

# Messianic and Christological interpretation in Iṣō`Dâdh of Merw's Commentary on Ezekiel

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In agreement with his East Syriac heritage, Iṣō`dâdh's commentary on Ezekiel does not contain any direct messianic interpretations. There are, however, interpretations that link the text to Christ or are of importance for Iṣō`dâdh's Christology. As far as Christology is concerned, his interpretation of Ezekiel 1:27–28 is important, where he rejects interpretations related to the two natures of Christ. The interpretation of Theodoret of Cyrus is especially relevant in this regard, but also others, such as Gregory. In addition to this, in some instances Iṣō`dâdh sees a double meaning in a text or a typological reference. These texts receive attention in this paper, with special attention to Iṣō`dâdh's exegesis of Ezekiel 1 and 47. In his interpretation of Ezekiel 1, he looks in the first place at the time of the prophet, for example in referring to different interpretations of the living creatures and their faces, such as the four regions of the world, the four seasons, the four elements or kings of Babylonia, of the Medes, the Persians and the Greeks. It can, however, also refer to Christ, with the four creatures representing the Gospels. The river of Ezekiel 47 is also linked to the dispensation of the New Testament. These texts are studied in detail in this paper, especially in comparison to the interpretation of Theodoret.

## Introduction

The importance of the work of Theodore of Mopsuestia for the interpretation of the Bible in the Syriac churches, and especially in the Eastern tradition, is well known. In this regard much attention has been given to the interpretation of the Psalms in the East Syriac tradition and the relationship of this interpretation with the tradition going back to Theodore. The fact, that the studies of the Psalms in the East Syriac tradition, and especially in the work of Iṣō`dâdh of Merv, is related to a number of important factors, will be discussed below. However, the other parts of Iṣō`dâdh's commentary on the Old Testament did not always receive similar attention. This is especially true of Iṣō`dâdh's commentary on the book of the prophet Ezekiel. Except for the work done by Van der Eynde in the critical edition of this commentary, not much has been published about Iṣō`dâdh's Ezekiel commentary and its place in the history of East Syriac exegesis. This article will make a few remarks on Antiochene exegesis and its influence on East Syriac exegesis, with special attention to Theodore of Mopsuestia and Theodoret of Cyrus. This will be followed by a discussion of the Syriac sources that Iṣō`dâdh could have used, with special attention to Theodore Bar Koni and Isho Bar Nun. This will be followed by a discussion of some text from Iṣō`dâdh's commentary and the possibility of messianic interpretation of passages.

## Antiochene and East Syriac exegesis

It is well known that Theodore of Mopsuestia was regarded as the exegete par excellence by the East Syriac Church. This has been demonstrated quite clearly with reference to Theodore's commentary on the Psalms, with the relationship between his commentary, the East Syriac headings, and the interpretation of the Psalms in the East Syriac tradition beyond any doubt. Lucas van Rompay (1996:612–641, 2000:559–577) has considered the Syriac tradition of biblical interpretation in some detail in different publications, as well as the commentary tradition in Syriac. He gives attention to the Syriac translation of the works of Theodore. Through these translations the Antiochene approach to the Bible becomes well known to especially the East Syrian scholars and the work of Theodore became the dominant factor for their orientation. They followed his approach and his hermeneutical principles and terminology. This resulted in the rejection of allegory, with typology accepted, but strictly controlled (Van Rompay 1996:634; cf. also Ter Haar Romeny 1997:129). The influence of Origen on the allegorical interpretation of the Alexandrian School is well known. He compared a literal reading of the Bible with the bitter waters of Marah (Heine 2007:56). The Antiochenes reacted against this kind of interpretation. However, the approach of Origen and like-minded early scholars was an attempt to reclaim the Old Testament for the church, also in reaction to the literal reading of Marcion (Heine 2007:72–73).

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Van Rompay distinguishes three kinds of commentaries among the Antiochenes, namely the full commentary, the selective commentary and the question and answer type of commentary. The full commentary quotes the complete Old Testament text with comments. The commentaries of Theodore on the Psalms and the Minor Prophets, as well as Diodore's commentary on the Psalms, are examples of this kind of approach. The selective commentary discusses a limited number of passages. The commentary of Išô`dâdh on the Psalms is an example of this kind of commentary. Theodoret's *Quaestiones* (n.d.) on the Octateuch is an example of the third type (P.G. 80:77–858). In his discussion of the work of Theodore, Hidas (1996:550–557) does not make any mention of Theodore's commentary on Ezekiel. In his discussion of the work of Išô`dâdh, Van Rompay (2000:569–570) does also not mention Ezekiel at all.

Theodoret of Cyrus did write a commentary on Ezekiel (P.G. 81:807–1254). A recent survey of his life and work is by Guinot (2006). Theodoret wrote his commentary on Ezekiel between 431 and 441 AD (Guinot 2006:890). In his commentaries he consulted the works of the important Antiochenes, Diodore and Theodore, but he also consulted the works of Origen and Eusebius (Guinot 2006:892–894). His Antiochene background led him to give primacy to the literal sense in his interpretation (Guinot 2006:898–903). His historical approach is made clear in his introduction to the commentary on Ezekiel, where he provides the reader with a summary of the history of the last days of Judah and the last kings of Judah and their different names (Hill 2005:128). He gave special attention to matters of textual criticism, using the other three Greek translations as well as the Peshitta in his work. However, he went further than just the literal sense of the text in his interpretation, accepting frequently a figurative sense (Guinot 2006:903–905). This is a more spiritual sense than the literal. For this he employed typology as well (Guinot 2006:905–907).

In 2001 Leonhard published a very important study on the relationship between the commentaries on the Psalms by Theodore and Išô`dâdh of Merv. This study gives important background for research on the other commentaries of Išô`dâdh, as Išô`dâdh's commentary is of the highest importance for understanding East Syriac exegesis in the 9th century (Leonhard 2001:1). Leonhard (2001:11–13) provided a survey of scholarship on Išô`dâdh including publications of his work. He further presented an extensive discussion of the place of Theodore's commentary on the Psalms among East Syrian exegetes (Leonhard 2001:18–24). Leonhard agreed with Van Rompay that the Syriac translation of Theodore's commentary on the Psalms had to be regarded as an old and faithful translation. It was, however, adapted to the text of the Peshitta (Leonhard 2001:22). Leonhard shared the opinion of Robert Devreesse (1939) that Išô`dâdh's commentary could not be used to reconstruct Theodore's commentary. Išô`dâdh used Theodore to a large extent, but Leonhard's study corroborated Devreesse's conclusions in this regard (Leonhard 2001:23; cf. also Devreesse 1939:xxix). Leonhard's study makes it clear that Išô`dâdh did indeed

use Theodore's work, but not in a uniform way. In some instances he copied portions from Theodore; in other places he abbreviated or enlarged the text. According to Leonhard, in the texts that were studied, Išô`dâdh's dependence on Theodore amounts to about 30% of the total, whereas 38% of Išô`dâdh's comments are based on features of the Syriac, and thus contain contributions that are derived from Syriac exegesis (Leonhard 2001:243–244).

## Išô`dâdh and his sources

As far as Išô`dâdh's commentary on Ezekiel is concerned, it is not quite certain whether Theodore did indeed write a commentary on this prophetic book. It is thus improbable that Išô`dâdh had direct access to the work of Theodore on Ezekiel. Išô`dâdh's commentary provides an important insight into East Syriac exegesis in the 9th century (Leonhard 2001:1). The East Syriac commentaries of the time of Išô`dâdh reflect the complicated relationship between these commentaries and between them and the work of Theodore (Leonhard 2001:19). As far as Išô`dâdh's commentary on the Psalms is concerned, Leonhard is of the opinion that Išô`dâdh reworked the material from Theodore Bar Koni, but perhaps not in the form in which it occurs in the present Scholion. He also reworked Isho Bar Nun's *Selected Questions* (Leonhard 2001:246).

As far as Išô`dâdh's commentary on Ezekiel is concerned, the discussion by Van der Eynde in his edition of this commentary is still the most detailed. According to him, the main characteristic of the interpretation of the prophets by Išô`dâdh is his linking of the prophecies to events before the time of Christ, with a very small number of prophecies being regarded as messianic (Van der Eynde 1972b:vvi). As far as Ezekiel is concerned, the prophecies are mainly applied to the Jewish people during the time of the exile and the restoration (Van der Eynde 1972b:vi–vii). As far as messianic prophecies are concerned, Van der Eynde distinguishes three possibilities, namely direct messianic prophecies, prophecies with a double aim and messianic types (Van der Eynde 1972b:vii–viii). The commentary on Ezekiel has no direct messianic prophecies, three prophecies with a double aim (in Ezk 21:27, 37& 47), while typology occurs in Ezekiel 1 and 44 (Van der Eynde 1972b:viii–ix).

Van der Eynde (1972b:xiii–xx) discusses in detail the authors and works cited or used by Išô`dâdh. It is interesting to note that Theodore of Mopsuestia is not cited on his own. The Greek author cited the most is Theodoret of Cyrus (Van der Eynde 1972b:xvii–xviii). As for Theodore, it is his spirit and principles that guide Išô`dâdh. As far as Syriac authors are concerned, Van der Eynde (1972b:xix–xx) thinks that Išô`dâdh used a source that was used by both Theodore Bar Koni and Isho Bar Nun, and not their works directly. He also made extensive use of the *Syro-Hexapla*.<sup>1</sup>

1. Cf. also Van der Eynde (1972b:xxi–xxii) for a discussion of the commentaries of the two Syriac scholars.



## Selected texts from Išô`dâdh

Although it is true that Išô`dâdh borrowed much material from Theodoret, he does frequently not follow Theodoret's messianic or Christological interpretation of texts from Ezekiel. An interesting example occurs in Ezekiel 44:2. In Ezekiel 44:1–3, somebody takes the prophet to the eastern gate of the sanctuary – the gate was closed and had to remain closed, because the Lord passed through the gate. Only the ruler could go through it. In his commentary Theodoret says that this gate indicates the uterus of the Virgin, through which no one can go except the Lord (meaning Jesus). Išô`dâdh does not follow this interpretation of Theodoret, but says that the East will be honoured and sanctified by the Christians. In some instances, however, Išô`dâdh's interpretations agree with that of Theodoret. In his commentary on Ezekiel 37:4–6, about the dry bones becoming alive, Theodoret connects the vision to the resurrection of all people, quoting from 1 Corinthians 15:52. Išô`dâdh links this passage to the appearance of the Lord and the resurrection of all people. The interpretation is not exactly similar, but it agrees with regard to the resurrection of all people.

For the purpose of this paper, Ezekiel 1 and 47 will receive special attention. Ezekiel 1 has one very good example indicating the proximity of Išô`dâdh to the work of Theodore Bar Koni, where Van der Eynde thinks they used a common source. In his discussion of the four living creatures of Ezekiel 1, Išô`dâdh repeats many elements that occur in the work of Theodore Bar Koni as well, frequently using exactly the same Syriac words. Išô`dâdh says that the four living creatures could indicate the four corners of the earth, the four seasons of the year or the four elements (Van der Ende 1972a:46). Theodore Bar Koni refers to the same three probabilities, but in a somewhat shorter version (without the reference to the earth in connection with the four corners; Scher 1912:301). Išô`dâdh and Theodore Bar Koni also refer to the view of other commentators where the four creatures are linked to the kings of the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians and the Greeks. With regard to the whole vision of the chariot, Išô`dâdh and Theodore say that other commentators link this vision to Christ, with for example the four creatures representing the four Gospels, the charioteer the Messiah, the wings the rapid spread of the Gospel and many more examples (cf. Scher 1912:304; Van der Eynde 1972a:46). Išô`dâdh regularly has a slightly longer text than Theodore, and Theodore tends to use shorter constructions, for example, the genitive without *a*. This supports the idea that they both used a common source, while Išô`dâdh is not using Theodore directly. They both do not accept this interpretation of the four creatures, but subscribe to a more literal interpretation of the different faces, with the lion standing for the wild beasts, the ox for the domesticated animals, the eagle for the birds and the human face not only for the creatures who have rationality, but even for all the creatures of the whole world (cf. Scher 1912:301–302; Van der Eynde 1972a:46).

Ezekiel 1:26–28 is important in the context of this article. Van Der Eynde (1972b:xii) says that the vision of Ezekiel 1 indicates for many duophysites the doctrine of the distinction and the union of the two natures of Christ, but that Išô`dâdh rejected this exegesis. That interpretation distinguishes between that part of the person above the loins and the part below, with the loins being the connection between the two parts. The interpretation rejected by Išô`dâdh becomes clear in Theodoret's comments on verse 28. He says that the divine nature carries within it the human one (P.G. 81:836).

This is the kind of interpretation that Theodoret of Cyrus subscribed to. He says about verse 16 that this vision indicates the concealed and invisible divine nature (P.G. 81:832). This view is explicitly rejected by Išô`dâdh. He says that some commentators have this interpretation regarding the two natures of Christ, but he thinks that it is improbable. The part above and below the loins was clothed in fire and indicates a royal figure that is about to judge the people and the nations. It is the divine Word appearing for judgement (cf. Van der Eynde 1972a:51). He accepts that the figure could point to the incarnate Word, but not the idea of the two natures. Theodore Bar Koni has the same view, but expressed it more briefly than Išô`dâdh. He adds, however, explicitly that the two natures cannot be separated (cf. Scher 1912:304).

Išô`dâdh links Ezekiel 47 to the New Testament and Christ in a very interesting way. He starts with a brief introduction in which he makes this link clear. It is an example of a vision with a double application. He says that the vision of the stream coming out of the temple was meant to encourage the people to keep faith, but that its true fulfilment is only accomplished in the New Testament. While the exiled Jews lost hope, this vision tells them of a possible restoration. It tells them of their prosperity after the return, but for the believers of this time it tells about the strength and power of the preaching of the Gospel (cf. Van der Eynde 1972a:96–97). In a brief statement Theodore Bar Koni also subscribes to this double application (cf. Scher 1912:305). It is interesting to note that there are many parallel interpretations in the works of Išô`dâdh and Theodore Bar Koni to Ezekiel 47:1–12, and especially about the first part of the interpretation in both works. The following can be listed (cf. Scher 1912:305–306; Van der Eynde 1972a):

- The water of verse 1 referring to faith and baptism (Išô`dâdh adds knowledge, doctrine and the grace of the Holy Spirit to the two common references).
- The quotation from John 7:38 with respect to the water mentioned in verse 1 (whoever believes in me, streams of living water will flow from him).
- The stream in verse 5 referring to the force and strength of preaching.
- The water going out to the east in verse 1 referring to the direction from which the Magi will come to adore Christ in the New Testament.
- The altar in verse 1 referring to Christ as the true altar.
- The fact that the prophet was not allowed to cross the stream close to the Temple refers to some kind of mystery (linked to the saints by Išô`dâdh).



- The reference to the joy of the people when they arrive in verse 3.
- The passing through the water three times as a reference to the mystery of the threefold baptism with water.
- In verse 8 both take the word referring to a region as a reference to Galilee and linking it to the disciples.<sup>2</sup>

After these passages the two commentaries go in different directions, with no such major correspondences. In some instances they would also link the vision to the New Testament. For Iṣō`dādh the fishermen in verse 10 refer to the apostles who will carry away many from the other religions. Iṣō`dādh has a long quote from Henana with regard to verse 11.

It is clear from these examples that Iṣō`dādh interpreted the vision of Ezekiel 47:1–12 in the light of a second fulfilment in the New Testament, but he refrains from applying the passage directly to Christ.

It is interesting to note that Theodoret of Cyrus also frequently links this vision with the New Testament, but then mostly in a way not copied by Iṣō`dādh (or Theodore Bar Koni). He quotes, for example, the words of Jesus to the Samaritan women, that the one who will drink the water he gives, will never be thirsty again (P.G. 81:1241).

## Conclusion

It is clear from the examples discussed above that Iṣō`dādh remained faithful to his East Syriac heritage. In his interpretation he gives pride of place to the historical background and historical interpretation of the book of Ezekiel. However, he does from time to time bring the New Testament into the picture, partly for a Christological interpretation, but more often to give a second interpretation of the passage from the Old Testament that has a primary meaning in its historical context.

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<sup>2</sup>This link with Galilee is also found in the interpretation of Theodoret, cf. P.G. 81:1244. In this instance the two Syriac interpreters (or their common source) are probably dependent on Theodore.

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## Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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