Theodore Syncellus and the 626 Siege of Constantinople[1]

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Abstract: The homily on the Avar siege of Constantinople in 626 attributed to Theodore Syncellus shares numerous linguistic features both with Theodore's homily of 623 on the Virgin's Robe and with George of Pisidia's poem of 626/7 on the siege. Theodore and George both celebrate the combined efforts of Patriarch Sergius and the Virgin Mary in saving the city, but Theodore also highlights the involvement of other agents, in particular the patrician Bonus and the young Heraclius Constantine, who were jointly in charge of the city while Emperor Heraclius was campaigning against the Persians. The homily is structured around the exegesis of three Old Testament passages: the promise in Isaiah 7 to King Ahaz about the salvation of Jerusalem; the analysis of numbers in Zachariah 8.19; and God's destruction of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38–39.

Keywords: Theodore Syncellus, Constantinople, Avars, 626 Siege, Patriarch Sergius, Virgin Mary, George of Pisidia, Old Testament exegesis.

The homily entitled 'Concerning the insane move of the godless barbarians and Persians against this God-guarded city, and their shameful withdrawal by the mercy of God through the Mother of God,' also referred to as 'On the Avar Siege of Constantinople,' is commonly attributed to Theodore Syncellus.[2] It is a substantial text, just over 900 lines long, which might have taken almost two hours to deliver. It is cited in all serious di-

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scussions of the 626 siege,[3] but has only received three dedicated discussions in the past 30 years,[4] and these contain some debatable interpretations. A further study is justified.

Theodore, as 'cell-mate' of Patriarch Sergius, was an important cleric at the centre of events when Sergius, alongside the patrician Bonus whom Emperor Heraclius had left in charge of affairs, coordinated the city's defence against the attack in summer 626 by a massive tribal federation led by the Avar Khagan. He was chosen as one of the five distinguished envoys sent to the Khagan on 2nd August, most probably as the Patriarch's representative in discussions.[5] The precise date of the homily is unknown, but it appears from the one mention of Bonus by name that he was still alive (12, 302.29–30);[6] this provides a *terminus ante* for the speech of 11th May 627, the date of Bonus' death (*Chron. Pasch.* 726.16–727.2). Thus, when the homily was delivered, Heraclius was absent on campaign in the East, the Persian war still hung in the balance, and Khusro had not yet been overthrown (February 628). This explains the mood of the speech, which is jubilant with regard to the city after its escape from imminent catastrophe but silent about the empire, with the exception of the islands. It has been plausibly suggested by James Howard-Johnston that the homily was composed for the service to celebrate the city's preservation that Sergius and the young emperor Heraclius Constantine soon held in the Virgin's church at Blachernae,[7] perhaps at the feast for the nativity of the Virgin on 8th September,[8] or possibly during the Christmas festivities.

Our only other information about Theodore is that he is credited with a speech on the Virgin's Robe that culminates in praise for Sergius' return of the relic to the Virgin's church and oratory at Blachernae, from where it had been removed for safe-keeping in June 623 when the Avars overran the Long Walls and looted the extramural suburbs.[9] This work is normally dated to a few months after its removal,[10] and a suggestion that the relic would not have been returned until Blachernae had been incorporated into the city's defences in 627 (*Chron. Pasch.* 726.14–15) is implausible:[11] the speech on the Robe

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[3]   E.g., Barisic 1954; Speck 1980; Howard-Johnston 1995; Hurbanic 2019.

[4]   Olster 1994, 72–79; Peltomaa 2009; Hurbanic 2016.

[5]   *Chron. Pasch.* 721.9. Theodore records the embassy, referring to three envoys by Biblical pseudonyms, but passing over in silence a fourth because only three were named at 2 Kings 18.18. His failure to mention his own participation is often taken as proof that he composed the homily, but this argument is not robust since he does not provide real names for any envoy.

[6]   The various references to Bonus as the unnamed 'custodian of affairs' (14, 303.39–40; 18, 305.16–17; 22, 307.15; 34, 312.22–23) also suggest that he was still alive.

[7]   Reported only by Nicephorus 13.37–40.

[8]   Howard-Johnston 2010, 147; the suggestion of Barisic (1954, 375), accepted by Hurbanic (2019, 8; 29, note 10, and tentatively in *PLRE* III 1277 (Theodorus 159), that it was recited on 7th August 627 at the first annual commemoration of the city's deliverance, ignores the fact that Bonus was dead by then.

[9]   The last section, on the relic's return, was edited with a Russian translation by Loparev (1895); for an English translation of this section, see Cameron (1979), though the erroneous dating to 619 must be disregarded. The full text is only available in Combefis (1648), columns 751–788. References to 'Robe' provide paragraph numbers of both the whole text and the Loparev selection; for the first part the paragraph number and Combefis column are given.

[10]   Thus Cameron (1979) plausibly suggests that the speech was delivered one year after the Avar incursion, probably on 2nd July, the date of the festival instituted to commemorate the deposition.

[11]   Howard-Johnston 2010, 147–148; Howard-Johnston 2021, 284. It should be noted that, although 'Robe' reports that Heraclius prayed with Sergius in the church to the Virgin called Jerusalem, was con-

refers to God delivering the city from the crisis of 623, but says nothing about its even more spectacular escape in 626 when Blachernae was at the centre of events.[12] After the Avars withdrew in 623, Heraclius hoped that there would be peace in the Balkans while he campaigned in the East; there was no reason to delay restoring Blachernae, which might not have taken long to accomplish since the main task would have been to reattach the panels or decorations in precious metals that had been rapidly prized off in the panic of June 623.

There are similarities between the two speeches in terms of language and content that support identity of authorship:[13] appeals to 'eye-witnesses and spectators' (Robe 23/1; Siege 39, 314.1); Sergius' prayers and requests by night and day (Robe 25/3; Siege 13, 301.31–32); 'the gate that from the fact is called golden' (Robe 25/3; Siege 312.40–313.1); everything is achieved in the balance of the divine will, *thelema* (Robe 26/4; Siege 35, 312.20; 39, 314.4); the list of those summoned by Sergius (Robe 29/7; Siege 13, 303.19–20); 'hailstorm,' *chalaza*, used to describe the Avar approach (Robe 29/7; Siege 19, 305.37); Sergius being preceded and accompanied by clergy (Robe 31/9; Siege 18, 305.16); Sergius' propensity for floods of tears (Robe 33/11, 14; Siege 17, 305.4–5);[14] the concluding prayer to the Virgin to safeguard the city (Robe 40/18; Siege 51, 320.25–29); neither refers to Sergius by name but only through the designation of 'chief priest.' The two speeches display some familiarity with the Homeric poems, 'Siege' referring to the somewhat obscure Briareus (*Iliad* 1.396) while the apposite citation of *Iliad* 9.223 in 'Robe' (10, col. 762) suggests a good knowledge of the text. Of course, any orator composing a speech after the 626 siege could have adopted words and images from an earlier speech on the events of 623, whoever its author, but at least there is nothing to suggest that the same writer was not responsible for both.[15]

'Siege' is a significant early witness to events, delivered at a time when matters were still fresh in the minds of the audience, but it is not the earliest. It is surpassed in terms of detail by the exceptional account in the contemporary *Chronicon Paschale*,[16] which probably presents a report that was prepared for Sergius to send to the absent Emperor Heraclius before the end of August 626, since it refers to 'the current 14th indiction'

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sulted by Sergius when the casket had been violated, and acted with Sergius in restoring the shrine (25/3, 28/6–29/7), it does not mention his participation in the ceremony of restoration (30/8–33/11). This would be surprising if he had been there, but accords with the emperor's presence in Constantinople during 623 and departure to campaign in the east in April 624.

[12] As noted by Mango (1994). Effenberger (2016, 323–324), accepted by Hurbanic (2019, 253), finds this argument unconvincing because, whereas in 'Robe' the relic is said to have been given to the city for its safety (29/7), in 'Siege' Theodore does not mention any contribution by the Robe to the Avar defeat, unlike the images of Virgin and Child that were painted on the city gates (15, 304.4–8). The Robe is not mentioned in the later speech because attention is mainly directed to the Virgin's personal involvement as defender, as Pentcheva (2002, 5) noted.

[13] Cf. Wenger 1955 for discussion of some of these similarities.

[14] For weeping as a defining characteristic of Sergius, see Mary Whitby 1998, 267–268.

[15] Wortley (1977, 117) suggests that use of adverbial *pantos*, which appears ten times in 'Robe' but never in 'Siege,' points to different authors, but to my mind this stylistic tic is not sufficient to outweigh the other indications of common authorship.

[16] Translated by Whitby – Whitby 1989. The later account in Nicephorus 13 provides only a little additional information; that in Theophanes 316.16–27 only the uncorroborated statement that Shahvaraz spent the winter at Chalcedon.

(*Chron.Pasch.* 717.2).[17] As such it would have been available for Theodore to consult, if he had to refresh his memory when composing his own work;[18] it is even possible that he had a hand in compiling the report for Sergius. His homily is particularly important in that it preserves some information on actions between Monday 3rd August and the middle of Thursday 7th August, where two pages are missing from the Vatican manuscript of the *Chronicon Paschale*, about 46 lines in the Bonn Corpus edition.

It is also very probable that Theodore was familiar, at least in outline or concept, with the third contemporary account of the siege, the panegyrical poem *Bellum Avaricum* by George of Pisidia.[19] George as a deacon and treasurer, *skeuophylax*,[20] of Haghia Sophia was also a senior figure in the entourage of Sergius; both George and Theodore praised Sergius on other occasions,[21] and naturally made clear his contribution to inspiring the defenders. There are parallels between their language and imagery, which suggest that one influenced the other. Both writers use the word *gegeneis*, 'earth-born,' albeit in slightly different contexts (6, 300.2; George, *BA* 215); they compare the innumerable Avars to the sands of the sea (6, 300.18–19; George, *BA* 174), and to bees around the hive (6, 300.20; George, *BA* 63–65); they call the Khagan a fox (10, 301.25; George, *BA* 113), refuse to describe in detail the humiliation of Heraclius in 623 (6, 301.40; George, *BA* 123–124), and emphasize the continual activity of Sergius, both day and night (13, 303.14–17, 31–32; George, *BA* 137, 190–191); they apply the image of Scylla and Charybdis to the twin Avar and Persian threats (6, 304.18–19; George, *BA* 204–206), and point to the power of Sergius' silence (17, 305.6; George, *BA* 138–140); they note that the Golden Horn can be renamed the Red Sea (24, 308.13–15; George, *BA* 492–497), refer to mankind's five senses (25, 308.36–37; George, *BA* 505–524), assert that the Avars and Persians were in competition to be first to burn the city (37, 313.19–20; George, *BA* 400–401), and conclude with thanks to God as creator of what is seen and unseen (51, 319.40; George, *BA* 519–521), with a final reference to Heraclius and his son (52, 320.20–24; George, *BA* 537–541). Some of these parallels might be dismissed as coincidence or natural usage, and individually none is decisive, but cumulatively they are compelling. What is less certain is which writer influenced the other, and mutual influence between two colleagues cannot be excluded.[22]

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[17]   For this very plausible suggestion, which explains why the report does not highlight Sergius' own contribution, see Speck 2003, 213–214; Howard-Johnston 2010, 45–48. George of Pisidia (*Bellum Avaricum*, hereafter *BA*, 227) refers to Sergius' desire not to be noticed.

[18]   On the other hand, Theodore wrongly placed the Khagan's dispatch of Slav dugouts to transport Persian troops on Saturday 2nd (22, 307.11–13) instead of Sunday evening, which suggests that he did not check every detail.

[19]   Ed. and Italian trans, Pertusi (1960). An English translation by Mary Whitby will appear in *Travaux et Mémoires* in 2022; I am grateful to the author for sight of an early draft.

[20]   For his possible career, see Howard-Johnston (2010, 17–18), which uses information overlooked in *PLRE* III 523 (Georgius 54). In due course George was appointed one of the 12 imperial *referendarii*, and may have become *chartophylax*, keeper of records.

[21]   Theodore in 'Robe,' George in his *Hexaemeron*, for which see Mary Whitby 1995, 125–128 and Mary Whitby 2020. I am grateful to the author for the opportunity to read this in advance of publication.

[22]   Howard-Johnston (2010, 147) suggests that George wrote in emulation of Theodore's homily; in a circuitous discussion Speck (1980, 18–19, 24–26, 52–53), also places George after Theodore, for example on the basis that the Scylla-Charybdis allusion was suggested to him by Theodore, who also provided the outline for the growth of the Avar threat; Hurbanic (2019) prefers mutual influence.

The two works, however, are very different, in part because of the different expectations of a panegyrical epic as opposed to a homily.[23] George unsurprisingly contains little specific information on events, and is primarily concerned to praise the Virgin and Patriarch Sergius, the latter in particular for ensuring the Virgin's assistance. Theodore also celebrates the roles of both the Virgin and Sergius, but highlights the involvement of the absent Heraclius, praises the interventions of Bonus, and specifically refers to actions by the young Heraclius Constantine; he also provides some detail on events, albeit far less than the *Chronicon Paschale*. His prime aim is to argue, through a combination of Biblical prophecies, whose fulfillment is now demonstrated, and an account of the Virgin's intervention in events, that Constantinople is divinely protected, for which proper thanks must be given.[24] Amidst a wealth of scriptural citation, Theodore's speech is structured around three key Old Testament passages: Isaiah 7, where the prophet reassures King Ahaz that Jerusalem will survive the threat from Syria and Israel or Samaria; the numbers mentioned in Zechariah 8.19, as supplemented by Jeremiah 52.12–16 on the number 10; Ezekiel 38–39, where the prophet's pronounces God's judgment on Gog and his armies.[25]

Theodore uses Isaiah to introduce the first half of the speech, with a triumphant proclamation of good news (1) and emphasis on his authority in predicting the Virgin birth (2), before turning to his specific promise to Ahaz (2–5) and its applicability to recent events (6–8). This leads into a survey of the origins of the crisis when the Avar Khagan chose to exploit Heraclius' absence on campaign against the Persians (9–11); the prayers of the distant Heraclius, the imperial children in the palace, and Sergius, as well as the physical preparations co-ordinated by Bonus and the spiritual defences installed by Sergius (11–15); the action on the first three days (16–19); the embassy on which Theodore served and its consequences (20–23); and the fighting up to the ninth day (24–25). With the arrival of 7th August, the 10th day of the siege, Theodore cites Zechariah on the significance of numbers, as supported by Jeremiah on the date of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (26–31). Having established the importance of the number 10 and defended his arithmetic, Theodore recounts the events of the tenth day, first on land and then in the Golden Horn, followed by the intervention of Bonus to prevent a chaotic sally (32–35); the defeated Avars withdraw, followed by the Persians (36–37), and their failure is linked back to Isaiah's promise about the two smoking firebrands (38–39). The third and final section of the speech is dominated by discussion of Ezekiel's promise of the destruction of Gog's invasion (40–47), the longest section of exegesis in the speech, which is concluded with celebrations in the words of Deborah the judge and reflections on the magnitude of the city's deliverance (48–50), an account of Heraclius' reception of the good news (51), and a return to Isaiah for God's promise to defend his city (52).

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[23]   Thus Speck 1980, 50.

[24]   Cf. Speck 1980, 64.

[25]   Theodore extracts particular details from the historical account of events at 2 Kings 16.1–20 (Ahaz's wickedness; names of envoys), but his exegesis focuses on Isaiah's prophecy alone, since that is what he can exploit typologically; at 2 Kings 16.8 Ahaz was criticized for taking the Temple treasures and sending them to Assyria, which might have had unfortunate resonances with Heraclius' use of the Church's wealth to finance his campaigns, as Speck, *Züfalliges* 83, notes.

It should not be a surprise that Theodore had to perform some adjustments to the wording of the Old Testament in order to improve the alignment of its predictions with contemporary events. Isaiah (7.1) refers to Pekah the son of Remaliah as king of Israel, which Theodore changes to Samaria; although this adaptation can be excused on the basis of Isaiah 7.9, where the head of Samaria is said to be Remaliah's son, the removal of Israel from the quotation permits Theodore to avoid the potential awkwardness of having Israel campaign against Jerusalem, since later in the speech he aligns both Israel and Jerusalem with Constantinople. In Zechariah 8.19 the fasts of the fourth month, and of the fifth, seventh, and tenth are said to presage joy and celebrations. The number four had no relevance to Theodore, and by omitting the first phrase from his citation he avoids the reference to 'month,' which might have obscured his application of the numbers to days.

The most significant adjustments come in the Ezekiel passage. In the list of those threatened by invasion and pillage (Ezekiel 38.13), through the switch of a single letter the Charchedonioi merchants (i.e. Carthaginians) are altered to Chalcedonioi (41, 315.16), namely those of Chalcedon on the Asiatic coast of the Bosporus where Shahvaraz based his army.[26] There is a more significant change in Ezekiel 39.11, where the Septuagint reads: 'And it shall come to pass on that day that I will give unto Gog a named place, a tomb in Israel, the mass grave for those who came towards the sea, and they shall enclose the mouth of the ravine.' Theodore changes the Septuagint's *pros tei thalassai*, which denotes the place being approached by Gog's army, to *en tei thalassai* (41, 315.29); this permitted the genitive participle *epelthonton* to apply to those who came to attack, while 'in the sea' locates their mass grave.[27] As a result, Theodore's citation reads, 'I will give to Gog a named place, a tomb in Israel, the mass grave in the sea of those who came.' This change attached the prophecy more directly to the events of 626, namely the destruction of the Slav fleet in the Golden Horn, which was filled with their corpses.

At points Theodore's commentary requires clarification or defence against possible challenges. A simple case is the explication of the instruction to Isaiah to meet Ahaz at 'the highway of the fuller's field,' where 'field' is said to represent the world and 'fuller' one who cleanses (5, 299.35–36), hence an allusion to Christ redeeming the world. Theodore's justification of his numerical exegesis is more complicated. He states that Jewish interpreters connect the numbers with the capture of Jerusalem, grief for which will ultimately lead to great joy. Theodore here refers to the historical destruction of the temple by Babylonians (587 BC) and Romans (AD 70), which provided an appropriate contrast for the escape of Constantinople. Nothing in the speech points to the Persian capture of Jerusalem in 614, discussion of which would have diverted his argument. Theodore's difficulty in this section lay in aligning Jewish lunar months with the Roman calendar, his justification for equating the fifth month of the Jewish year, Ab, with August being that the first month of the Jewish year, Nisan, often coincides with April (28, 309.34–35). The fact, however, that the Jerusalem temple was twice destroyed on the tenth day of

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[26]   Noted by Hurbanic 2016, 283. Charchedonioi in the Septuagint was already a change from the Hebrew's merchants of Tarshish, but at least kept the location in the distant western Mediterranean. If pressed on his change, Theodore might have defended himself on the basis of textual corruption; Theophanes 301.15 provides an example of Chalcedon (*Chalchedonos*) being corrupted to Carthage (*Charchedonos*).

[27]   Slightly later Theodore reverts to the Septuagint's *pros* (41, 315.35–36), though for him the crucial point remains that the mass grave is in the sea.

the fifth month, a coincidence already noted by the Jewish historian Josephus, provides a useful distraction from the weakness of treating August as the fifth month (29–31).

The most extensive argument relates to Gog. Theodore virtually admits that his reference to Chalcedon will be challenged (44), disposing of this with the irrelevant comment that Chalcedonian merchants are not said to have traded with Israel (44, 317.13–14). The prediction that Gog will be buried (Ezekiel 39.11) also has to be explained, since the Khagan survived the failure of his assault. Theodore manages this by ignoring the reference to burial and focusing instead on Ezekiel's earlier statement that Gog will fall along with his bands (Ezekiel 39.3). He notes that in the Bible the verb 'to fall' has several different meanings, including that of falling short of one's hopes, so that the combination of the Khagan's disappointment and the deaths of so many of his followers justifies the proposed interpretation (42, 315.38–316.7).

This strained exegesis is reinforced by the dismissal of alternative Jewish interpretations as irrelevant, 'If the children of the Hebrews might wish to understand the words of the prophet in other ways and not like this, let them understand them as they want' (42, 316.7–9). Theodore challenges doubters to demonstrate an historical occasion when an attack of Israel ended with invaders suffering the disaster predicted by Ezekiel, pointing to the fact that this did not happen either in Titus' capture of Jerusalem or during the campaigns of the Maccabees. The current dispersal of the Jewish nation meant that there was no longer a particular land physically occupied by the people of Israel to attract the attention of invaders and so provide a possible context in which the prophecy could be fulfilled for Jews at some future date (43).

Theodore here sidesteps the challenge posed by the Persian invasion of Palestine and capture of Jerusalem in 614, distressing events that continued to trouble Christians until the evacuation of Shahvaraz's troops in 629 and Heraclius' restoration of the Cross to Jerusalem in March 630: the Jewish disapora meant that Palestine had ceased to be the land of the people of Israel, so the Persian invasion was irrelevant.[28] Jews had rejoiced at the events of 614, for example in a liturgical poem composed for the day commemorating the historical destruction of the temple, which contained an eschatological celebration of the overthrow of Edom (i.e. Rome); this text was written shortly after 614, while the Jews in Palestine still enjoyed Persian favour.[29] Theodore is most unlikely to have known this poem, though he may have been aware of contemporary Jewish views, or how they were portrayed by Christians, so that it was important to assert that Ezekiel's prophecy could no longer apply to the people of Israel in Palestine. Events at Constantinople made the city a valid alternative, and Theodore connects Gog's plan to attack 'a people that are at rest, inhabiting the land in peace, in which there is neither a wall nor bars nor gates' (Ezekiel 38.11) with the Khagan's mistaken belief that Constantinople had been left unprotected by Heraclius' absence, and that its inhabitants were unprepared and unmilitary (45, 317.16–23). This is reinforced through identification of 'the navel of the land' (Ezekiel 38.12)[30] as Constantinople, the seat of empire with a central position between East and West (46, 317.29–31).

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[28] In any case the Persians had not, yet, suffered the fate predicted for Gog and his horde.
[29] Sivan 2000, 287–292.
[30] The Septuagint word is *omphalos*, used of Delphi as the centre of the world.

Theodore's exegesis involves some disagreements with Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament, and the contrast between the historical Israel 'of the flesh' and the contemporary empire is inevitably detrimental to the former. This does not, however, justify characterizing the work as 'clearly a polemical piece of writing focused on supposed Jewish opponents,' with events as 'a mere historical backdrop against which he develops his polemic.'[31] Theodore criticizes King Ahaz for wickedness, but the main accusation against him is his rejection of Isaiah's invitation to ask God for a sign, that sign being a Virgin giving birth to a son called Immanuel, which Isaiah in any case announces (2, 298.30–37); this treatment of Ahaz is no different from that in the Bible.[32] In his interpretation of Zechariah, Theodore is content to sideline Jewish interpretations of the numbers, 'No-one begrudges them receiving and interpreting what was said by Zachariah however they may wish' (26, 309.10–11), since they are still mired in grief. Such a mild rejection of Jewish views is repeated in Theodore's analysis of Ezekiel (42, 316.7–9, quoted above), and at one point Jewish exegetes are cited favourably (44, 317.6–8). The Jews here function as a straw man,[33] whose dismissal may help to dissuade other possible objections to Theodore's analysis. There is also occasional criticism in the speech of Jews for disbelief (5, 299.31) and crucifying God (26, 309.8–10), but these standard comments are not used as an opportunity for sustained abuse that might be expected in an anti-Jewish polemic.[34]

Another aspect of the speech that has been seen to disparage Jews is the alignment of Constantinople with Jerusalem and Israel. The opening prophecy of Isaiah uses the escape of 'old Jerusalem' (2, 298.26; cf. 38, 313.36), or 'that Jerusalem' (3, 299.2), from Rezin and Pekah to prefigure the miraculous deliverance of Constantinople from Avars and Persians. At two points the connection leads to Constantinople being described as 'this Jerusalem' (8, 301.6–7), or simply 'Jerusalem' (38, 313.31);[35] this is the closest that Theodore comes to the concept of Constantinople as 'new Jerusalem,' a term he does not use. The identity of Israel is relevant to the interpretation of Ezekiel, as noted above, since Theodore opens his discussion with the assertion that the words cannot 'be understood concerning the land of Israel, which boasts circumcision of the flesh' (40, 312.25–26), going on to show that campaigns in Palestine by Seleucid and Romans had not fulfilled the prophecy about Gog. Theodore's conclusion is that the land of Israel can only be understood as Constantinople, in particular because 'to be truly Israel is this, namely to glorify the Lord in a true heart and willing soul, and to dwell in the guileless land of Israel is to offer pure and bloodless sacrifices to God in every place' (44, 316.36–40).

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[31] Hurbanic 2016, 273.

[32] Isaiah 7.11–14, with 2 Kings 16 for his idolatry.

[33] Olster 1994, 83.

[34] In 'Robe' Theodore's treatment of the old Jewish woman who was the last in the line of custodians of the relic, is very positive, and he even observes, correctly but surprisingly, that Jews and Christians both worshipped the same God (10, col. 763); Baynes (1955, 247) notes the remarkable tone of this remark.

[35] The discussion of Hurbanic (2016, 277–278) is misleading, since his translation of the passage introduces a reference to 'the present-day Jerusalem' where the Greek reads 'depicting in advance as if in the shadow and shape of the old Jerusalem the miracles that have now happened' (38, 313.35–36).

Theodore has appropriated Old Testament prophecy, but such realignment had always been essential to the Christian message and he does not do this in an aggressively polemical manner. If polemic and arousing anger against the Jews had been his principal objective, Theodore could have mentioned their alleged support for the Persian invasion of Palestine and capture of Jerusalem; he might also have accused them of ingratitude, along the lines that the Jewish community in Constantinople had been saved from rape and pillage by the intervention of the Virgin, the one who fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy, but that even this manifestation of her power could not persuade Jews to recognize their historic error. Theodore's purpose in the speech was positive, to celebrate the Virgin's triumph, a miracle in itself and further elevated as a realization of Old Testament prophecies; recent events are paramount and the exegesis supports this, rather than providing a context for anti-Jewish diatribe.

The primary purpose of Theodore's homily is to praise the Virgin for saving Constantinople:[36] Sergius arranges for her image to be painted on the gates in the land walls, from where they virtually shout at the besiegers that they are doomed to fail (15, 304.8–13); on the third day of the siege she boosts the defenders' confidence when attackers are ambushed near her extramural church at Pege (19, 305.40–306.7);[37] finally, on the last day, through her power the Slav dugouts are destroyed in front of her church at Blachernae (33, 311.17–40).[38] The obvious Biblical prototype was the destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea, and the Virgin is contrasted favourably with Moses: whereas he had to use his staff, she worked her miracle through her will alone, with a nod (33, 311.26–29). Later she is portrayed as superior to Phinehas, who transfixed the Midianite and Israelite with a lance, while She thwarts the besieging armies 'with her voice and will alone' (39, 314.2–5).[39] A tension has been identified in Theodore's treatment of the Virgin on the basis that he wanted her to be directly involved but could not portray her as physically present,[40] but this is unjustified. The Virgin's power and authority are so great that she does not need to be directly engaged as a warrior goddess: she influences God through her intercession and tears, and can use agents such as Bonus or the Roman ambushers to act for her or intimidate the opposition.

There is a marked difference in visibility of Christ and the Virgin in the homily,[41] the latter being referred to over 70 times as Virgin, Mother of God (*Theometor*), or 'the one who gave birth to God' (*Theotokos*).[42] By contrast, there are few mentions of Christ, whose name occurs three times, twice in the phrase 'the mystery of Christ' (5, 299.34;

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[36]   For the Marian context of the speech, see Cunningham 2021, Introduction, and ch.3 'Occasional Homilies' for Theodore; I am very grateful to the author for the opportunity to see the proofs of this book.

[37]   This incident is not mentioned by any other source and was probably of minor importance. On the other hand, it corroborates Procopius' observation (*Buildings* 1.3.9) that the Virgin's churches at Pege and Blachernae were invisible protections for the two ends of the city's land defences.

[38]   Connections between Theodore's treatment of the Virgin and the Akathistos Hymn are presented in Peltomaa 2009.

[39]   Cf. George, *BA* 7 for her acting without arms, in contrast to his account of events in the Golden Horn where he imagines her using bows and sword to defeat the Slav boats (*BA* 448–456).

[40]   Kaldellis 2013, 140–141.

[41]   Hurbanic (2019, 249) suggests that for Theodore Christ and the Virgin contributed equally to the Roman victory, but this is not supported by their respective visibility in the text.

[42]   Peltomaa 2009, 287.

15, 304.16) and once in 'according to the gospel of Christ the God' (17, 305.3). The first prayers of Heraclius (12, 302.31–33) and Sergius are both directed at Christ, although Sergius promptly switches to Old Testament allusions (13, 303.22–24), and the collective prayer of the city leaders refers to 'the people that is called by your name', i.e., Christians, just after invoking Old Testament victories (23, 307.37). Christ is indicated in the initial reference to Isaiah's prediction of the incarnation of God the Word (1, 298.5–7), the images on the gates show the Virgin carrying her son (15, 304.7–8), an *acheiropoietos* icon of 'the only-begotten God' is paraded along the walls (17, 305.1), and the crucifixion is mentioned (26, 309.9–10). Overall, however, God the Son is overshadowed by both the Virgin, who is responsible for Constantinople's deliverance and especially for the massacre in the Golden Horn,[43] and the Old Testament God of Battles, the one responsible for the historical victories of Israel that prefigure the escape of Constantinople: thus Deborah's celebration that is cited immediately after the Avar humiliation is addressed to the 'Lord God of Israel' (48, 318.27–28). Throughout the Virgin is the key divine influence, whether acting by herself through human agents or in the frequent pairing of 'God and the Virgin.'

Sergius is praised as the one who deployed the Virgin's images, and his passage along the land walls is compared to that of Moses on the mountain (18, 305.14–15),[44] his silent prayer resembles that of Moses (17, 305.6–7), while he surpasses Moses when displaying the *acheiropoietos* image on the first day of the siege: Moses had secured victory over the Amalakites by keeping his arms raised, but required physical support as his arms grew feeble, a sign of the weakness of the old law (17, 304.36–305.6).[45] He is also called 'another Isaiah' (3, 299.4), who mediates divine matters to the people as Isaiah did to Ahaz, or 'our Isaiah' (13, 303.16). Sergius, however, does not dominate Theodore's speech in the way he does George's poem.[46] In both works the Virgin is prominent, with the Patriarch being crucial as the intermediary who solicited her favour, but in George's panegyric Sergius comes close to overshadowing even the Virgin, while there is only one anonymous allusion to Bonus (*BA* 314), and to Heraclius Constantine (*BA* 537). Theodore gives more space to other leaders and praises the collaborative effort that resulted in the city's escape. In the comparison with Isaiah he uses Ahaz to create a contrast between the situation of old Jerusalem, which was ruled by a wicked king, and Constantinople where Heraclius is 'a most unwavering image of piety,' who devotes himself to divine observance and encourages his subjects to do the same (3, 298.39–299.1). As a source of stability for his people, Heraclius is compared to the wise kings David and Solomon (11, 302.10–12). At the end of the speech, Sergius is praised as 'an auspicious holocaust' whose prayers and offerings at Blachernae seek the eternal safety of the city (52, 320.10–15), but Theodore's concluding prayer returns to the emperor: he asks that Heraclius may be crowned with victories like David and bestow his piety and orthodoxy

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[43] The only major action not attributed to the Virgin is prevention of the Persians crossing the Bosporus, which is only mentioned very briefly even though it was a significant success (24, 308.1–2).

[44] Comparison of Sergius with Moses was important for George: see Mary Whitby 1995, 125–126.

[45] As noted by Pertusi (1960, 220) George (*BA* 366–373) relocated the parade of the *acheiropoietos* image after the unsuccessful return of the envoys.

[46] Spain Alexander (1977, 223) recognizes the balance between Sergius, Heraclius, Bonus, and Heraclius Constantine; cf. also Speck 1980, 64.

on his son, unlike Solomon who is not to be imitated in this respect, before returning to the text of Isaiah, who is to entreat God and the Virgin to protect the city and people (52, 320.20–29).

Heraclius, though absent, is prominent in the homily. When Heraclius learns of the Avar plans, Theodore assigns him a prayer that, in line with Mosaic Law, asks that God preserve unharmed what had been entrusted (12, 302.30–303.4).[47] Later in the speech, as the emperor awaits news from the capital, the sight of messengers approaching first prompts Heraclius to rush to prostrate himself in a church to the Virgin, and once the good news is announced he kneels down in public to give thanks to God and the Virgin (51, 319.39–320.5). Theodore in fact composed more direct speech for Heraclius than for Sergius, whose main prayer (13, 303.22–30) is balanced by the earlier prayers of the absent Heraclius (12, 302.31–303.4) and that of the imperial children in the Virgin's oratory in the palace (13, 303.10–14).[48]

The collective nature of leadership within Constantinople is clear. After the unsuccessful embassy, Heraclius Constantine, Sergius, and Bonus jointly pray to God for help (22–3, 307.14–40); this is the longest prayer in the text. Sergius takes the lead in devotional matters, but in secular decisions others are involved. Thus it is the 14-year old Heraclius Constantine who grants food to the Avars in response to the Khagan's demand (18, 305.29–33), and he is said to decide on sending the embassy in consultation with Sergius and the Senate (20, 306.20–23).[49] Before the siege Bonus, as the emperor's 'custodian of affairs,' acts on Heraclius' instructions for final preparations (14, 303.37–39), with his energy compared to Joshua's ambush of Ai and Gideon's pitchers and lamps for attacking the Midianites (12, 302.28–30; 14, 303.33–35).[50] Once the siege is underway, the division of responsibility is clear: Sergius traverses the wall in a procession of clergy, presumably leading prayers, while Bonus organizes the defenders, being compared to Gideon marshalling his select force (18, 305.13–18). When the Virgin wishes to prevent the defenders from rushing out to burn the Avar machines, Bonus accomplishes this for her, running around to halt a disorganized sally (35, 312.20–27). The joint leadership is symbolized when Sergius and Bonus lead the people in prayer while observing the Avars' destruction of their own equipment (35, 312.39–313.4).[51]

The city's enemies are brought into this Biblical thought-world primarily through the prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel. In the former the twin threat is represented by Isaiah's two smoking firebrands, though Theodore does not explicitly identify either enemy with Rezin and Pekah, perhaps because neither Syria nor Samaria was a good match for the

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[47] Christ is not named in the prayer, though it is clearly addressed to him.

[48] Olster (1994, 74) accords Sergius' prayer greater prominence by treating it in isolation from the prayers of Heraclius and his children.

[49] In George officials and the unnamed Bonus act as Sergius' collaborators (*BA* 311–325).

[50] By contrast, in George Sergius is referred to as leading the army and Heraclius' orders are carried out by unnamed servants (*BA* 234–245, 294–301).

[51] Olster's claim that Theodore 'laid special emphasis on ecclesiastical leadership' (1994, 74) does not do full justice to the actions allotted to Bonus and Heraclius Constantine; obviously, with the emperor absent, others had to step into his place. Peltomaa too (2009, 292) regards Sergius as 'the main actor of the siege drama.'

Avar threat from the north or west.[52] In analyzing Ezekiel's prophecy Theodore repeats that Gog represents an assemblage of nations, hence the Avar horde (40, 314.20–21; 44, 316.33–35), though when explaining away the fact that the Khagan himself did not perish he does treat Gog as an individual (42, 315.38–316.1).[53] Frequent reference to the destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea aligns Pharaoh with the Khagan, who is once called 'this Pharaoh' (24, 308.13–14), although elsewhere Theodore focuses on the parallel maritime events rather than individuals. The Khagan is also linked with Sisera, another opponent of Israel to be humiliated by a woman (48, 318.22–26), even though there was no Jael to pierce his head with a tent peg.

The most common image for the Khagan is that of an animal, an unspecified wild beast (seven times), a dog (ten times), pig, leech (twice), fox, and snake or serpent (three times):[54] fox and serpent capture his treachery, demonstrated in the ambush of 623, leech represents his constant avarice in draining the empire of gold and gifts, while dog is sometimes qualified as shameless or mad. Pagan mythology is also invoked to characterize the Khagan: his greed would 'have filled even the hands of Briareus and changed the cruelty of Phalaris' (10, 302.1–2), invoking Homer's 100-armed giant and the sadistic tyrant of Acragas as individuals who were difficult to satisfy. The report by the Roman ambassadors most appropriately refers to him as 'a terrestrial Proteus' and 'another Salmoneus' (21, 306.27, 31): Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea, was known for his slippery changes of appearance, while the mythical king Salmoneus challenged Zeus by driving his chariot across a bridge of brass, trailing behind dried leather skins and cauldrons to imitate thunder, just as the Khagan challenges God by advising the Romans not to put their trust in him (21, 306.33–36). Earlier the Khagan had been called the devil's child, by choice rather than nature, one who regarded himself as comparable to God in his mastery of everything (8, 300.39–301.3), while the fact that he was impervious to shame made him worse than demons (11, pp. 301–302).

Fewer terms are used for the Persians, largely because the Khagan is the main actor in the siege. The joint Avar-Persian threat is compared 'poetically' to Scylla and Charybdis (16, 304.18–19), the Persians being the latter.[55] They are referred to as the historical rulers of the East, Chaldaeans and Assyrians (6, 300.14–15), while Khusro is called the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (7, 300.22–23; 37, 313.20–21) and Shah-

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[52]   When Theodore says the two firebrands are revealed, 'the one by the flame with which he set light and the smoke of his fire, the other by the darkness and the dejection of his wicked conscience' (38, 313.28–31), it could be inferred that the former, the Khagan, is Rezin, and the latter, Shahvaraz, Pekah.

[53]   In Ezekiel, Gog is an individual, Gog of the land of Magog, but by Revelation Gog and Magog have become a mass of nations.

[54]   Beast: 9, 301.13; 10, 301.28, 33; 11, 302.13, 25; 12, 302.34; 24, 308.20 (Khagan and Shahvaraz jointly). Pig: 7, 300.34. Leech: 9, 301.14; 10, 302.2. Fox: 10, 301.24–25. Snake/serpent: 10, 301.34–35; 11, 302,18; 13, 303.14. Dog: 6, 300.16; 9, 301.21; 10, 301.28; 18, 305.30, 32, 35 (twice); 24, 308.1; 25, 308.29; 32, 310.40; 36, 313.5; 44, 316.34; 45, 317.23. The Avar army is also referred to as wild beasts (11, 302.21) and swarms of wasps (18, 305.19). In 'Robe' the Khagan is referred to as 'that locust' (25/3).

[55]   George of Pisidia also uses this comparison (*BA* 204–208), but rather than having Scylla and Charybdis threaten Constantinople, or even Heraclius or Sergius, he places in their midst 'the consultant of deceit,' whom Pertusi (1960, 185) glosses as the devil. Although George's deceitful individual might be intended to recall *polumetis* Odysseus, the man of many wiles, it is unclear why Scylla and Charybdis should straddle the devil rather than a person or object in peril.

varaz is Nebuchadnezzar's arrogant general Holophernes (7, 300.28; 37, 313.20–21). The presentation of Khusro is to be expected, while the treatment of Shahvaraz suggests that, when the homily was delivered, he had not yet fallen out with his king and reached an agreement with the Romans. The story of their dispute is preserved in various off-shoots of the lost chronicle of Theophilus of Edessa,[56] but the details vary considerably; whether there is any truth in the story is uncertain,[57] although at some point before late 627 Shahvaraz in Egypt was declining to assist the increasingly desperate Khusro. When Theodore spoke, this was still in the future.

The triumph of Theodore's speech is not without qualification. The crisis had befallen the city primarily because of Roman sins (9, 301.10–13), and Theodore admitted that 'as a result of the multitude of sins we could have obliterated such a great city, beautiful buildings, and distinguished houses, and not been thought worthy to be their inhabitants' (50, 319.15–18). In response to this the Romans must not 'appear barren or lazy or inactive for the glory and praise of the Saviour through good deeds' (50, 319.24–26), with the description in the next chapter of Heraclius' response to the news of victory demonstrating how this is to be done, followed by the account of Sergius' ascetic devotions and prayers at Blachernae (52, 320.10–15). The actions of emperor and patriarch are, again, presented in parallel.

In the concluding prayers first Sergius asks that the city be 'guarded unsacked for all time,' then after quoting Isaiah's promise, 'Thus says the Lord our God. I shall defend this city to save it both for mine own sake, and for that of my servant David' (Isaiah 37.34–35), Theodore requests that Heraclius be crowned with victories and Heraclius Constantine be wise and peaceful like Solomon. In the final sentence he asks Isaiah to intercede with God and the Virgin that 'they save for eternity both city and people who are sinners' (52, 320.15–27). Theodore's speech has been seen as an eschatological text, in the belief that he 'considered the Avar siege of Constantinople as the prologue to the end of the world.'[58] The celebration and prayers of the conclusion, however, do not support this view.[59]

The Roman-Persian war of the early seventh century was indeed a time of heightened eschatological expectations, when new predictions were created, though most of the relevant texts were completed after the conclusion of the war with Persia and the restoration of the Cross to Jerusalem.[60] Gog and Magog were familiar eschatological figures thanks to their appearance in Revelation 20.8, where Satan, on being released from prison, gathers the nations from the ends of the earth, Gog and Magog, for a final cosmic battle, but their eschatological implications represent a development in the centuries between the composition of Ezekiel (c.6th BC) and Revelation (c.2nd AD). In Ezekiel 38–39, the annihilation of Gog's attack on Israel is predicted, after which Israel is to enjoy a period of blessed peace when the presence of God returns to the Temple, as described in the

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[56]   Sources translated in Hoyland 2011, 68–73.

[57]   Accepted, for example, by Mango 1985, 108–109; Kaegi 2003, 148–150; and in modified form by Howard-Johnston 2010, 203–204. Hurbanic (2019, 229–235) dates the breach to a year or so after the siege.

[58]   Hurbanic 2016, 280.

[59]   Hurbanic (2016, 287) regards its triumphant tone as surprising, but that is only because of his assumption that the mention of Gog must be eschatological.

[60]   Reinink 2002.

book's final chapters; this might resemble a Messianic Golden Age, but this is not made explicit in Ezekiel and the defeat of Gog does not necessarily presage the end of times. In his exegesis, Theodore focuses on the words of Ezekiel and is not influenced by the subsequent evolution of the prophecy, apart from interpreting Gog as an assemblage of nations. What is important for him is the prediction that a great horde of invaders, intent on pillage, will be utterly defeated, receiving as reward a mass grave, which Theodore locates in the sea, in line with the defeat of the Slavs in the Golden Horn; he picks out Ezekiel's promise that there will be peace in the islands, since this was the only part of the empire in the east to which this applied in 626/627.[61] After the annihilation of Gog there will be peace in Israel, namely Constantinople, with celebrations for the calamities that have been averted. At the end of the exegesis, Deborah is introduced to lead hymns of triumph, supported by Miriam sister of Moses, in praise that contains no suggestion that the end of the world is nigh.

Theodore's speech was composed for a specific context, relatively soon after the events being described, quite possibly for a collective celebration of the Virgin's triumph. He anticipated that the audience would contain the civic leadership of Constantinople, led by Bonus and Heraclius Constantine, in addition to Patriarch Sergius and his clergy, and ensured that the speech contained due recognition of their individual actions. It is a speech of triumph and a paean of thanks for the divine favour displayed by the Virgin, who has demonstrated her special concern for her city, but it is also an exhortation to the audience of sinners, who must be energetic in glorifying their divine protectors, God and the Virgin, since the emperor still needs God to grant him victories, as He had done to his prototype David. The church, as 'the Deborah of our times' (48, 318.23), leads the celebrations, but it is the inhabitants who, collectively, must ensure the continuation of divine favour. Pure worship justifies Theodore in identifying Constantinople as the Israel of Biblical prophecy, and he looks to the future in requesting that the young co-emperor, Heraclius Constantine, have Solomon's wisdom but avoid his idolatry.

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[61]   Hurbanic (2016, 288) observes that 'Theodore's triumphalism is related not to the empire but mainly to the faith of its inhabitants and their God-Protected city'; in view of the current military situation, he could hardly do anything else.

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