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## The career of Archbishop Theodore

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Until quite recently, our knowledge of the career of Archbishop Theodore has depended almost entirely on the information conveyed by Bede in his *Historia ecclesiastica*, which may be summarized as follows: Theodore died on 19 September 690, aged 88 (*HE* V.8), and hence was born in 602; according to Bede he was a native of Tarsus in Cilicia, was well instructed in secular and Christian literature both Greek and Latin (*HE* IV.1) and was latterly living as a monk in Rome when he came to the attention of Pope Vitalian (657–72), through the recommendation of Hadrian, then abbot of a monastery near Naples but subsequently to become Theodore's companion during his English appointment; and after being consecrated archbishop of Canterbury in Rome on 26 March 668, Theodore arrived in England a year later, on 27 May 669, then aged 67, to begin his twenty-two-year archbishopric, a period described by Bede as the happiest since the English first came to Britain.<sup>1</sup> From even this brief summary it is clear that, although Bede was well informed on the circumstances of Theodore's appointment, he knew virtually nothing about his previous career. However, the recent publication of the biblical commentaries which originated in Theodore's Canterbury school provides new information which makes possible a fresh understanding of the earlier phases of Theodore's career.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *HE* IV.1 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 334): 'neque umquam prorsus, ex quo Britanniam petierunt Angli, feliciora fuere tempora'.

<sup>2</sup> For a reconstruction of Theodore's career in light of all evidence now available, see *Biblical Commentaries*, ed. Bischoff and Lapidge, pp. 5–81; the present essay represents an abbreviated version of that discussion, to which reference should be made on all points of bibliographical detail.

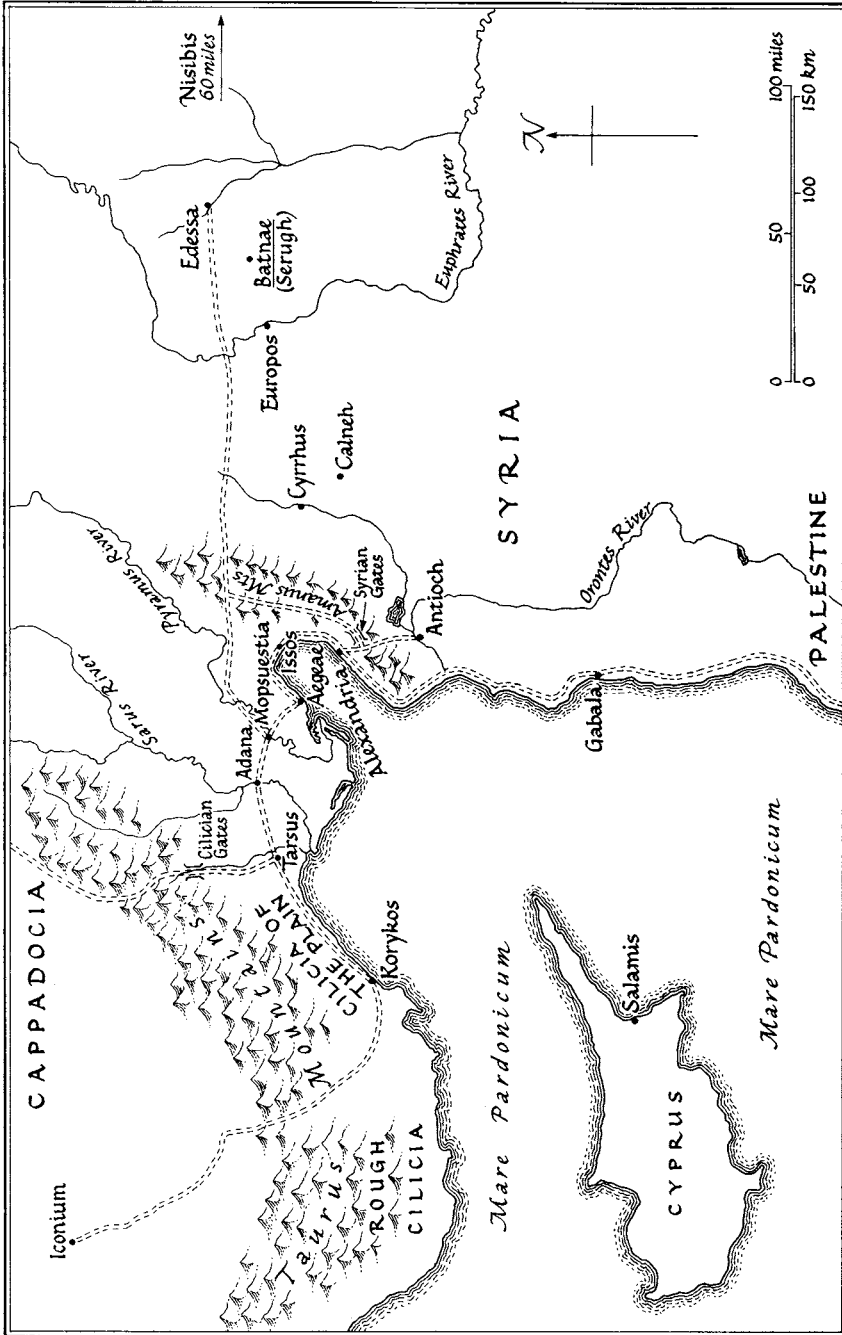


Fig. 1 Cilicia and Syria

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TARSUS, ANTIOCH AND SYRIA

As we learn from Bede, Theodore was born in Tarsus in 602. Tarsus was one of the principal cities of the Greek-speaking diocese of Cilicia (see fig. 1),<sup>3</sup> but although it had achieved considerable prominence in imperial times, little is known of Tarsus in late antiquity, especially during the period from the fifth century to the seventh.<sup>4</sup> We know from various sources of building works undertaken there during the reigns of Justinian (527–65) and his successors;<sup>5</sup> but unfortunately Tarsus itself lies buried some twenty feet beneath the modern Turkish city of Gözlü Kule, and it is consequently impossible to form any visual impression of the Christian city.<sup>6</sup> More important for the present discussion is the fact that no late antique source mentions any school in Tarsus. A native of Tarsus interested in the pursuit of higher education would have been obliged to turn elsewhere, therefore. The largest city near to Tarsus was Antioch (modern Antakya), some 100 miles distant by way of the Roman coastal road which linked the two sites; and since Tarsus was part of the patriarchate of Antioch,<sup>7</sup> it is a reasonable assumption – though it cannot be proved outright – that the young Theodore will have gone to Antioch in pursuit of his scholarly career.

Antioch, by contrast with a provincial city such as Tarsus, was one of the great cities of the Roman empire.<sup>8</sup> We know something of its

<sup>3</sup> See F. Hild, *Tabula Imperii Byzantini V: Kilikien und Isaurien*, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Klasse, Denkschriften 215 (Vienna, 1990), 428–39.

<sup>4</sup> The fullest account is still that by V. Schulze, *Altchristliche Städte und Landschaften*, 3 vols. in 4 (Gütersloh, 1922–30) II.2, 266–90.

<sup>5</sup> See Hild, *Tabula Imperii Byzantini V*, pls. 378–80 (a bridge built by Justinian which is still standing).

<sup>6</sup> There were extensive excavations at Gözlü Kule during the 1930s (published as *Excavations at Gözlü Kule, Tarsus*, ed. H. Goldman, 3 vols. in 6 (Princeton, NJ, 1950–63)); but these were conducted at the periphery of the ancient city, and recovered nothing of relevance to Christian Tarsus.

<sup>7</sup> See R. Devreesse, *Le Patriarcat d'Antioche depuis la paix de l'église jusqu'à la conquête arabe* (Paris, 1945), pp. 151–3.

<sup>8</sup> The fullest account of Antioch is G. Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton, NJ, 1961); see also Schulze, *Altchristliche Städte III* (devoted entirely to Antioch).

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appearance both from archaeological excavation<sup>9</sup> and from the detailed descriptions of a number of its natives, including Libanius and Ammianus Marcellinus in the fourth century, and John Malalas in the later sixth. Antioch's situation at the western gateway, as it were, of the network of trade routes which stretched inland to Syria and Persia and beyond to India and China, meant that it was always a large and wealthy city, and may have had a population of half a million in late antiquity. Antioch at that time was renowned above all for its schools. In the later fourth century the famous rhetor Libanius maintained a school in Antioch, and from the vast corpus of his correspondence we know of the activities and achievements of his numerous students.<sup>10</sup> These students included some who were Christian, and it is probable that Libanius taught two of the most important Christian exegetes of the patristic period, namely John Chrysostom (d. 407)<sup>11</sup> and Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428).<sup>12</sup> However, John and Theodore were both subsequently associated with the Antiochene school of Diodore, later bishop of Tarsus (d. c. 394).<sup>13</sup> In their biblical studies, Diodore and his followers practised a type of exegesis which is appropriately described as 'literal': in contrast with Alexandrine exegetes such as Origen, who were interested above all in extracting allegorical or symbolic meaning from the biblical text, the Antiochenes attempted to elucidate the exact sense of the text by repair to techniques which we would today describe as 'philological'.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, the Antiochene exegetical method lay in the careful comparison of variant versions of the transmitted biblical text (in Hebrew and Greek) and in consultation of relevant ancillary aids (such as ancient etymological lexica) and disciplines, such as

<sup>9</sup> See *Antioch on the Orontes*, ed. G. W. Elderkin, R. Stillwell *et al.*, 5 vols. in 6 (Princeton, NJ, 1934–72). On the churches of Antioch, see (briefly) R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 4th ed. rev. S. Curcic (Harmondsworth, 1986), pp. 75–8.

<sup>10</sup> See P. Petit, *Les Etudiants de Libanius* (Paris, n.d. [1956?]), pp. 17–40 and *passim*, as well as D. S. Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch: a Study of Early Christian Thought in the East* (Cambridge, 1982).

<sup>11</sup> A clear introduction to John Chrysostom is given by F. M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon. A Guide to the Literature and its Background* (London, 1983), pp. 143–59.

<sup>12</sup> See esp. R. Devreese, *Essai sur Théodore de Mopsueste*, Studi e testi 141 (Vatican City, 1948), and Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, pp. 199–213.

<sup>13</sup> Young, *ibid.*, pp. 191–9.

<sup>14</sup> On Antiochene exegesis, see the excellent study by C. Schäublin, *Untersuchungen zu Methode und Herkunft der antiochenischen Exegese*, Theophaneia 23 (Cologne and Bonn, 1974), and the brief discussion (with bibliography) in *Biblical Commentaries*, ed. Bischoff and Lapidge, pp. 243–5.

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philosophy, rhetoric and medicine. This approach is seen not only in the surviving exegetical fragments of Diodore and the numerous biblical commentaries on both Testaments by Theodore of Mopsuestia, but also throughout the huge corpus of homiletic and exegetical writing of John Chrysostom. The same 'philological' approach is to be seen in later adherents of the Antiochene school, such as Theodoret of Cyrhus (d. 466),<sup>15</sup> Severian of Gabala (d. c. 408)<sup>16</sup> and the scholarly layman who is known as Cosmas Indicopleustes.<sup>17</sup>

The first point relevant to our reconstruction of Theodore's early career is the fact that the Canterbury biblical commentaries are wholly Antiochene in orientation.<sup>18</sup> They reveal a persistent concern with explaining the literal sense of scripture: the nature of the flora, fauna, minerals and precious stones mentioned in the Bible; Hebrew customs; the topography of the Holy Land; the appurtenances of everyday life as described in the Bible. The Vulgate (Latin) text is frequently elucidated by reference to the earlier Septuagint (Greek) version. Problematic expressions in the biblical text are approached by frequent appeals to etymology, whether in Syriac, Greek or Latin. The ancillary disciplines of philosophy, rhetoric and medicine are often the sources of explanations. Furthermore, Antiochene exegetes are frequently cited as authorities for the interpretation of individual passages. John Chrysostom, for example, is cited by name seven times in the Canterbury biblical commentaries.<sup>19</sup> Cosmas Indicopleustes is quoted verbatim under the title *Christianus historiographus*.<sup>20</sup> Although they are not named, the writings of Theodoret of Cyrhus and Severian of Gabala were very probably drawn upon in the Canterbury commentaries, as also, possibly, were writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia.<sup>21</sup> On the evidence of the Canterbury biblical commentaries, then, there can be no

<sup>15</sup> See Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, pp. 265–89, as well as G. W. Ashby, *Theodoret of Cyrhus as Exegete of the Old Testament* (Grahamstown, 1972), pp. 17–55.

<sup>16</sup> See J. Zellinger, *Die Genesishomilien des Bischofs Severian von Gabala*, *Alttestamentliche Abhandlungen* 7.1 (Münster, 1916).

<sup>17</sup> See W. Wolska, *La Topographie chrétienne de Cosmas Indicopleustes: théologie et science au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1962), pp. 40–61, and Devreesse, *Essai sur Théodore de Mopsueste*, pp. 273–4.

<sup>18</sup> *Biblical Commentaries*, ed. Bischoff and Lapidge, pp. 245–9.

<sup>19</sup> PentI 28 and 44; Gn-Ex-EvIa 22; EvII 3, 41, 87 and 97. See discussion by Bischoff and Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries*, pp. 214–16.

<sup>20</sup> PentI 91; see *Biblical Commentaries*, ed. Bischoff and Lapidge, pp. 208–11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 222–4.

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doubt that Archbishop Theodore was thoroughly trained in Antiochene exegesis. It is not possible to affirm that such training could have been received at Antioch and nowhere else, for the writings of the great Antiochene exegetes were known throughout the Greek world; furthermore, many of these writings were available in Syriac (see below, pp. 36–48). However, we should recall that Tarsus lay within the patriarchate of Antioch and that Antioch was the nearest large city to Tarsus. Although there was a distance of two centuries' time between the florescence of the Antiochene exegetical school in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, and the early seventh century, when the young Theodore was pursuing his biblical studies, there is nevertheless sufficient evidence to indicate that schools were still flourishing in Antioch in the late sixth and early seventh centuries: John Malalas (d. 578) composed his *Chronographia* there, probably in the 570s;<sup>22</sup> Evagrius Scholasticus (d. c. 594) composed his *Historia ecclesiastica* there in the 590s;<sup>23</sup> and in the early decades of the seventh century John of Antioch produced a world chronicle (based partly on that of John Malalas) which extended from Adam to AD 610.<sup>24</sup> There is no doubt, therefore, that there were active schools and scholars in Antioch during the period of Theodore's youth; and given the Antiochene orientation of the Canterbury biblical commentaries, it is a reasonable hypothesis that he received some part of his early training there.

At the time of Theodore's (presumed) sojourn in Antioch, Syria was a thoroughly bilingual country in which both Greek and Syriac were spoken.<sup>25</sup> Many of the church fathers mentioned in previous paragraphs were bilingual: Theodore of Mopsuestia and Theodoret of Cyrillus were native speakers of Greek who knew Syriac,<sup>26</sup> for example, and John Malalas was a native speaker of Syriac who learned to write in Greek.<sup>27</sup> And just as there was a rich Syrian tradition of patristic literature in

<sup>22</sup> See B. Croke, 'Malalas, the Man and his Work', in *Studies in John Malalas*, ed. E. Jeffreys, B. Croke and R. Scott, *Byzantina Australiensia* 6 (Sydney, 1990), 1–25.

<sup>23</sup> P. Allen, *Evagrius Scholasticus the Church Historian*, *Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, Etudes et documents* 41 (Louvain, 1981).

<sup>24</sup> H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1978) I, 326–8.

<sup>25</sup> See G. Haddad, *Aspects of Social Life in Antioch in the Hellenistic-Roman Period* (New York, n.d. [1952?]), pp. 104–21.

<sup>26</sup> For Theodore of Mopsuestia, see L. Pirot, *L'Oeuvre exégétique de Théodore de Mopsueste* (Rome, 1913), pp. 95–6; for Theodoret, see Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, p. 267.

<sup>27</sup> Croke, 'Malalas, the Man and his Work', p. 3.

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Greek, so there was a rich tradition in Syriac, as Sebastian Brock demonstrates in a subsequent chapter (below, pp. 48–9). And whereas the focal point of Greek Christianity in Syria was Antioch, so that of Syriac Christianity was Edessa (modern Sanliurfa in southeastern Turkey), which lies on a fertile plain some 150 miles inland from Antioch, across the Euphrates river.<sup>28</sup> Like Antioch, Edessa was situated on important eastern trade routes; also like Antioch, it was a wealthy city full of lavish churches, which are known both from excavation and from written sources.<sup>29</sup> Many of the most important Syriac church fathers lived in Edessa. In particular, Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), perhaps the greatest of all Syriac exegetes, spent much of his life in Edessa.<sup>30</sup> Although scholarly tradition at Edessa underwent various vicissitudes, it is clear that an important school still existed there in the time of Theodore's youth, for the renowned exegete Jacob of Edessa (c. 640–708) was active there in the generation after Theodore.<sup>31</sup> The point is worth stressing, for in the Canterbury biblical commentaries we find an observation concerning Edessa which appears to record a first-hand experience. With regard to the 'cucumbers and melons' mentioned in Numbers XI.5, the explanation is given that large cucumbers are called *pepones*, and that in the city of Edessa they grow so large that a camel could scarcely carry two of them:

*cucumeres et pepones unum sunt, sed tamen cucumeres dicuntur pepones cum magni fiunt; ac saepe in uno pepone fiunt .xxx. librae. In Edissia ciuitate fiunt ut uix potest duo portare unus camelus.*

(PentI 413)

*cucumbers and melons* are the same thing, but cucumbers are called *pepones* when they grow large, and often one *pepon* will weigh thirty pounds. In the city of Edessa they grow so large that a camel can scarcely carry two of them.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> See, in general, J. B. Segal, *Edessa, 'the Blessed City'* (Oxford, 1970).

<sup>29</sup> See A. Baumstark, 'Vorjustinianische kirchliche Bauten in Edessa', *Oriens Christianus* 4 (1904), 164–83; A.-M. Schneider, 'Die Kathedrale von Edessa', *Oriens Christianus* 36 (1941), 161–7; and A. Palmer and L. Rodley, 'The Inauguration Anthem of Hagia Sophia in Edessa', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 12 (1989), 117–69.

<sup>30</sup> The best general introduction is S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: the Spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem* (Rome, 1985); see also Brock's discussion below, p. 40.

<sup>31</sup> On scholarly tradition at Edessa, see E. R. Hayes, *L'Ecole d'Edesse* (Paris, 1930); on Jacob, see A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur* (Bonn, 1922), pp. 248–56, and discussion by Brock, below, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> *Biblical Commentaries*, ed. Bischoff and Lapidge, pp. 374–5, with discussion at p. 35.

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We can scarcely recover the reasons which led the young Theodore to Edessa; but it is interesting to note that the Canterbury biblical commentaries reflect an awareness of Syriac language and patristic literature.<sup>33</sup> At three points in the commentaries, biblical expressions are explained in terms of Syriac etymology (EvII 58, 70 and 72). Ephrem the Syrian is once quoted by name (EvII 29), even though the quotation in question comes not directly from Ephrem's original Syriac but from an intermediary Greek translation. On other occasions, however, explanations in the Canterbury biblical commentaries have striking parallels in Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis*, a work which is not known to have been translated into Greek, as well as in the Syriac *Book of the Cave of Treasures*, a sixth-century exegetical compilation. None of this need imply that Theodore had a profound knowledge of Syriac and its patristic literature; but in light of the above-quoted remark concerning Edessa, there is no need to doubt that he had travelled in Syria, both to Antioch and to Edessa, and that he had some knowledge not only of Antiochene biblical exegesis but also perhaps an awareness of Syriac exegesis. By carrying such awareness to far-distant England, as he was later to do, Theodore imported perspectives and experiences which were unique to the western world in the seventh century.

#### THE PERSIAN AND ARAB INVASIONS OF SYRIA

The period of Theodore's study in Syria, which probably fell during the second or third decade of the seventh century, witnessed violent political upheavals which have left their mark on the Near East down to the present day.<sup>34</sup> Theodore can scarcely have been unaffected by them. At this time the Byzantine empire was under assault on all fronts, and the fact that Emperor Heraclius (610–41) was occupied fully by Avar/Slav invaders to the north enabled the Persian king Chosroes II (590–628) to invade Syria and Palestine from the south-east. Because the Byzantine armies were engaged on other frontiers, Chosroes II was able to conquer Antioch in 613

<sup>33</sup> See detailed discussion *ibid.*, pp. 233–40.

<sup>34</sup> For the historical circumstances, see in general G. Ostrogorsky, *Geschichte des byzantinischen Staates*, 3rd ed. (Munich, 1973), pp. 73–103; J. Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom* (London, 1989), pp. 186–204 (the Persians) and 211–13 (Islam); and J. F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: the Transformation of a Culture* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 41–53.



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and Damascus and Jerusalem in the following year. (The conquest of Jerusalem led to the capture of one of the most precious – and symbolic – relics in Christendom, the remnant of the True Cross.) Shortly after taking Antioch, the Persian armies moved northwards and occupied Tarsus; further advance was only halted by the nearly impenetrable Taurus Mountains which loom behind Tarsus. At the time Tarsus was captured the young Theodore will have been 11 or 12 years old. The Persian occupation of Syria will therefore have formed the background to his childhood and earliest phases of schooling. It is thus interesting to find several observations on Persian culture in the Canterbury biblical commentaries.<sup>35</sup> Thus at one point (PentI 206) it is said that the Persians, like the Byzantine Greeks, kept as eunuchs only those who had been castrated; elsewhere, at PentI 303, the ‘cups’ (*scyphos*) mentioned in Exodus XXV.31 are explained as being ‘not round like a saucer, but long and angular; the Persians still use them for drinking at feasts’. The Persians did indeed use long, horn-shaped vessels similar to Greek *rhyta*,<sup>36</sup> but the interesting question is when and in what circumstances the young Theodore was able to observe Persians drinking at a feast.

The Persian assault on Syria and Palestine was a problem which *inter alia* occupied Heraclius for many years; but after a series of exhausting campaigns, the Byzantine army finally defeated the Persians at Nineveh in 627 (Chosroes II was murdered by his own men the following year) and succeeded in recovering the relic of the True Cross. But the long and exhausting campaigns left the Byzantine army unprepared for the Arab threat which arose suddenly in the 630s; by the same token, the Persian occupation had left the cities of Syria and Palestine without the fully functioning municipal defences which had been in effect before the Persian invasions.<sup>37</sup> The Arabs had hitherto existed as a loose confederation of nomadic tribes, whose characteristic form of warfare was the viking-style raid; but through the efforts of Muhammad (d. 632) they began to achieve some religious and political cohesion; and this, in combination with the strategies of a succession of brilliant military commanders and the weakened defences of Syria and Palestine, allowed an astonishingly rapid

<sup>35</sup> See *Biblical Commentaries*, ed. Bischoff and Lapidge, pp. 8–9.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 478 (comm. to PentI 303).

<sup>37</sup> See esp. W. E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 47–51 and *passim*, and F. M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, NJ, 1981), pp. 91–155.

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expansion of Arab strength, with the result that the Arabs won a number of important battles there in 633–4. The decisive battle took place at Yarmuk (east of the Sea of Galilee) in 636, when the Arab armies comprehensively defeated a massive Byzantine army (said to have numbered 100,000).<sup>38</sup> Following this defeat, Heraclius in effect abandoned Syria and Palestine to the Arabs: Jerusalem and Antioch were taken in 637, and Tarsus soon after (once again the Taurus Mountains halted further advance towards Constantinople). One result of the Arab conquest was that large numbers of Palestinian and Syrian monks fled as refugees from the Arab occupation: to North Africa, to Sicily and Italy, and to Constantinople. Christian writers from these areas, such as Sophronius, the patriarch of Jerusalem who had the sad office of relinquishing that city to the Arabs, describe vividly the terror which the Arabs inspired among the natives of those regions.<sup>39</sup> The experience of such terror may possibly lie behind an acerbic comment in the Canterbury biblical commentaries concerning the ‘Saracens’ or Arabs:<sup>40</sup>

sic fuit genus eius Saracenis, numquam cum omnibus pacem habentes sed semper contra aliquos certantes.

(PentI 104)

thus Ishmael’s race was that of the Saracens, a race which is never at peace with anyone, but is always at war with someone.

We later find Theodore at Constantinople (see below), and it is a reasonable assumption that he fled at this point as a refugee from the invading Arab armies – if he had not fled earlier from the Persian occupation of Syria. The absolute *terminus ante quem* for his departure from his homeland may reasonably be given as 637, when he will have been 35 years old.

<sup>38</sup> See the comprehensive discussion by Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, pp. 112–46.

<sup>39</sup> See D. J. Constantelos, ‘The Moslem Conquests of the Near East as revealed in the Greek Sources of the Seventh and Eighth Centuries’, *Byzantion* 42 (1972), 325–57; on the reaction of Sophronius, see esp. p. 332.

<sup>40</sup> *Biblical Commentaries*, ed. Bischoff and Lapidge, pp. 324–5 (with comm. at pp. 455–6). On early western perceptions of the Arab expansion, see the excellent study by E. Rotter, *Abendland und Sarazenen. Das okzidentale Araberbild und seine Entstehung im Frühmittelalter* (Berlin and New York, 1986), who does not (understandably) make reference to the Canterbury biblical commentaries, the evidence of which predates all of the western sources discussed by him.