Collecting and Arranging Knowledge:
Theodore of Mopsuestia in Late Antique Compilations

Rector Magnificus, Deans of the Faculties of Theology and Humanities, Colleagues, Friends, and Family, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The key word which serves as the overarching theme of this joint gathering is knowledge. Professor ter Haar Romeny has highlighted several aspects of this intriguing topic, as these can be observed and studied over a considerable expanse of human history and civilisation from Mesopotamia to the early Byzantine period. Now I shall take this opportunity to discuss more specifically the problematics of knowledge in Late Antiquity, while also drawing comparisons from our own era, which we deem to be the era *par excellence* of the boundless eruption of electronically produced knowledge and information technology.

Knowledge as a Survival Mechanism and as a Means of Social Control

The aspiration, or shall we rather say, the need to amass knowledge, to store it, and to retrieve it intelligently, is as old as humanity itself. Knowledge is useful in manifold ways: it is advantageous to humans (and animals) in their Darwinist urge to survive and it feeds the darkest Freudian passions to gain more power and control over others. To be sure, how we gather knowledge and how we choose to keep or dispense with it is not only a psychological, but also a social phenomenon. Still influenced by Foucault's seminal work from the late 1960s, where knowledge is identified as a form of social control, many sociologists tend to associate knowledge with social activities which involve, or stem from, struggle, competition, and even violence. However, there is something in knowledge, or more precisely, in the process of collecting and retrieving it, which is highly sociable and is geared towards increasing, rather than decreasing, one's pool of friends and allies. Much like monkeys who are busy grooming their peers' fur, we, too, are constantly busy retrieving knowledge from our peers and redistributing it. The way we handle knowledge, then, depends very much on the context in which we are operating: a top-down relationship suggests that power and the exercise of authority are at play, when information is treated as a lever by which people can be controlled. A peer relationship, on the other hand, suggests that knowledge and information are treated more like a commodity which is being traded for other commodities: more information, material gains, or emotional gains, such as love and esteem. Exercising social control via knowledge is something which is rightly associated with centralised, if not, tyrannical regimes. Surprisingly enough, in Late Antiquity, statements about the approved type of knowledge are quite rare, but they do exist, for example, in the Emperor Justinian's *Novel 42*, where the emperor reiterates the Emperor Constantine's ban on the work of the pagan philosopher Porphyry, predominantly his *Against the Christians*, alongside a string of Christian 'heretics' (Magdalino 2013).

Collecting, Arranging, and Distributing Knowledge as an Ongoing Activity

Coming back to the theme discussed earlier by Professor Ter Haar Romeny, whatever our purpose in controlling or sharing knowledge might be, our social context plays an important role

in determining what the individual might remember or forget (Harris *et al*. 2008; Sutton *et al.* 2010). In historical research it is more common to talk about mimesis, memory and such concepts which presuppose action, consciousness, and deliberate selection and choice making; forgetting, on the other hand, is a non-tangible factor, which is difficult to quantify, measure, and hence analyse.

As individuals, we are engaged in a cognitive process which is highly complex and is very often carried out subconsciously. Most typically of the age of electronic information, we are constantly bombarded with information which needs to be somehow stored in our brains. In some cases, the distilled information is also reproduced in a tangible medium (a text, an image, a musical piece). In recent years, researchers talk about the 'Google Effect' (Wegner *et al.* 2013). The term describes the effect of the instant availability of information on our ability, or will, to remember. To be sure, in most cases, the flow of electronic information does not make any mark on us, and the ease in which we retrieve information also reflects the ease in which we forget it. Could we possibly explain choices made in Antiquity in the same way? Leaving aside the fact that we live in a markedly digital environment, the cognitive processes may be assumed to be the common ground between us and our predecessors.

The Recipe Book as the Product of a Complex Cognitive Process

When we engage ourselves in knowledge acquisition, its processing and its dissemination, we actually engage in manifold forms of discourse analysis (both textual and visual) all the time and almost incessantly. To take an example of such activity, in the process of arranging my recipes, it became necessary for me to make a sequence of decisions, which I would normally be unaware of, if it were not for the occasion of having to think and write about the subject. We shall see that in the process of selecting information for the purpose of rearranging it, we are going through several stages regardless of the intended final product (and I am now highlighting the textual product, though it might as well be a visual product), be it a recipe book, an encyclopaedia, an anthology, or a student's text book. What I did was to handle multiple sources with the aim of creating a new corpus of knowledge (in this case, my recipe book), while applying a variety of conscious and subconscious *criteria*.

In many instances, we have to work with or around pre-designed, or pre-imposed, *classification structures*, whose existence is bound to affect our criteria. More specifically, I had a choice of whether to use a plain binder or a pre-designed binder, containing specialised compartments or sub categories (entrees, mains, desserts, baking and pastry) which, are in fact (pre-imposed) classification structures. Next there is the question of how to classify: some dishes fit both categories (e.g. desserts which are also pastry). If I encounter too many difficulties in handling the pre-existing classification structures, I may opt for a default action and just choose a binder without the pre-designed compartments, thus establishing my own categories. There are other factors which, however technical they may be, are nonetheless crucial to the process and to the shaping of the end product. Such a factor is space which, with the exception, perhaps, of the electronic vessels created by the web, is always limited. The problem of space necessitates making conscious decisions regarding the type of knowledge which needs to be kept in or out. In this situation, we have several default actions at our disposal:

discarding knowledge, or creating more space. Why did I take the example of arranging a private collection of knowledge? Because whether it is 'important knowledge' arranged a priori for posterity, or just something the individual creates for private use, we may be right to assume that in both cases, the cognitive processes are similar.

Knowledge: How Do We Handle it in Comparison with Our Predecessors

We are used to thinking about ourselves as the products of modernity, internet and computer literates, who are enjoying a practically limitless flow of information. In some way, it is correct that we are exposed to information but whether this information always translates itself into knowledge is a question of a different calibre (Poundstone 2016). We should leave aside for the moment the inherent tension between information and knowledge and the magical process in which, in our own eyes, the information cocoon transforms itself into the knowledge butterfly. To be sure, conceptualising and handling knowledge is not something new to our generation. We may even imagine that our self-identity as all-knowers and as a highly sophisticated breed is not unique to us either. Those who laid claims to cultural superiority, such as the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt, the ancient Israelites, the Babylonians, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Incas, the subjects of the African kingdom of Benin, the ancient Indians and the ancient Chinese, have always promoted themselves via the prism of their supposedly immense knowledge and intellectual advancement. So, feeling powerful and unique because of knowledge and feeling the need to arrange it for the purposes mentioned earlier on (social control, posterity, teaching and dissemination) are obviously entirely subjective properties, as we have learnt in more recent history from the public endorsement in the United States—and the equally intensive rejection—of Hirsch's famous list from the 1980s of the facts which 'every American needs to know'.

Late Antiquity: A Post-Classical Age of Information?

Christians in Late Antiquity had all the reasons to feel culturally superior and religiously triumphant. The period of Late Antiquity, being an artificial historical demarcation, is difficult to define. Yet, we might be satisfied for the moment to locate it within the Mediterranean basin and the East, beginning with the reign of the Emperor Constantine (272–337 CE) and running through the Patristic 'golden age' (namely the period between the fourth and the fifth centuries, when Christian society gained unparalleled political, religious, and cultural supremacy under the spiritual and practical leadership of key intellectual and religious figures, also recognised as 'the Fathers of the Church'). When venturing into the oiled machine of the Byzantine state, that is the Roman Empire in the East, with the city of Constantinople, now Istanbul, at its heart, we see that Christians had long gotten accustomed to their superior position, despite considerable military and political challenges. In the course of the years, their realm had been subjected to serious threats: the Sassanians, or Persians, continued to press hard from the eastern frontier, and their attacks culminated in the temporary occupation of Jerusalem in 614. Moreover, the fate of the western part of the Empire, including its capital Rome, could not have evaded the attention and concern of fellow Christians living in the east, when in 476 Rome fell into the hands of the Visigoths. Finally, invasions from the Arab peninsula, which started as a trickle, became a serious threat to Christian rule in the Mediterranean basin, when

in the first part of the seventh century, Egypt and Palestine, including Jerusalem, succumbed to Arab rule. The collapse of the Christian Byzantine Empire in the east was not sudden and spanned centuries until the enormous Christian Byzantine Empire was practically pushed into the Anatolian Peninsula. Nevertheless, throughout all those centuries, Christians, being in their own eyes the legal successors of the 'chosen people', never lost the conviction regarding their unique position as *verus Israel*. Within this largely prosperous and intellectually driven community, the Christians, predominantly those living in the great urban centres of the time, were constantly engaged in the arrangement of knowledge for their own use. Putting great confidence in the protection of Divine Providence, Christians knew how to brush off difficulties, to place them conveniently within a wider perspective, greater than the individual himself, and to re-adjust. Thus, when the great authorities of the Patristic age faded away physically, Christian intellectuals continued to indulge in their teachings and to find new ways to disseminate their heritage.

Beyond the Fathers: Collecting, Handling, and Compiling Knowledge in Late Antiquity

We should regard it as a matter of fact that the ancient Christians, being, at least in their own eyes, the successors of ancient Greece, the Hellenistic kingdoms and the Roman Republic and Empire, and of ancient Israel, have not invented anything new in terms of their attitude to 'high culture' which, in their mind, was a direct offshoot of classical Antiquity, nor in terms of the methods they used to preserve and transmit their intellectual assets. *Beyond the Fathers* is the title of a research project, now concluded, which was directed by myself in cooperation with several international partners. One major conclusion resulting from this project was that against the background of new challenges and the disappearance of the authoritative figures who had flourished in the formative days of Christianity as a dominant religion (hence 'Beyond the Fathers'), Christians sought to express themselves in ways which would reflect those challenges (Amirav & Celia 2016). One such mode of literary expression was the intensification of reductionist activity, namely a wide-spread encyclopaedist tendency which stemmed, among other factors, from an intense psychological urge to control masses of knowledge, transmitted from the days of classical antiquity.

Another source of knowledge which attracted the attention of Christian intellectuals was, of course, the gigantic homiletic and exegetical, or interpretive, enterprise upon which the Fathers of the Church embarked. This activity resulted in a sizeable corpus of new knowledge about the Bible and its reception. This new knowledge, in turn, induced a renewed impetus to handle and process the literary heritage. At the same time, Eusebius of Caesarea (*c.* 260–339 CE) and Procopius of Caesarea (*c.* 500–562 CE) were, perhaps, the only prominent Christian historians who could still be associated, in terms of quality and style, with the old classicising guard, who wrote large-scale historical narratives (Cameron 1991). All other Christian historians may be better described as chroniclers, compilers, and encyclopaedists. All these literates worked within a variety of genres which were aimed, each in its own way, at encapsulating masses of knowledge. In this context we can mention *florilegia*, *catenae*, question-and-answer handbooks *(erotapokriseis),* philosophical sayings (s*ententiae*), sayings of the Fathers (*apophtegmata patrum*), Byzantine 'need to know' literature, chronicles, rhetorical and philosophical textbooks, pedagogical handbooks for kings and princes, military manuals, heresiological

lists (incorporated in specialised treatises such as those of Epiphanius of Salamis (*c.* 310–403 CE) or John of Damascus (*c.*675–749 CE), or attached to decisions of church councils), and narrative cycles, such as the legends of Alexander the great.

Theodore of Mopsuestia in the Tradition of the Biblical Anthologies

We shall now zoom in on Theodore of Mopsuestia (*c.* 350–428 CE) who was mentioned earlier by Professor Ter Haar Romeny. A reasonably educated person would have heard of famous church fathers, such as Augustine and Jerome. A reasonably educated Christian would have heard of Origen and Chrysostom. By contrast, the name of Theodore of Mopsuestia would strike fewer chords in the hearts of most people. In fact, here is a case when history plays its cruel tricks on us, when the passage of time becomes like a dark veil, to the effect that central figures fade away from our collective memory, sometimes with no good or apparent reason. However, in Theodore's case, there might be a concrete reason which precipitated his relative anonymity in popular circles. Together with Eusebius of Emesa (*c.* 300–360 CE), John Chrysostom (*c.* 349–407 CE) and Diodore of Tarsus (d. *c.* 390 CE) Theodore of Mopsuestia formed a distinctive group of Christian rhetoricians, pastors, and biblical commentators whose approach to the biblical text was overwhelmingly literal. They are known as the Antiochenes, so-called after the famous city of Antiochia, now in Turkey.

The traditional rivals of the Antiochenes were the Alexandrian allegorists, with Origen as their chief proponent. This rivalry had far-reaching repercussions on the reception of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, within early Christian circles. Moreover, the dispute was far from being confined to just stylistic or even academic differences. Members of these rival groups, especially in the aftermath of the all-important council of Chalcedon (451 CE), entertained profound, contradictory theological convictions: the Antiochenes served as the proponents of Dyophysitism (that is, a belief in a dual-natured Christ, human and divine, whereas the Alexandrians believed in the one nature of Christ—hence they were called the Monophysites, or, as we had better call them, the Miaphysites. It is against this background that the Emperor Justinian sought and received in a general council he convened in 553 the excommunication and condemnation of a string of patristic fathers, chief among which was Theodore (Menze 2008). The subsequent sinking, at least in the West, of Theodore of Mopsuestia and his work into the abyss of oblivion had much to do with this imperial act of *damnatio memoriae,* cursing of the memory, which Christians of all ages and ecclesiastical ranks perfected over the years into a most effective means of indicating what they wished members of their community to know, as a means of social control. As was proven by Françoise Petit, Procopius of Gaza, the sixth-century biblical exegete, has been, in fact, wrongly credited for many years with the invention of the genre of the *catena*, or the exegetical anthology. But whatever Procopius' contribution to the genre may have been, it is quite evident that Procopius also cited extensively from Theodore, despite the fact that by then, the latter was already condemned and rejected both by the emperor and by leading ecclesiastical figures of the day.

The unexpected saviours of Theodore's memory and legacy were indeed the compilers, who, for a variety of reasons and motivations, collected excerpts from the full text or, in many cases, from other collections and available translations. In many cases, the full text is now lost, so the

only evidence we have is found in the collections or anthologies, which were prepared in Late Antiquity and the early Byzantine period. Professor ter Haar Romeny discussed in his lecture the type of anthology called *catena.* We learned from him that the compiler had to follow strict rules not only in respect of *how* to compile, but also in terms of *what* to compile. Nevertheless, at some level, it becomes challenging to trace not only what the compiler has done but why: why choose this passage and not another; what connections does the compiler make between different sources and how; why does he choose to support the biblical text with the interpretation of one exegete and not of another exegete?

The Compilation of a Study Textbook in Syriac on the Minor Pauline Epistles (Diyarbakir 22)

Coming back to the story behind the putting together of my recipe binder, I mentioned this episode in order to stress that my interest lay primarily in the cognitive processes relating to the questions of how people chose to approach a body of knowledge in terms of its selection, arrangement and dissemination and why. This problem is at the heart of a current project on Theodore of Mopsuestia's commentaries on the Minor Pauline Epistles. Directed by myself, the project is carried out most diligently by a team of young specialists, Dr Emiliano Fiori, Maya Goldberg and Cor Hoogerwerf. Together, we are trying to reconstruct the composition of a remarkable document, which contains a Syriac translation of Theodore's original Greek text which is now available only in fragments (Swete 1880). Hitherto unpublished, the manuscript in question can be dated to the fourteenth century (Reinink 1987). First described in 1907, when it was still preserved in the library of the Chaldean Archbishopric of Diyarbakır (now in south-eastern Turkey), Diyarbakir 22 exemplifies the exposure of many cultural treasures to the mercy or ill will of Fortuna. The manuscript, comprising some 529 leaves, contains commentaries on both the Old and the New Testaments, from Genesis to the Epistle to the Hebrews. During the First World War, the library was transferred to a private house, and after the war part of that library was moved to the library of the Chaldean patriarchate of Mosul (Iraq). Our manuscript was among the books moved to Mosul. It was moved again to the Chaldean Patriarchate in Baghdad around 1961. After the last war in Iraq, the books in the library of the Chaldean Patriarchate were hastily buried, and after the recent turmoil in Iraq their destiny has become unclear. Fortunately, the manuscript had already been microfilmed in Mosul during the fifties. This microfilm was prepared for the Sécrétariat of a series dedicated to oriental Christian sources (CSCO) in Leuven, and after being in the possession of Dr Gerrit Reinink, it is currently preserved at the Peshitta Institute here at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

There are two important facts regarding this finding, one positive and one negative: on the positive side we can gratefully conclude regarding an ancient Latin translation of Theodore's work, which survived the general misfortune of Theodore's work (Swete 1880) that, contrary to what was supposed by scholars so far (Edwards 1999), in fact, this translation is actually quite reliable and is a good rendering of the Greek original. On the negative side we may note that this manuscript comes with its own package of problems caused by the complex structure of the work. I will explain why this is the case: this manuscript is not a straightforward rendering of Theodore's commentaries from beginning to end. It is a compilation, an amalgamation of several sources of which Theodore was the major, but not the only author. Dr Reinink, here present, described the structure of the Pauline Epistles section as twofold, comprising what he

called Q1 and Q2. The first source, or Q1, contains excerpts from Isho'dad of Merw, bishop of Hdatta (*fl.* 850 CE), which often features short excerpts from and re-workings of Theodore of Mopsuestia's commentaries. The second source, or Q2, includes long excerpts from Theodore of Mopsuestia in the form of a summarised Theodorean exegesis, as well as scholastic material, or lecture notes dating from much later periods.

Clearly, the anonymous compiler of this document held strong convictions regarding Theodore, his importance and the need to study his work in connection with and in relation to the study of much later East Syrian writers, such as, again, Isho'dad of Merw, Theodore bar Koni (*fl.* during the eighth, or ninth, century), and Isho' bar Nun (Patriarch of the Church of the East, 823–828 CE). In our attempts to isolate and sift through the Theodorian parts of the manuscript, we must apply the traditional tools of philological research: collating, comparing, and identifying piecemeal the different pieces in the puzzle. Looking at how the anonymous compiler structured his anthology, at the almost-haphazard way he linked the different authors together, it becomes more and more clear to us that the compiler may have been less of a literary or a theological genius, trying to orchestrate together a number of sources for the sake of posterity, and more of a dedicated teacher, who produced a scholarly manual, or textbook, for his diligent (or, perhaps, outright lazy?) students.

Conclusion

When trying to make sense of knowledge systematisation, it might be useful to compare ancient and modern knowledge outputs and the dilemmas which arise when we try to control the available knowledge by mapping it and seeking meaningful and accessible frameworks for it. To go back to the lists of ancient and modern interests, output and foci, we may realise that not much has changed in respect of attitudes to knowledge and the necessity to control it conceptually and quantitatively, and the idea that we need to select for others what they should and need to know (i.e. remember or forget). We have reviewed briefly the intellectual challenges which the successors of the Fathers of the Church, and Theodore of Mopsuestia among them, had to face. In essence, their problem, which is very similar to our problem, was to have to deal with too much knowledge. Why too much knowledge?: because they had to process and distillate the legacy of classical antiquity, as well as the legacy of the church fathers, who, by that time, had become iconic and idealised.

Debt of Thanks

I am standing here in celebration of scholarship, of research in the humanities, of the rich heritage of the Greco-Roman world, and of the legacy of the Abrahamic religions. A debt of thanks is owed to the Board of the Vrije Universiteit and the Board of the Faculty of Theology, in particular Professor Wim Janse, for having created a personal chair in Patristics and Late Antiquity.

This event is also a celebration of women's scholarship and of the idea that women are being taken seriously despite the occasional unwillingness, even today, to accept them as equals in the spheres of business, politics, and academia. Elizabeth I, the formidable Tudor Queen of England, prepared overnight a translation of Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Fenna

Diemer-Lindeboom (1913–2004), whose name adorns my chair, was the first female law graduate at the VU and well-known for her commitment to human rights in wartime Netherlands. Between these two women of letters stretches a strong and unbreakable thread of self-conviction, dedication, and plain daring. They and all pioneering women in and outside academia deserve our gratitude.

On a more personal level, a debt of thanks is owed to the people who have been around me in all or in many important stages of my life: my late father and my mother, who is advanced in age and could not be present here today; my dear husband, who cares about my career more than he cares about his own; my children, who enrich my life; my thesis supervisor, Professor Dame Averil Cameron, and my college advisor, Professor Sir Fergus Millar, whose dedication has stretched far beyond formal duties.

In addition, I wish to thank my friends and colleagues at the Faculty and in the various stations of my academic journey. Of these, I am especially indebted to Professors Kirn, Chrysos, Van der Borght, Van Geest, and Lietaert Peerbolte for their support over the years.

Professors Van Lieburg and Harinck, I am looking forward to working with you and my colleagues at the Church History section of my Faculty in the Amsterdam Centre for Religious History (www.acrh.eu), which we have just launched this afternoon.

I am also grateful to the members of the Young Academy of Europe (www.yacadeuro.org), who entrusted me, if only for one year, with a precious and vibrant organisation, dedicated to young researchers.

Finally, my team and I wish to thank the Thyssen Foundation wholeheartedly for allowing us to study Theodore's complex reception history and how it actually came about.

My inaugural speech is now concluded.

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