition (τὰς ἀφορμὰς [...] τῆς σαφηνείας),” and that which appears to be direct borrowing is instead “an inheritance from our forbearers (κληρονομία πατρώα).”³² This is an implicit claim to belong within this authoritative and “blessed” chain of interpretation, as well as an implicit claim to interpretive authority. That is, one cannot rightly be accused of stealing that which one already has in one’s possession.

Theodoret then proceeds to describe in much more detail than we find elsewhere the manner in which he has used this material from his predecessors: in some cases, he has “taken from them (παρ’ ἐκείνων εἰληφότες);” in others he has “added (προστίθεμεν)”³³ something himself; sometimes he has “abbreviated (συντέμνομεν)” what he found in his sources; sometimes he “develops (διευρύνομεν)” what he finds there.³⁴ Despite these claims to have made considerable use of his sources, however, Theodoret expresses confidence that his task was “not without benefit to the readers (οὐκ ἄχρηστον οἶμαι τοῖς ἐντευζομένοις),” lest anyone consider him lazy or lacking his own interpretive sensibilities.³⁵ Theodoret is clearly concerned to present himself as both aware of and indebted to the prior tradition, but also as an interpretive authority in his own right. In *his* useful commentary text, he tells us, in addition to the voices of his predecessors, his readers will find his own masterful selections, abbreviations, and expansions on the traditional material.³⁶

Furthermore, within his rhetorical self-defence, he justifies the production of yet another commentary on the Song of Songs in two additional ways. First, he claims that he is spiritually weak and thus that he is therefore, in his own limited strength, unfit for the interpretive task before him.³⁷ He describes himself as “a soul fraught with a heavy weight of sins and a mind enveloped in worries about the affairs entrusted to me, and hence kept lowly and earthly, incapable of grasping the divine realities with precision [...] my mind’s tongue too slothful and tardy.”³⁸ However, through “prayer and supplication” Theodoret claims to be empowered to “presume to plumb the depths of the work so as to come up with the pearl of its meaning (εἰς τὸ βάθος τοῦ γράμματος καταβῆναι τετολμήκαμεν, ἵνα δοῖ τὸν τοῦ νοήματος ἀνεγκώμεν μαργαρίτην).”³⁹ This expression of spiritual and interpretive weakness is of course a common rhetorical trope in the biblical commentary preface, as we noted above, and here, I argue, it serves the purpose of allowing him to present himself as an interpreter with the appropriate humble posture in the face of such a great number of authoritative predecessors, not to mention the difficulties presented by the nature of the biblical text itself.⁴⁰ Moreover, the blessed David, who said “Take the veil from my eyes and I shall understand the wonders of your Law” (Ps 118:18),⁴¹ provides Theodoret with both a scriptural example to follow and with specific words to pray for interpretive assistance,⁴² and he is therefore confident that his prayers will be

³¹ *Explan. in Cant.* (PG 81:48; Hill, 32).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Note that throughout this preface Theodoret uses the “royal” or “epistolary” first person plural.

³⁴ *Explan. in Cant.* (PG 81:48; Hill, 32).

³⁵ *Ibid.* Theodoret makes a similar claim concerning the “benefit” or “usefulness” of his written work in several other prefaces of his corpus: *Hist. eccl.* prol. 1.2 (SC 501:142); *Eran. seu Plym.* prol. (PG 83:29); *Graec. Affect. Curat.* prol. (SC 57:100).

³⁶ The claim that both the text of focus and the interpretation one offers of it is useful is another rhetorical trope found in ancient prefaces. See Hadot, “Les Introductions aux commentaires exégétiques,” 100–22.

³⁷ Cf. *Hist. eccl.* prol. 1.3 (SC 501:142).

³⁸ This in contrast to the qualities of the ideal interpreter who would have “a purified soul that is also rid of every uncleanness [...] a mind that has wings, capable of discerning divine things and prepared to enter the precincts of the Spirit [...] a tongue responsive to the mind and worthily interpreting its vision.” (PG 81:28; Hill, 21).

³⁹ *Explan. in Cant.* (PG 81:28; Hill, 21).

⁴⁰ See, for example, Crawford’s brief discussion of this tendency in his treatment of Cyril of Alexandria’s preface to his *Commentary on John* in his *Cyril of Alexandria’s Trinitarian Theology of Scripture*, 184. Fürst articulates the trope in this way: “a disingenuous stress on the author’s inability to write such a book connected with a request for support and an invocation of a deity.” See Fürst, “Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy,” 18. For the *topos* in Latin prefaces, see: Janson, *Latin Prose Prefaces*, 120–1, 144–5.

⁴¹ Psalm numbering according to the LXX.

⁴² *Explan. in Cant.* (PG 81:29; Hill, 21–2).

answered. His claims to have offered prayers for divine grace thus allow him to claim at once access to divine interpretive assistance and to present himself as possessing the appropriately humble interpretive posture.

The second additional way in which Theodoret justifies the production of his commentary is his claims that he has dared to undertake the task because his “dear leader (φίλη μοι κεφαλή)” requested it, and he seeks to honour this request despite both his weakness and his “countless” political, ecclesiastical, and civic concerns.⁴³ This appeal to the request from a patron or friend, another common trope in the ancient literary preface, allows Theodoret to demonstrate that his expertise has been recognized as desirable.⁴⁴ Both of these additional features of this preface aid Theodoret in his self-presentation *vis-à-vis* the prior authoritative tradition, which he knows well, and which he has adapted for his own interpretive purposes.

In this preface, then, Theodoret presents himself rhetorically as a humble and balanced interpreter in the lineage of the “blessed” majority of the prior tradition, whose exegetical skill is recognized and sought out by others. The potential problem of the existence of his predecessors’ commentaries as he seeks to present his own he turns to his advantage, claiming to be an exegetical author who has, in his own authoritative text, not stolen from previous authors, but made masterful selections and developments of the very tradition of which he is an inheritor.

3 *The beneficiary of some little knowledge from many pious writers*

We will now turn to Theodoret’s preface to his *Commentary on Daniel*, which he is thought to have composed in approximately 433 CE.⁴⁵ In this preface, Theodoret takes somewhat of a different tack to what we saw above, beginning immediately with his distinctive interpretive abilities and credentials with a decidedly defensive tone.⁴⁶ In this context, an important credential is his awareness and transmission of the prior tradition, which, incidentally, allows him to act in obedience to Scripture itself.

Theodoret’s presentation of himself as an authoritative exegetical author becomes immediately clear in this preface, as he claims in the first sentence that, “If it were easy for everyone to explicate the utterances of the divine prophets (Εἰ πᾶσι ῥάδιον ἦν τὰ τῶν θείων προφητῶν ἀναπτύσσειν θεσπίσματα) [...] perhaps it would rightfully be thought an idle endeavour to produce a commentary on them in writing (ἴσως ἂν εἰκότως ἐνομίσθη παρέλκον ἀνάγραφτον τούτων ποιεῖσθαι τὴν ἐρμηνείαν).”⁴⁷ However, he continues, all

⁴³ *Explan. in Cant.* (PG 81:28; Hill, 21). This is a common strategy of Theodoret’s and we will not examine every instance in the article in order to avoid unnecessary repetition. In his *Commentary on Daniel* for example, Theodoret claims that, “many illustrious acquaintances also have made earnest supplications to us and obliged us to summon up courage for this contest.” See *Explan. in Dan.* Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Comm.Dan.*, 4–5. In this same preface, he also tells us that “his friends” requested this commentary on Daniel first of all. This so as to defend his having begun with the book of Daniel rather than the other prophets, and a defence of including Daniel among the prophets rather than the writings, as the Jewish canon had done. See Hill’s discussion of this issue for more context in his translator’s “Introduction,” 5, 7 n.7. Cf. *Explanatio in Jeramiam praef.* Cf. *Hist. eccl.* prol. 1.4 (SC 501:142), where he names the previous work of Eusebius.

⁴⁴ See Fürst’s discussion of the conventional feature of the preface in which the author claims that a patron has made an external request for the work: Fürst, “Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy,” 23–4. For other examples in which early Christian exegetes appeal to a request from a patron, see: Jerome, *Comm. Matt praef.* (SC 242:66); Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. Cant praef.* (WGRW 13:2–3).

⁴⁵ See Hill’s discussion of the dating in his translator’s introduction to *Theodoret of Cyrus: Comm.Dan.* xii–xiv.

⁴⁶ It is not entirely clear why Theodoret uses certain rhetorical strategies to engage with the prior tradition in one preface, and different strategies in another. We simply do not know enough about the socio-historical circumstances in which these writings emerged. We do know, however, that the bishop had a stock list of strategies with which to work, and he made use of them as he saw fit. My claim here is confirmed by the fact that his arguments in defence of his production of his commentaries on the Twelve and on the letters of Paul are strikingly similar despite the fact that they were not produced at the same time, nor in the same circumstances.

⁴⁷ Hill, *Comm.Dan.* 2–3.

Christians have not been given the same gifts and abilities, an argument in which he is aided by Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor 12, and it is therefore not "improper for [him] to put into writing [the prophets'] teaching for those ignorant of their divine written words."⁴⁸ Implicit here is his claim to possess the spiritual gifts required to produce exegetical comments in written form, and it is with this authorial self-understanding that he begins his rhetorical self-defence.

Theodoret then proceeds to specify his authorial-exegetical qualifications.⁴⁹ He continues by claiming that unlike many others, he has two essential qualifications: (1) he has been "raised on [the divine writings]" since his youth, and (2) he is "the beneficiary of some little knowledge from many pious writers (παρὰ πολλῶν δὲ συγγραφέων εὐσεβῶν σμικρὰν τινα γνῶσιν ἐρανισάμενος)."⁵⁰ Thus, his knowledge of both scripture and his predecessors' treatments of Daniel is marshalled as evidence of his distinctive suitability to the task of exegetical comment in written form. His awareness of the existence of many writers prior to him is not here, as we saw above, presented as a potential problem to be explained or overcome, but straightforwardly presented as one of his essential qualifications, and indeed one of his spiritual gifts, as is the ability to present this knowledge in written form.

Significantly, Theodoret claims, within what we might understand as this preface's section of self-defence, that Scripture itself commands us to "teach our offspring what we have learned from our parents (Deut 4:9)."⁵¹ That is, Scripture commands him to take what he has learned from his interpretive predecessors, i.e. his parents, and to present these teachings in his own commentary on the biblical text of Daniel. What follows is a string of quotations from Ps 77:1–7, which Theodoret takes as further scriptural justification that he presents to his readers, i.e. his "children," that which has been passed down to him.⁵²

In his preface, Theodoret does not seem worried about setting his own treatment of Daniel apart from those of the prior tradition, but rather, he presents his commentary as a work in which he faithfully transmits what he has received in their writings to his readers, and this at the command of Scripture itself. This then is a striking appeal to scriptural evidence to justify his re-production of his predecessors' exegetical readings within his own commentary. Not only that, but the familial language provided by Scripture provides him with the vocabulary to articulate, once again, his intimate ties to the prior tradition. Finally, we are here presented with a straightforward authoritative claim by Theodoret that he considers himself to be spiritually gifted in the department of *literary* exegetical comment, given his thoroughgoing knowledge of both scripture and the exegetical tradition.

4 *We too gathered from those places where things were well expressed*

In the preface to his *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*, a text he likely completed in approximately the same period as the *Commentary on Daniel*, Theodoret once again begins with a defensive tone, this time defending himself against those who might criticize him for the production of a commentary on a book upon which others have already commented.⁵³ Here, as we shall see, he also goes on to explain his mode of using his predecessors' work in a manner that is again authorized by Scripture itself.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Theodoret's friends and esteemed acquaintances also recognize his skills for he claims that they too have requested this text from him, as noted in n. 43 above. See *Explan. in Dan.* Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Comm.Dan.*, 4–5.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid. As I noted above, within his self-defence, Theodoret tends to make use of scriptural argumentation and *exempla*, of which this section is an example.

⁵² Hill, *Comm.Dan.*, 4–5.

⁵³ Thus in this instance, the rhetorical elements of the address of accusers and his self-defence are immediately intertwined.

⁵⁴ Theodoret's preface to his *Interpretatio in Epistolas Pauli* takes almost the same form as this one. He makes the same comments about his critics and he defends himself against their critiques using the same arguments, though using different

Theodoret immediately addresses his critics, i.e. those who would consider him to be “idle and superfluous (περιττόν [...] καὶ παρέλκον)” in his desire to produce a commentary on the twelve, due to the fact that “several others (ἄλλων τινῶν) have completed such a task.”⁵⁵ Part of his initial refutation of these critics is provided by his claim that there are other, more generous recipients of his text, whom he would rather listen to, for they actually possess “precise schooling in sacred Scripture (τὴν ἱερὰν ἀκριβῶς πεπαιδευμένοι Γραφήν),” and they therefore understand the value of his work.⁵⁶ In fact, this latter group of individuals are like Christ himself, who took this kind of generous approach to the widow of Mark 12:41–4 when she gave her humble offering, understanding that it is “the quality of the intention” that matters, not the quality of the gift.⁵⁷ Here then, Theodoret implicitly likens himself to the widow and her feeble offering, as well as to a long list of other inferior scriptural *exempla*: the poor people who, at the time the tabernacle was built, were able to offer only their strength and skill, but no materials for building; those less prominent than Moses, who nonetheless delivered oracles; and the disciples of the twelve apostles.⁵⁸ In each case, it was the Holy Spirit who did the real work, for it is the Spirit who gives spiritual gifts. If Theodoret’s opponents knew the contents of scripture, they would have known that there is precedent for those who make their offerings to God despite weakness and inadequacy.⁵⁹

Theodoret makes explicit his own connection to this line of inadequate-yet-well-intended scriptural servants of God by claiming that those in the line of the apostles and their disciples in the churches today belong in this lineage as well. It is for this reason that he has dared to make his interpretive offering despite the fact that others have already done the same, and despite his own (rhetorical) inadequacy as an interpreter. He claims that even though he is accused of “following others’ ideas (τοῖς ἐτέρων [...] τις ἀκολουθεῖν ἡμᾶς φήσκει),” he would still be found to be “making a contribution in keeping with our ability (τὸν δυνατόν ἡμῖν ἔρανον συνεισφέροντας),” like each of these scriptural *exempla*.⁶⁰ We have here then an explicit acknowledgement of the contributions of the weighty prior exegetical tradition, the existence of which suggests to his closed-minded critics that his commentary is superfluous, as well as a scriptural argument of self-defence, that he is in good company with the list of inadequate characters of scripture, who were, nonetheless, recipients of the Spirit’s grace in their respective offerings.

In a manner reminiscent of his comments in the preface to the Song of Songs commentary, Theodoret turns to address the prior tradition once again here, articulating how he has dealt with his sources. This time, however, he makes use of the Old Testament account of the building of the tabernacle as an image to aid his description, and as a rhetorical mode of scriptural argumentation in his defence in keeping with his claim to be like those who, at the time of the tabernacle’s construction, could offer only their labour. He claims,

like those who spun and wove the fiber offered by others and prepared the skins of the tabernacle, we too gathered from those places where things were well expressed (καὶ ἡμεῖς ἔνθεν κάκειθεν τὰ καλῶς εἰρημένα συλλέξαντες),⁶¹ and with God’s help we wove one composition from them all (ἐν ἐκ πάντων ἐξυφανοῦμεν σὺν Θεῷ φάναι σύγγραμμα), making clear for the readers the thinking (δὴλην ποιοῦντες τοῖς ἐντυγχάνουσι τὴν διάνοιαν) of the Twelve Prophets.⁶²

Here again, Theodoret admits to his extensive use of the prior tradition’s exegesis of the twelve prophets, and he describes his selective and compositional procedure in order to meet his interpretive

scriptural *exempla*. We will therefore not explore it in detail here, but simply refer the reader to the text as well as to Lorrain’s study in *Le Commentaire de Théodoret de Cyr*, 92–142, which we highlighted above.

⁵⁵ *Explan. in XII proph.* (PG 81:1545; Hill, 33).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* By implication, he insinuates that his critics do not have such precise schooling in scripture.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Explan. in XII proph.* (PG 81:1545, 1548; Hill, 33–4). Again we have Theodoret’s rhetorical recourse to the use of scriptural *exempla* for his argumentation.

⁵⁹ Yet again, we see Theodoret making the rhetorical claim to interpretive weakness, and his need for divine assistance.

⁶⁰ *Explan. in XII proph.* (PG 81:1548; Hill, 34).

⁶¹ Note that I have provided my own translation of this clause so as to avoid the rather odd phrasing of Hill: “we too gathered from hither and yon sentiments well expressed [...]” Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*, 34.

⁶² *Explan. in XII proph.* (PG 81:1548; Hill, 34).

goal of clarifying the prophetic writings. In fact, it seems to me that for him, part of what offering a clear and authoritative commentary on the Twelve prophets means is selecting the best and most fitting comments from his predecessors' work. Again, scripture itself provides the authorizing image for his compositional practice: those who spun and wove together the materials for the tabernacle worked with materials already offered by others, just as Theodoret does with his predecessors' sources.

In this case of his preface on the Twelve, Theodoret seems not to be worried about the reader who might accuse him of "theft" due to his use of the prior tradition, but rather, he is worried about the critical reader who accuses him of redundancy, given that previous interpreters had already commented on the Twelve. This scriptural argumentation based on the account of the building of the tabernacle, however, allows him to justify his exegetical-authorial practice.

5 *Let no one think any less of our efforts for the reason that others have produced a commentary on this before ours*

We turn now to Theodoret's preface and epilogue to his *Commentary on the Psalms*, a work he composed in the early 440s.⁶³ We will see that he claims awareness of the works and approaches of his predecessors in the preface, making space for his own work by evaluating and critiquing the extreme interpretive approaches of his predecessors. Here then is another example in which Theodoret sees fit to take a critical tone with the prior tradition. We will also see, however, that in his epilogue, after having completed the commentary, he admits to having made use of his predecessors' works, despite his critique. Just as was the case with the Song of Songs commentary, scholars have primarily been interested in this preface due to Theodoret's discussion of allegorical and historical-literal readings of the Psalms.⁶⁴ While this will play into our discussion, given that it concerns his engagement with the prior tradition, it is only part of the story, and will therefore not be our main focus.

Theodoret begins the preface with an implicit claim to his own interpretive authority within a discussion of the fact that he was desired to produce a commentary on the psalms for quite some time, but has been prevented due to the many requests for commentaries on other biblical texts.⁶⁵ After singing the praises of the book of the Psalms itself – it is a text full of grace, charm, and benefit, not to mention that it is popular and enjoyable – Theodoret claims that he was prevented from commenting on this text because he had received requests for commentaries on the Song of Songs, Daniel, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Prophets.⁶⁶ This is a very clear claim to interpretive authority; his written comments on scripture have been so coveted that he is only now finding time to comment on this most important book of the Psalms.⁶⁷

Before he can begin his treatment of the Psalms, however, Theodoret must once again deal with the fact that others before him have produced their own commentaries on the biblical book, and thus begins his self-defence. He addresses this issue by saying, "let no one think any less of our efforts for the reason that others (ἄλλους) have produced a commentary on this before ours."⁶⁸ He is well aware, he assures his reader, that he is coming rather late to the task, admitting that he has "encountered (ἐντυχὼν) various such

⁶³ See Hill's discussion of the date in his translator's introduction to his *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Psalms*, 3–4.

⁶⁴ Hill, "Introduction," to *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Psalms*, 15; Guinot, *L'Exégèse de Théodoret de Cyr*, 276–81; O'Keefe, "A Letter that Killeth," 97–9.

⁶⁵ Here we have another rhetorical claim to interpretive authority based on an appeal to requests from others for various written commentaries.

⁶⁶ *Interp. in Psal.* (PG 80:860; Hill, 40).

⁶⁷ Most major interpreters seem to have produced a commentary on the Psalms, given the text's central place within the life, worship, and thought of the earliest Christian communities. It may have been something of a rite of passage in the Antiochene tradition in particular, as noted by Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Psalms*, 39n.2. See Rondeau's presentation and discussion of each of late antique Christian commentary on the Psalms in *Les Commentaires Patristiques du Psautier*.

⁶⁸ *Interp. in Psal.* (PG 80:860; Hill, 40).

commentaries.”⁶⁹ This fact has not deterred him, for in these commentaries, he informs us, he has found certain interpretive extremes: “some I found turning to allegory with insatiable desire (τοὺς μὲν εἰς ἀλληγορίαν μετὰ πολλῆς χωρήσαντας ἀπληστίας εὐρών),”⁷⁰ while others make the inspired composition resemble historical narratives of a certain type with the result that the commentary represents a case rather for Jews than the household of the faith (τοὺς δὲ τισιν ἱστορίαις τὴν προφητείαν ἀρμόσαντας, ὡς Ἰουδαίους μᾶλλον τὴν ἐρμηνείαν συνηγορεῖν, ἢ τοῖς τροφίμοις τῆς πίστεως [...]).”⁷¹ Though (again) he does not name them specifically here, likely as a way of discrediting them further, scholars have speculated that Theodoret probably has the “allegorists” Origen, and perhaps also Eusebius of Caesarea, in view with respect to the former group, and Diodore and his student Theodore of Mopsuestia in view with respect to the latter.⁷² In any case, Theodoret wishes to avoid both extremes of the prior tradition, which he claims explicitly here: “In my opinion, it is for the wise man to shun the extreme tendencies of both the former and the latter [...].”⁷³ This is a claim to offer a more balanced approach than either of these camps, and a way of defending his production of another Psalms commentary. Unlike his predecessors, Theodoret claims that he will adjudicate carefully which prophecies in the psalms are to be applied to events of the past alone, and which to Christ, the church, and the apostolic preaching. Further, his commentary, he claims, “will not involve great labour,” and he will seek to “avoid superfluity of words, while offering to those ready for it some benefit in concentrated form.”⁷⁴ That is, not only does Theodoret claim that his commentary will avoid the pitfalls of extreme literalism or allegory, but it will also be an accessible and straightforward text that will be beneficial to the reader.⁷⁵

Now that he has the opportunity to turn his attention to this text, Theodoret begins by offering a prayer for divine assistance, and he likens himself rhetorically to “the blind” and “the deaf,” as a way of confessing his own inadequacy for the task.⁷⁶ Fortunately, the God to whom he turns for help is the God who “gives insight to the blind, who reveals mysteries [...] enables those once deaf to the divine sayings to hear them, and leads those who live in darkness and gloom to enjoy sight” (cf. Is 42:16).⁷⁷ Yet again, we have here a simultaneous confession of weakness and demonstration of the appropriate humble interpretive posture for the task.⁷⁸

As mentioned above, Theodoret returns to a discussion of previous interpreters of the Psalms as he addresses the reader in the epilogue to this commentary. Here he urges his reader to reap the benefit of his comments, and, in the cases where he seems not to have “arrived at the Spirit’s hidden mysteries (τῶν κεκρυμμένων τοῦ Πνεύματος οὐκ ἐφικόμεθα μυστηρίων),” to refrain from being too harsh with him.⁷⁹

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ I have again decided not to follow Hill’s rather idiosyncratic translation of this clause: “some I found taking refuge in allegory with considerable relish.” Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Psalms*, 40.

⁷¹ *Interp. in Psal.* (PG 80:860; Hill, 40–1). Cf. Diodore’s preface to his own *Commentarii in Psalmos*, of which Theodoret himself was certainly aware.

⁷² Hill, Translator’s “Introduction” to his translation, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Psalms*, 18; Guinot, *L’Exégèse de Théodoret de Cyr*, 276–81.

⁷³ *Interp. in Psal.* (PG 80:860; Hill, 41).

⁷⁴ *Interp. in Psal.* (PG 80:861; Hill, 41).

⁷⁵ As we noted above, the claim to offer a useful text is itself a rhetorical claim, which further contributes to his justification of the written project on which he embarks.

⁷⁶ *Interp. in Psal.* (PG 80:860; Hill, 40).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ In the remainder of his preface to the Psalms commentary, Theodoret weighs in on some of the disputed issues involved with psalm exegesis that had concerned previous interpreters, such as whether or not David can be said to be the author of the entire composition, the extent to which the titles of the psalms have bearing on their interpretation, and the lack of chronological order to the individual psalms as they appear in the collection. For example, scholars have noted the specific commentaries of Diodore, Gregory of Nyssa, and Chrysostom and their discussions of these issues. Theodoret does not take a particularly strong position with respect to any of these issues, but he demonstrates himself intimately aware of the debates, providing his reader with another indication that he is in control of both the content of the Psalms themselves and of the prior tradition.

⁷⁹ *Interp. in Psal.* (PG 80:1997; Hill, 374).

However, he also describes here what it is he has done in the commentary, particularly as it relates to the works of previous interpreters, saying:

what we succeeded in finding we proposed to everyone ungrudgingly,⁸⁰ and what we learned from the fathers we were anxious to offer to posterity (ἃ παρὰ τῶν Πατέρων ἐδιδάχθημεν, τοῖς μεθ' ἡμᾶς προσενεγκεῖν ἐσπουδάσαμεν). The labour undergone was ours; for others free of labour is the benefit we offer.⁸¹

As we saw in the preface to his *Commentary on Daniel*, Theodoret claims straightforwardly that, in addition to providing some of his own comments, he has transmitted what he received from the prior tradition in this Psalms commentary. However, he considers this to have been his own labour, as he insists here, for part of his work in interpreting the Psalms has been to find the best offerings of his predecessors and curate them appropriately for his readers.

So in this commentary, we saw Theodoret present himself in relation to the prior tradition in two distinctive, albeit complimentary ways: (1) he could critically evaluate the extremes of his predecessors' allegorical and historical approaches to the Psalms, thus claiming to present a more balanced approach in his own commentary, and thereby justify its production; and (2) he could also claim at the conclusion of his work that he has transmitted the prior tradition to his audience, balanced and masterful interpretive author that he is.

6 Previous scholars have promised to resolve apparent problems in holy Scripture

We will now turn to Theodoret's very brief preface to his *Questions on the Octateuch*, a text in which he deals with the questions that arise from difficult and unclear passages of the scriptural text.⁸² Here we will see that while Theodoret briefly acknowledges his (again unnamed) predecessors, he moves swiftly to justify his own attempt by means of a claim to having produced it at the request of another. It is therefore his self-presentation as a sought-after exegetical author, and as we shall see, his claim to receive assistance from the divine author responsible for the difficult text, that are most noteworthy here.

In this preface, Theodoret makes a direct statement about previous interpreters of the Octateuch in the opening lines: "Previous scholars (ἄλλοι φιλομαθεῖς ἄνδρες) have promised to resolve apparent problems in holy Scripture (ἐπηγγείλαντο διαλῦσαι τῆς θείας γραφῆς τὰ δοκοῦντα εἶναι ζητήματα) by explicating the sense of some, indicating the background of others, and, in a word, clarifying whatever remains unclear to ordinary people."⁸³ Curiously, in this case, there is no explicit evaluation of the attempts of his predecessors, such as we have seen above, and he thus makes his self-defence for having produced another (rather extensive) such text on the same subject on other grounds, namely, an appeal to an external request for the commentary.⁸⁴ Here Theodoret addresses one Hypatius, likely some kind of assistant to the bishop, saying, "you [...] have pressed me to undertake this task and insisted that the present work would be widely useful (ὠφέλιμον)."⁸⁵ Theodoret indicates that he has allowed himself to be convinced by Hypatius, making the indirect rhetorical claim that his text will be found useful, and thus he claims that he has conducted the

⁸⁰ Here again I have translated ἀφθόνηως as "ungrudgingly" so as to avoid Hill's expression "without stint," which is somewhat obscure.

⁸¹ *Interp. in Psal.* (PG 80:1997; Hill, 374).

⁸² Hill, "Introduction," *Theodoret of Cyrus: The Questions on the Octateuch*, xx–xxi.

⁸³ Hill, *Ques*, 2–3.

⁸⁴ Theodoret proceeds to produce his own *Questions on the Octateuch* despite the fact that previous authors did so, in part because the genre allows one to include the comments of others in the answers to the questions raised of the biblical text, as Guinot has argued. See "Les *Questions sur l'Octateuque*." Of course, one could also include the interpretations of previous commentators in the commentary genre.

⁸⁵ Hill, *Ques*, 2–3.

work even though he is not in good health.⁸⁶ This appeal to an external request, as we said above, serves to provide the justification for his interpretive and authorial endeavours.

The comment concerning his poor health is an admission of his own weakness, a strategy we have seen him use above, and it is this confession of weakness that also prompts him to claim, with great rhetorical force, that his weakness is of no matter, for, in any case, he trusts not in himself, but “in the one who dictated this manner of composition for the Scriptures, as it belongs to him to bring to the fore the meaning concealed in the text (αὐτοῦ γὰρ ἐστὶν ἐπιδειῖναι τὴν ἐν τῷ γράμματι κεκρυμμένην διάνοιαν).”⁸⁷ Not only does Theodoret claim access to divine interpretive assistance here, but due to his weakness, he also performs rhetorically the appropriately humble interpretive posture, as we saw above in several instances.

In this case, however, Theodoret’s appeal to Christ himself for interpretive assistance is particularly apt because “He it was, after all, who in the sacred Gospels presented his teaching in parables (παραβολικῶς) and then provided the interpretation of what he had said in riddles (τῶν αἰνιγματωδῶς εἰρημένων ἐποιεῖτο τὴν ἐρμηνείαν).”⁸⁸ In other words, Christ, who is responsible for the very nature of the puzzling biblical material of his focus, who himself spoke in riddles and parables to his disciples in the Gospels, is the perfect source by which the exegete would explain similarly difficult passages in the Octateuch and to which he rightly ought to appeal. This Theodoret claims to do in order to authorize his work, again making use of fitting scriptural argumentation in his self-defence.

In this brief example, despite his acknowledgement of the endeavours of his predecessors, he considered it sufficient to defend the production of his text with recourse to two rhetorical strategies we have seen him use previously: (1) he appeals to the request of Hypatius for the written exegetical work, and (2) given the difficult nature of the biblical text and to his poor health, Theodoret characteristically expresses his inadequacy for the task, though such an admission allows him, as we have seen in the examples above, to further mount his defence and shape his self-presentation, for he goes on to claim interpretive assistance from Christ, the one who himself composed the difficult text.

7 Conclusion

We have seen that Theodoret crafted his self-presentation in relation to his description of his engagement with the prior exegetical tradition in several significant ways. First and foremost, he presents himself as an inheritor of this rich tradition, which authorizes his extensive use of them throughout his commentaries, and ensures that his reproduction of their exegesis in his own writings is not theft, but simply his right as one belonging to the tradition. Second, we saw in some instances that he took a more critical approach to the prior tradition, in part as a way to justify his own provision of a commentary on the book in question. Even in these cases, however, Theodoret still felt free to make substantial use of the prior tradition of which he is critical, in addition to making his own comments. Third, he takes the opportunity provided by the preface to present his role as exegete at this late stage in the tradition as one who is in control of both scripture and the prior tradition – a role that involves the careful adjudication of a variety of readings from various earlier voices and sources. My focus on Theodoret’s comments about his own exegetical practice as it relates to his reception of his predecessors has highlighted the fact that this fifth-century author understood the role of the exegete to involve, to a large degree, the written transmission of the voices of “the Fathers.” That is, Theodoret claims to understand himself as a kind of curator of the weighty prior tradition. This was not a passive exercise, however. One’s own voice was still required, for the selection process itself was no easy task, and in fact Theodoret claims that it was rather laborious. By this stage, one had to know both scripture and the interpretive tradition thoroughly in order to work critically with both. In fact, he

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 3–5.

seems to intimate that, given his place in the tradition, exegesis requires that one is responsible for the entirety of the prior tradition, biblical, and interpretive.⁸⁹ Fourth, his claim to possess the appropriately humble exegetical posture through his frequent rhetorical expressions of inadequacy in the light of the prior tradition and the difficulty of the biblical texts contributes to the manner of his self-presentation.

Fifth, as part of his self-defence in light of the accusation of his rhetorical critics, Theodoret produced much scriptural argumentation and *exempla*, which served to justify both the writing of his biblical commentaries and his particular manner of working with the prior tradition. Such argumentation with the content of the biblical text itself reinforced for his reader his mastery over the material. He demonstrated that he could pray the words of scripture as he asked for divine interpretive assistance; he could obey scripture's commands to transmit to his spiritual children that which had been passed down to him from his spiritual fathers; and he claimed to work with his predecessors' written works just as the faithful poor worked with the materials of others in the age of the tabernacle's construction, making creative use of the biblical image that authorizes his practice.

Sixth, and finally, Theodoret's biblical commentary prefaces illustrate that for him, a significant part of being an authoritative exegete is that one comments on the biblical text – *vis-à-vis* the comments of the prior tradition – in written form. Several features of the commentary preface point in this direction. Theodoret's frequent appeals to his patrons' or friends' requests for his written comments contribute to his self-presentation as an authoritative exegetical *author* in no small way. In fact, providing written comment on scripture is, he tells us, one of his spiritual gifts, and the texts he produces are spiritually and intellectually useful for his readers, not a little claim to rhetorical and interpretive authority, as we have noted above. Despite the fact that Theodoret has made extensive use of the prior tradition, he argues, he is no less an author, for he has curated and weaved together his sources in such a masterful way that he provides for his reader the best of the tradition in addition to his own comments.

Theodoret's own articulation of his relationship to the prior tradition is of no little import, given his actual historical position between the related genres of exegetical commentary and the catena that developed in the sixth century in Syria-Palestine, the same geographical region in which he operated.⁹⁰ By the fifth century, in the Greek tradition at least, the transition between these two exegetical genres is evidenced in Theodoret's own comments about what the production of a commentary meant. That is, he claims both to provide his own interpretation of a given biblical text and to transmit that which is of value from his predecessors. Guinot in particular has demonstrated thoroughly the great extent to which Theodoret has made use of his sources, though primarily in respect to those instances in which Theodoret indicates explicitly that his interpretation has been assisted by an unidentified "other."⁹¹ Preliminary study of Theodoret's *Commentary on the Psalms* indicates that Theodoret also felt rather free to include large verbatim quotations of his predecessors' comments without indicating that what he presents is not his own.⁹² Such a move is certainly in keeping with his own description of his exegetical-curatorial practice in his prefaces, though it has not been our purpose here to evaluate the extent to which this is the case. It would take a great deal more work to verify that this is his practice throughout his exegetical works, but it is my view that it is no small wonder that some of the catenists of the sixth to ninth centuries found

⁸⁹ I contend that one might fruitfully examine the biblical commentary prefaces of several of Theodoret's approximate contemporaries, such as Jerome or Cyril of Alexandria, so as to determine the extent to which Theodoret's self-presentation as it has been discussed here is simply a sign of the time in which he wrote, i.e. at a relatively late stage in the tradition, and on the cusp of the rise of the exegetical catena.

⁹⁰ I am in part indebted to Peter W. Martens for this observation, which was reflected in a question he put to me concerning a presentation of some work on Theodoret's extensive use of Eusebius's *Commentary on the Psalms* at a recent AAR meeting.

⁹¹ Guinot, *L'Exégèse de Théodore de Cyr*, 631–799.

⁹² Here I refer to my own recent, though still unpublished examination of Theodoret's exegesis of Ps 15 for the conference presentation mentioned above at the AAR's Origen and Origen Reception unit. In this presentation, I built on Guinot's work of demonstrating the degree to which Theodoret made use of the prior tradition, demonstrating that there are many occasions in which Theodoret does not signal his use of a prior source, but simply uses large passages verbatim from a given source, in this case, the *Commentary on the Psalms* of Eusebius. Theodoret's extensive use of Eusebius' psalms commentary Rondeau states explicitly in *Les Commentaires Patristiques du Psautier*, 136.

Theodoret's works so helpful, both in their own right, and as they compiled their own chains of exegetical comments by the Fathers.⁹³

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⁹³ Layton, "Catenae," 227.

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