

IMPASSIBLE SUFFERING? DIVINE PASSION AND FIFTH-CENTURY CHRISTOLOGY

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[Editor's Note: Most textbook accounts of the fifth-century christological debates suggest that the humanity of Jesus was the primary concern of the Antiochene theologians. From this perspective, Alexandrian Christology, represented by Cyril, appears to have fundamentally misunderstood the meaning of the Incarnation. Dr. O'Keefe argues that the primary theological concern of the debates was the impassibility of God. Thus, the Alexandrians, rather than the Antiochenes, are shown to have defended more faithfully the humanity of the Son of God.]

FEW PERIODS in the history of Christian thought have received more scholarly attention than the christological debates of the fifth century. In fact, so much interpretive energy has been spent on these controversies that many textbooks report confidently that all relevant questions about the debates have been answered.¹ The controversy, the textbooks imply, was about Jesus and his humanity. The players were the Alexandrians (in the person of Cyril) who diminished this humanity and the Antiochenes who defended it. According to this account, Alexandrian Christology missed the point of the Incarnation by denying the Word a full human nature, while Antiochene christological thought grasped the essentials. Antiochene theologians were the coolheaded exegetes who resisted allegorical readings of the text, refused to allow philosophy to dominate their Christology, and insisted on the historical significance of Jesus as a human being. These Antiochenes, as seen by the textbooks, resemble modern historical

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¹ See Thomas Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, rev. ed. (New York: Image Books, 1990); Denise Carmody and John Carmody, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1995) 47; Justo González, *The Story of Christianity 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 252–57; Thomas Helm, *The Christian Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1991) 75–77.

critics in their appreciation for history and for the human life of Jesus.²

Although some scholarly studies of the christological debates of the fifth century recognize the inaccuracy of this position³ the view that Antiochenes were prototypical historians committed to the man Jesus continues to be influential. Many scholars still think that Antiochene theologians worried most about defending the full humanity of the Word incarnate. As a result, contemporary scholarship has not attended to what is, in my view, the more central Antiochene efforts to defend the impassibility of God. The depth of the Antiochene resistance to using language suggestive of divine suffering can easily be missed if we are predisposed to find a controversy about history and humanity.

The impassibility of God was a major theological concern not only to the theologians of the fifth century but also throughout the patristic period. While most patristic authors embraced the idea that God transcended suffering and passion, it would be a mistake to assume that they all did so without hesitation or qualification. One recent study demonstrates that a significant number of patristic authors made surprisingly "theopaschite" remarks, including such stalwart theologians as Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Origen.⁴ Likewise, studies of the fourth century have noted that the problem of divine suffering figured prominently in the development of Nicene theology; the anti-Nicene position gelled around resistance to the term "homoousion" precisely because it brought the sufferings of the Son too close to the godhead.⁵ After the council, with the Son's divine stature assured, the problem of impassibility became, if anything, more difficult. To what extent did the human sufferings of the Son touch the divine nature? If Jesus Christ is God, as Nicaea declared, and if Jesus Christ suffered, as Scripture asserted, does this not im-

² The pervasiveness of this interpretation has been noted by John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1995) 190; see also Robert Wilken, "Exegesis and the History of Theology: Reflections on the Adam-Christ Typology in Cyril of Alexandria," *Church History* 35 (1966) 140. Perhaps the most strident defenders of this position were G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woolcombe, *Essays on Typology, Studies in Biblical Theology* (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1956).

³ E.g., Frances Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to its Literature and Background* (London: SCM, 1983).

⁴ Joseph M. Hallman, *The Descent of God: Divine Suffering in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). See also Michael Slusser's illuminating study of second-century theopaschite language, "Theopaschite Expression in Second-Century Christianity as Reflected in the Writings of Justin, Melito, Celsus and Irenaeus" (Ph.D. diss. Oxford, 1975). Thomas Weinandy offers a thorough study of the notion of impassibility in the history of Christian doctrine; see his *Does God Change?* (Still River, Mass.: St. Bede's, 1985).

⁵ R. P. C. Hanson reviews the evidence in *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988) 109-16.

ply that God suffered in some way? It should come as no surprise, then, that God's impassibility emerged as a key issue in the christological debates of the next century.⁶

In order to understand the christological debate, we must recognize that concern about God's impassibility goes to the heart of the controversy itself. I will argue that the conflict between Cyril and the Antiochenes is not a conflict between the historically insensitive and the historically sensitive, or between one who would minimize Jesus' humanity and those who would defend it. Rather, the conflict emerges when the scriptural narrative collides with certain philosophical presuppositions about what God can and cannot be like. In my view, Cyril wanted to say that when philosophy and the biblical narrative conflict, preference ought to be given to the biblical narrative. The Antiochenes tended to do the reverse. In practical terms, this means that Cyril's christological expression appeared dangerously "theopaschite" to his Antiochene antagonists.

Scholarly discussions of both the trinitarian and christological controversies have tended to focus on the evolution of vocabulary, such as the distinction between "hypostasis" and "ousia" in the fourth century or the meaning of "physis" and "prosopon" in the fifth. Certainly, understanding these and other terms is vital to the effort to reconstruct these christological debates.⁷ Here, however, I am more interested in the judgments behind the vocabulary. More specifically, I want to highlight the insights that led specific authors to use a particular word or phrase, rather than simply focusing on the word or phrase itself. From this perspective, I think it may be helpful to see the christological controversy less as a debate about terminology and more as a debate about the fullness of God's presence in the world. To use patristic language, the fight was about the reality of the "economy" of the Word. Within the limits of his own worldview, Cyril pushed language as far as he could, underscoring the fullness of God's participation with us. Conversely, the Antiochenes resisted Cyril's impulse, fearing that it would compromise the integrity of the godhead. Ironically, the Nicene theology defended by the Antiochenes was itself a debate about fullness of participation, the fullness of Jesus' partici-

⁶ Some time ago, Henry Chadwick observed how important this issue was for the Antiochenes; see his "Eucharist and Christology in the Nestorian Controversy," *Journal of Theological Studies* 2 (1951) 145-64. Likewise M. Anastos wrote that Nestorius was primarily concerned with protecting God from suffering ("Nestorius was Orthodox," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 16 [1962] 140). See, Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971) 231; Frances Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon* 274-75. Yet despite these statements, the christological controversy continues to be understood as a controversy preoccupied with the humanity of Christ.

⁷ The best account in English of the technical language of the controversy can be found in McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy*, esp. chaps. 2-3.

pation in God and, by extension, the fullness of our participation in God. Since Cyril's position insists upon both our full participation in God through the Son (Nicaea) and God's full participation with us, also through the Son (Chalcedon), we should not be surprised that he, and not the Antiochenes, won the day in 451. His Christology is logically an unfolding of a judgment implicit in Nicene thought.

THE CONTEXT: PATRISTIC EXEGESIS AND NICENE THEOLOGY

The position outlined above gains strength from recent scholarly work in the area of patristic biblical exegesis. An emerging consensus of scholars suggests that the difference between Alexandria and Antioch cannot be explained by an appeal either to method or to historical awareness.⁸ Cyril, Nestorius, and Theodoret were arguing about the meaning of the Incarnation, not about the historical details of the event. They all agreed that the Bible was the revealed word of God. They agreed that it gave reliable information about events of the past, including the events of the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. They all agreed that Jesus was the Son of God, and they understood this to mean that he was "homoousios" with the Father. In other words, all accepted Nicene theology and understood it fundamentally in the same way. Indeed, all were anxious to find a christological language that could somehow cope with the paradoxical claim that the second person of the Trinity, who all agreed was very God from very God, could at the same time be said to be incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, a man with a human mind and a human soul. However, Cyril, Nestorius, and Theodoret differed in the way they reconciled these common commitments with some of the unresolved implications of Nicene theology. For none, however, was history or "the historical Jesus" a factor in the formulation of christological expression. All the theologians of the controversy were decidedly ancient in their thinking.

A second source of confirmation for the thesis I am here advancing comes from the improved understanding of Nicene thought that has been achieved in the past decade.⁹ In the fourth century, Athanasius and the Cappadocians were able to allay anti-Nicene concerns about divine passibility both by separating God the Word from the creation and by creating a theological language to describe begetting and pro-

⁸ Frances Young, "The Rhetorical Schools and Their Influence on Patristic Exegesis," in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Rowan Williams (New York: Cambridge University, 1989). David Dawson details a close relationship between allegory and typology and shows that neither is interested in historical questions in the modern sense (*Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* [Berkeley: University of California, 1992]).

⁹ See especially, Michel Barnes and Daniel Williams, ed., *Arianism after Arius* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993); R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search*; R. Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987).

cession as an eternal characteristic of the godhead which did not imply change and development.¹⁰ But they did not adequately explain how that Word could be intimately present in his own creation without being touched by it and without transmitting the effects of contact to the inner Trinity. Athanasius understood this problem and, as is evident especially in his *Orations against the Arians*, attempted to categorize biblical language as referencing the Son *qua* human or the Son *qua* divine. Despite this rather glaring problem, the Nicene theologians chose to retain language underscoring the Son's divinity when the threat to impassibility could easily have been neutralized by assigning the Son a mediatorial, subordinate role. Because they did not do this, the problem shifted from primarily theological to primarily christological. The temptation for the next generation of theologians would be to attempt to avoid the theopaschite implications of Nicene thought by viewing all "passion" language in the New Testament as referring to the human nature of Jesus.

Given the continuity of the issues, it is curious that the fifth-century debates are not usually presented in terms of "Nicaea continued." The theologians of the fifth century did not suddenly discover an interest in the human Jesus. Rather, their attention shifted from the relationship of the Son to the Father to the relationship of the Son to the human. In both cases attention focuses on God the Word. Cyril, Nestorius, and Theodoret all believed that they were defending the Nicene faith. Hence, the debates that culminated in the Council of Chalcedon may fairly be described as an unfolding of the theological implications of Nicaea and not as the emergence of a completely new problem.

Given, therefore that patristic commentators on Scripture were not really interested in history as we understand it and that we now have a deeper understanding of the influence of ancient notions of divine impassibility on the development of Nicene theology, it now remains to consider how Cyril, Nestorius, and Theodoret attempted to resolve the theological problem they inherited.

Cyril's efforts, as we shall see, revolved primarily around an intertextual reading of the New Testament.¹¹ That is, several Pauline texts provided him with an interpretive key to understanding the Word's human presence. Cyril's starting point was the "economic" Christ whom we meet in Scripture and in the Church. Since the scriptural language seemed to stress the fullness of God's presence, Cyril did not retreat from it. Although he maintained that God is impassible, the issue ranked second in his mind. Conversely, the effort of Nestor-

¹⁰ See Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995) 183–85.

¹¹ For an interesting discussion of the function of intertextuality in biblical exegesis, see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990).

ius and Theodoret centered around their fears that overly zealous incarnational language threatened the Nicene view of God by reintroducing suffering and other passions into the godhead. While they clearly emphasized the full humanity of Christ (against Apollinarianism), their two-nature Christology is designed to avoid speaking carelessly about the fullness of God's presence and, thereby, implicating God in things properly human.

CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA

For Cyril, as for the other theologians involved in the christological debates of the fifth century, an awareness of the depth of the issues emerged slowly. From the time of his ordination to the episcopacy in 412 until the eruption of the conflict with Nestorius in 428, Cyril's works reveal no sense of christological crisis. During this time he composed massive commentaries on the Bible (most of which have been neither studied nor translated) and several doctrinal works. Cyril's immersion in the biblical text during this period provided him with a basic christological perspective that would mature under the pressure of his debate with the Antiochenes. The important thing to note here, however, is that from the point of view of doctrine, the great heresy remained Arianism. Cyril's *Dialogues on the Trinity*, composed well before the Nestorian controversy,¹² essentially reviewed the Nicene arguments of Athanasius and the Cappadocians. Only over time did he realize that Nestorius's position represented a new problem that had not been resolved in the fourth century.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when Nestorius's teaching began to have an influence in Egypt, Cyril suspected that the bishop of Constantinople had not learned the lessons of Nicaea. The documents dating from the early stages of the controversy confirm this. In a letter to the monks of Egypt, composed in the spring of 429, Cyril expressed his amazement that "certain people should be in any doubt as to whether the holy Virgin ought to be called the Mother of God or not."¹³ Quoting Athanasius, Cyril reminded the monks that the Scriptures point to Christ two-dimensionally. They indicate that he is "eternally God" and that "for our sake he took flesh from the virgin Mary, the Mother of God."¹⁴ The Arians, Cyril wrote, fell "into such stupidity in their conceptions as to think and say that the Son is recent and that he was brought into being from God the Father on the same level as the other creatures."¹⁵ By implication, Cyril suggested that denial of the Theotokos is logically the same as Arianism. Those who refuse to confess that Mary is Mother of God do not appreciate

¹² G. M. Durand suggests a date before 420 (*Cyrille d'Alexandrie: Dialogues sur la Trinité 1*, Sources Chrétiennes 231 [Paris: Cerf, 1976] 38–43).

¹³ PG 77.13B. English trans., McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria* 245–61.

¹⁴ PG 77.13D.

¹⁵ PG 77.16D.

the fullness of the Son's participation with us, just as the Arians misunderstood the fullness of the Son's participation in God. In the remainder of the letter, Cyril pointed out weakness that he had perceived in the Nestorian position. All of Cyril's objections suggest that those who fear the title "Theotokos" fear as well the economic implications of Nicaea. They are afraid to say that the Word was born. Clearly Cyril perceived the debate he had just entered as a debate about the unfolding meaning of Nicaea and not as a debate about Jesus per se.

Already in his *Letter to the Monks*, Cyril realized that his position flirted dangerously with theopaschite language. Moreover, as the controversy unfolded he understood that this language was itself the center of Antiochene anxiety about his Christology. Yet from his point of view the Antiochenes were so concerned about protecting the impassibility of God that they missed the entire point of the Incarnation. This passage from the *Letter to the Monks* is typical of Cyril's perspective: "For he was the Word in his own body born from a woman, and he gave it to death in due season, but he suffered nothing at all in his own nature for as such he is life and life-giver. Nonetheless he made the things of the flesh his own so that the suffering could be said to be his."¹⁶ By 430, the year of the *Third Letter to Nestorius*, Cyril was ready to push the limits of this language even more. "If anyone does not confess," he wrote in the twelfth anathema, "that the Word of God suffered in the flesh, was crucified in the flesh, and tasted death in the flesh, becoming the first-born from the dead, although as God he is life and life-giving, let him be anathema." Finally, by the time of the more mature works, the *Scholia on the Incarnation* and the treatise *That Christ is One*, Cyril had honed his language even more and spoke paradoxically about the "impassible suffering of the Son."¹⁷

While it is true that his philosophical education was limited,¹⁸ Cyril understood and accepted the doctrine of divine impassibility. Because of this, he must have understood that such deliberate use of paradoxical language would both antagonize the Antiochenes and leave him exposed to the charge that he was a theopaschite.¹⁹ So why did he continue to use such language? The answer has to do with his priorities. Cyril was first and foremost an exegete. During the 16 years of his episcopacy before he began his struggle with Nestorius, he had been busy working on commentaries for nearly every book of the Bi-

¹⁶ PG 77.36D.

¹⁷ See *Quod unus sit Christus*, Sources Chrétiennes 97, 766–67; *Scholia on the Incarnation* 35, in P. E. Pusey, ed., *S. Cyrilli Alexandriae epistolae tres oecumenicae* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1875) 574.

¹⁸ The best account of the early life and training of Cyril can be found in P. Évieux, *Cyrille d'Alexandrie: Lettres Festales 1*, Sources Chrétiennes 372 (Paris: Cerf, 1991) 11–72.

¹⁹ See Cyril's Second Letter to Succensus, in *Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters*, ed. Lionel R. Wickham (Oxford, 1983) 4.18.

ble. Cyril was steeped in biblical language and he brought this vast knowledge with him to his encounters with the Antiochenes.²⁰ Because he wished to remain faithful to the text, if the biblical narrative suggested that God the Word had suffered, then Cyril was willing to affirm it, even if doing so made the concept of an impassible godhead strain and buckle, and even if it raised the hackles of his brother bishops in Syria.

Cyril, like all exegetes, read the Bible through certain key texts. Augustine, for example, embraced Paul's thought in Romans 7 and 9 and created a theology of grace and sin that has dominated Western readings of the Scripture ever since.²¹ Cyril also relied upon key texts. As the Nestorian controversy progressed, Cyril realized that a new problem had emerged and that the primary question was not the divine status of the Son, but the fullness of the Son's human presence. In tandem with this realization, his attention shifted to biblical passages that concentrate on the Son's participation in human limitation, in particular John 1:14, Hebrews 2:14–17, and Philippians 2:6–8.²² In other words, Cyril's choice of texts, far from reflecting an attempt to minimize the humanity of the Word, as some scholars have claimed,²³ actually underscores his desire to emphasize the drama of the Word's economic manifestation. The forcefulness with which Cyril's intertextual analysis advanced his vision of the Word's presence made Antiochene theologians anxious; the bishop of Alexandria seemed deliberately to efface the lines separating God and humanity.

In the literature of the controversy, Cyril referred to John 1:14 more frequently than to any other passage in the Gospels. The core of the passage, as he saw it, is the bold proclamation that the "Word became flesh." This, he suggested, would force Christians to confess that God the Word sojourned among us. The following example taken from the *Scholia on the Incarnation* represents Cyril's typical exegesis of this text:

He through whom God the Father made the world was truly made man. He did not, as some think, come in a man so that we might consider him a man

²⁰ Cyril's knowledge of the Bible has been explored most recently by Robert L. Wilken, "St. Cyril of Alexandria: the Mystery of Christ in the Bible," *Pro Ecclesia* 4/4 (Fall, 1995) 454–78; see also Bertrand de Margerie, "L'exégèse christologique de saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 102 (1980) 400–25.

²¹ For a fascinating discussion of the history of interpretation of Romans, see Peter Gorday, *Principles of Patristic Exegesis: Romans 9–11 in Origen, John Chrysostom, and Augustine* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1983).

²² Wilken suggests that the Pauline image of Christ the new Adam (see 1 Corinthians 15:22, 47 and Romans 5:19) controls Cyril's exegesis ("St. Cyril of Alexandria" 470). It seems to me, however, that this image is more prevalent in texts dealing with Nicene concerns (i.e. the relationship of Son to Father) than in texts dealing with christological concerns.

²³ See especially Alois Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition 1: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon*, trans. John Bowden (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975) 473–83.

who had God indwelling him. If they hold this to be the case, and rely on it as true, then surely the saying of the blessed evangelist John appears pointless: "And the Word was made flesh" (John 1:14). If he did not become flesh, what was the point of the Incarnation? Or why did he say that he had become flesh? The meaning of the term "Incarnation" signifies that he became like us, though even so he remained above us, and indeed above all the creation.²⁴

Some scholars have suggested that Cyril's fixation on the language of "flesh" reveals that he was never able to escape the influence of Apollinarius and that, consequently, he was never able to appreciate the full humanity of Jesus. This view has been encouraged by ancient critics of Cyril who also attempted to accuse him of Apollinarian views.²⁵ A careful reading of the literature, however, does not support this. Indeed, Cyril, aware of the charges, explicitly denied that his Johannine emphasis on "the flesh" implies any implicit minimization of the full humanity of the Word. He wrote:

Evidently we would not say that [the Fathers at Nicaea] were unaware of the fact that the body that was united to the Word was animated by a rational soul, and so, if anyone says that the Word was made flesh he is not thereby confessing that the flesh united to him was devoid of a rational soul. It was this, I think (no, I'm quite sure of it), that the all-wise John meant when he said that the Word became flesh.²⁶

Cyril used John's language because he believed that it best expressed the dramatic and surprising reality of the Christian claim that the Word had been born as a man. As J. A. McGuckin explains, Christ "is a single concrete reality enfleshed before us. . . . What is more, that concrete, fleshed-out reality is that of the Word of God, none other."²⁷

Cyril's use of John may carry some ambiguous nuances. However, this text does not stand alone. As already mentioned, Cyril's Christology rests upon an intertextual foundation. His reading of John 1:14 must be understood in association with other texts. For example, Cyril referred frequently to the second chapter of Hebrews to emphasize, with the author of this epistle, that "since the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things." Becoming flesh means becoming human, living as we live and existing as we exist. In the fifth anathema, Cyril used Hebrews 2:14 to interpret John and to insist that the subject of the Incarnation is the Son him-

²⁴ *Scholia* 538.25–539.7.

²⁵ See Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition* 1.472–78; Jacques Liébaert, *La doctrine christologique de Saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie avant la querelle nestorienne* (Lille: Facultés catholiques, 1951) 172. Few scholars today, however, would still agree with the notion that Cyril was a secret Apollinarian; see Young, *Nicaea to Chalcedon* 259–63; McGuckin, *St. Cyril* 208.

²⁶ Second Letter to Succensus, Wickham 2.84.22–86.2.

²⁷ McGuckin, *St. Cyril* 208.

self;²⁸ this text functions in a similar way in various other documents of the controversy.²⁹

For Cyril though, no text more powerfully expressed the drama of the Word's economy and the fullness of God's presence than the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Cyril's interest in this text predates his conflict with Nestorius. In his *Commentary on Isaiah*, to select just one example, Cyril interpreted the Suffering Servant of Isaiah in the light of Paul:

Clearly God the Father is speaking about Christ, the savior of us all. For he says: 'Behold, my child will understand' [Isaiah 52:13 LXX]. You will discern that the child is both a son and a slave. For the Word, while he was God, took the form of a slave and, while he was Lord of all, he set forth into a measure of humanity. For he did not suppose that it was robbery to be equal to God, but he emptied himself, being born in the likeness of men and, discovered in this form, he humbled himself.³⁰

Cyril's fascination with this text has not escaped the notice of modern scholars. Paul Henry noted that "Cyril of Alexandria uses and comments upon Philippians 2:5–11 more than any other Greek Father."³¹ This text helped Cyril to emphasize the fullness of God's presence in the world. The man we meet in the Gospels and in prayer is none other than the incarnate presence of the second person of the Trinity; no competing subjects, such as a separate human subject, vie for control of Jesus.³²

Through Philippians 2, Cyril outlined a vision of a God who had entered into human limitation through an inexplicable act of grace and philanthropy.³³ Because he emphasized the economic manifestation of God's downward movement into human limitation, he tended not to worry about "how" such a thing might take place or "what" exactly the effects of such movement would be on God.³⁴ While under house arrest at Ephesus, he explained what he meant by appealing to this famous passage from Paul:

The Word of God is in the form of God the Father and equal to him, but did not consider that equality with God was something to be grasped, as it is written, but rather humbled himself to a voluntary self-emptying, and freely chose to lower himself into our condition, not losing what he is but remaining

²⁸ Third Letter to Nestorius, Wickham 30; PG 76.304, English translation from McGuckin.

²⁹ See Wickham 154.25–29.

³⁰ PG 70.1164D (my translation); see also 1036, 1041, 1044–45, 1164 and 1172A.

³¹ P. Henry, "Kénose," in *Dictionnaire de la Bible: Supplément* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1957) 5.92.

³² See McGuckin, *St. Cyril* 207–12.

³³ Cyril clearly depends upon Athanasius for his sense of the magnitude of God's favor in the Incarnation; see the excellent discussion of Athanasius's theology in Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning* 179–288.

³⁴ See McGuckin, *St. Cyril* 216–22; Wickham 30.1–5.

so as God while not despising the limitations of the manhood. So all things pertain to him: those befitting God, and those of man. Why would he empty himself out if the limitations of the manhood made him ashamed? Or if he was going to shun human characteristics who was it that compelled him by force or by necessity to become as we are?³⁵

By the time of the treatise *That Christ is One*, the position expressed above had become even more refined and carefully articulated. Immediately after quoting Philippians 2, Cyril wrote:

And indeed, the Only Begotten Word, even though he was God and born from God by nature . . . he it was who became man. He did not change himself into flesh; he did not endure any mixture or blending, or anything else of this kind. But he submitted himself to being emptied . . . and did not disdain the poverty of human nature. . . . He made it his very own, and not soulless as some have said, but rather animated with a rational soul, and thus he restored flesh to what it was in the beginning.³⁶

Again and again Cyril turned to the kenotic themes of Philippians 2 in order to emphasize the fullness of God's presence in Jesus. At this point it should be clear that the texts Cyril chose as he articulated the elements of his Christology were selected precisely because they highlighted the fullness of God's presence in the world. Still, we would be remiss if we did not consider the charges leveled against Cyril's perspective. As already noted, many modern scholars have tended to see Cyril as a theologian who never really understood the importance of the human nature of Jesus. Reflecting their own "modern" agenda, they have tended to view the debate as primarily a debate about the fullness of Jesus' humanity, rather than a debate about the fullness of God's presence. This contemporary perspective finds some support in the ancient sources, since it is certainly true that the Antiochenes worried that Cyril's Christology, like that of Apollinarius before him, denied that Christ was fully human.³⁷

Cyril himself understood these worries, and, as we have seen, the literature of the controversy is littered with explicit denials that he in any way taught that Jesus was less than fully human. But this is

³⁵ PG 76.301B-C; English translation from McGuckin.

³⁶ SC 97.718B-C. All translations of this text are from St. Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. J. A. McGuckin (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1995).

³⁷ It is important to note that ancient interest in the humanity of Jesus did not reflect the same set of concerns as modern interest does. Contemporary stress on the human Jesus derives from an awareness of history. It reflects an effort to understand Jesus as a historical person. Ancient interest had more to do with salvation and redemption: what is not assumed is not redeemed, as Gregory Nazianzus explained (Letter 101 to Cledonius). Apollinarius's Christology seemed to deny Jesus a human center of consciousness and create what was not Word, not human, but something else. Some Antiochene theologians reacted to elements in Cyril's language that reflected Apollinarian themes. They were not, however, worried about Jesus' historical existence.

only half the story, since the Antiochenes were clearly more worried about what Cyril's Christology (with its overdeveloped view of God's presence) did to the impassible God of Nicaea. The Antiochenes believed that Cyril allowed the human pathos of Jesus to touch the godhead and thereby to compromise God's impassible nature. In short they were concerned "about the Godness of God."³⁸ On this charge Cyril was, and knew himself to be, much more vulnerable.

Cyril's *Second Letter to Succensus* reveals this vulnerability with particular clarity. Composed between 434 and 438, in the midst of the controversy, the letter contains a succinct assessment of what Cyril thought the Antiochenes found unacceptable in his theology. He recorded a series of objections that, on the one hand, illustrate Antiochene concerns about his possible connections to Apollinarian ideas. However, if we pay attention to the way Cyril responded to them, we quickly realize that these are also the objections of men who were extraordinarily worried about the theopaschite implications of Cyril's writings. These worries, more than charges that he espoused Apollinarian views, struck close to home.

In the *Second Letter to Succensus*, often drawing on his favorite texts (John 1:14, Philippians 2:7, and Hebrews 2:16), Cyril turned these accusations upside down: his opponents erred not in their insistence on the full humanity of the incarnate Word, but in their exaggerated fear of attributing suffering to God. "They do not," he complained, "understand the economy, and make wicked attempts to displace the suffering to the man on his own, foolishly seeking a piety that does them harm."³⁹ True, Cyril himself did not attribute suffering directly to the Word in his own nature, but for him, such distinctions fade to insignificance after the Incarnation: "we recognize two natures in him . . . but we divided them only at a theoretical level (*en philais dielontes ennoiais*), and by subtle speculation (*en ischnais theoriais*), or rather we accept the distinction only in our mental intuitions (*nou phantasiis*)."⁴⁰ When we encounter Christ, we encounter a single subject, the Word made flesh; hence, "we do not rule out the legitimacy of saying that he suffered."⁴¹

Cyril knew that this position seemed to imply that God's impassible nature was compromised and he tried to find ways to work around it. As a first line of defense, he explained that he was merely reflecting on the economy of the Word as revealed in Scripture; he was not attempting to explain God in God's self. Hence, in the mature Christology of his *That Christ is One*, Cyril wrote:

He suffers in his own flesh, and not in the nature of the Godhead. The method of these things is altogether ineffable. . . . Yet, following these most correct

³⁸ Frances Young, *Nicaea to Chalcedon* 277.

³⁹ Wickham 91.17–20.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 92.14–16.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 86.24–25.

deductions . . . we do not deny that he can be said to suffer (in case we thereby imply that the birth in the flesh was not his but someone else's), but this does not mean that we say that the things pertaining to the flesh transpired in his divine and transcendent nature.⁴²

Cyril's commitment to the notion of divine impassibility conflicted with the sense of the scriptural narrative: the fully divine Nicene Son seemed to suffer. It is not a very large step to overt theopaschite language, yet Cyril avoided that. Nonetheless he leaned in the direction of the narrative and gave it a privileged place in his thought. The narrative of Incarnation, not the notion of impassibility, drove his Christology. This put Cyril in the awkward position of having to resort to paradoxical language to express how God the Son could both suffer and not suffer. According to Cyril, the only way to articulate this mystery was to say that the Son "suffered impassibly."⁴³

His Antiochene opponents read this paraodoxical language as an implicit denial of God's impassible nature, while his modern opponents tend to find in this language further evidence that Cyril never understood the importance of Christ's humanity. Neither interpretation is correct. In Cyril's view, the text spoke clearly of a Christ who both suffered and was God. Failure to allow the text to speak, in his view, is precisely the reason that the theology of his opponents fell short. The following passage from Cyril's short treatise *On the Creed* contains all of the main themes of his critique:

Why, then, our opponents, who in their extreme folly do not forbear to hold or express the views of Nestorius and Theodore, must answer our question: 'Do you refuse to allow him who is of the holy Virgin his being God and true Son of God the Father? Do you allot suffering to him alone, fending it off from God the Word to avoid God's being declared passible?' This is the point of their pedantic, muddleheaded fictions. In that case, the Word of God the Father on his own and by himself should not be called 'Christ'; for just as suffering is out of character with him when he is considered in isolation from the flesh, so is anointing an inconsistent feature alien to him. For God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost, but the Word of God is utterly complete in himself and required no anointing through the Holy Ghost. In which case, deny God's plan, banish the Only-begotten from any love toward the world! 'Christ' you must not call him. Was not his created existence within human limitations a lowly thing? In which case, seeing that that is out of character with him, nobody must acknowledge that he has become man, with the result that Christ can tell them: 'you err, knowing neither the scriptures nor God's power.'⁴⁴

In Cyril's opinion, the Antiochenes implied that the great gulf separating God and the world had not been bridged at all, and this

⁴² SC 97.776A; see also 769B, 775A.

⁴³ See McGuckin, *St. Cyril* 185, 190–91, 202–3.

⁴⁴ Wickham 131.12–30.

"shakes the whole rationale of the fleshly economy."⁴⁵ The entire thrust of Cyril's argument stressed the fullness of God's presence, even when such an affirmation strained the limits of language and forced him into paradoxical and awkward formulations.

THE ANTIOCHENES

Cyril believed that the Antiochenes both overemphasized the impassibility of God and retreated from declaring the fullness of God's presence in Christ. In other words, that they did not grasp the meaning of the Incarnation. This interpretation contrasts sharply with the popular scholarly characterization of Antiochene Christology as the ancient Christology most appreciative of the significance of the full humanity of Jesus. Some scholars, however, would agree that Cyril's understanding of the issues comes closer to the mark, and that the popular characterization is misleading, at best. In 1962, Milton Anastos, himself a defender of the Antiochene cause, recognized that Nestorius worried far more about the impassibility of God than he did about the humanity of Jesus.⁴⁶ We need not, however, rely upon the assessment of modern scholars to note the depth of the Antiochene commitment to divine impassibility. The primary literature of the christological controversy confirms the Alexandrian point of view: Nestorius and Theodoret, the two most important theologians on the Antiochene side, both found Cyril's Christology to be especially dangerous in its theopaschite implications. Moreover, God's impassible nature occupied a central position in their own efforts to develop the christological implications of Nicene theology.

Nestorius

Already in the *First Sermon against the Theotokos*, Nestorius pointed to the impassibility of God as a primary reason to avoid speaking of Mary as "Mother of God."⁴⁷ Similar anxiety about placing God too close to human suffering forms the basis of Nestorius's insulting response to Cyril's second letter.⁴⁸ Nestorius commended Cyril for attempting to base his christological ideas on the faith of Nicaea, but he implied that Cyril had failed to understand the council's basic impulses. Quoting 1 Timothy 4:13, 16, Nestorius urged Cyril to

⁴⁵ Second Letter to Succensus, Wickham 90.24.

⁴⁶ Milton Anastos, "Nestorius Was Orthodox" 140; see also 136-37. Anastos, who was sympathetic to Nestorius's position, saw the defense of God's impassible nature as a central feature of Chalcedonian orthodoxy.

⁴⁷ Friedrich Loofs, *Nestoriana: Die Fragmente des Nestorius* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1905) 249-64.

⁴⁸ McGuckin mentions the irony of Nestorius's comments. Nestorius suggests that Cyril was both poorly educated and used an obtuse literary style (*St. Cyril* 364 nn. 3 and 5).

“apply” himself “to reading,” for he had misunderstood the council texts “by thinking that they said the Word of God, coeternal with the Father, was passible.”⁴⁹

Nestorius used the remainder of the letter as an occasion to offer Cyril remedial lessons in how properly to read the Scriptures. Among the texts chosen was one of Cyril’s favorites, Philippians 2. According to Nestorius, Paul meant to underscore the two natures of Christ, not, as Cyril had suggested, the fullness of the Word’s human presence:

What does he say? ‘Have this mind among you which was in Christ Jesus. Though he was in the form of God he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but (to give the general sense) became obedient to death, death on a cross’ (Phil 2:5, 6:8). Since he was going to mention the death, he posited the title Christ so that no one might imagine that God the Word was passible, for Christ is a term that applies to both the impassible and the passible natures in a single persona. This is how Christ can be said, without danger, to be both passible and impassible; impassible in the Godhead, but passible in the nature of his body.⁵⁰

Nestorius selected other texts such as Matthew 1:1, 1:6, and Acts 1:14 to emphasize his point that Scripture contains an implicit two-nature Christology and that, because of this, it upholds absolutely the impassibility of the divine nature.

Confirmation of Nestorius’s fears comes in the form of Cyril’s response. The bishop of Alexandria can hardly have understood Nestorius’s closing quotation of 2 Samuel 3:1 (“the house of Saul goes to ruin, but the house of David goes from strength to strength”) as anything but a veiled reference to the ascendancy of Constantinople.⁵¹ Perhaps because of this Cyril’s *Third Letter to Nestorius* is deliberately provocative. He knew exactly how to upset Nestorius, and he pushed as far as he could the possibilities of theopaschite language. “If anyone does not confess,” Cyril wrote in the twelfth anathema, “that the Word of God suffered in the flesh, was crucified in the flesh, and tasted death in the flesh, becoming the first-born from the dead, although as God he is life and life-giving, let him be anathema.” Although Cyril would later retreat from so forceful an affirmation of his basic insight, his language clearly indicates that he understood that fear of attributing suffering to the Godhead went to the heart of Nestorius’s position.

Even toward the end of his life when Nestorius wrote the nearly impenetrable *Bazaar of Heracleides*, his Christology still revolved

⁴⁹ ACO 1.1.29.16–23; English trans. McGuckin.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 30.7–14.

⁵¹ Ibid 32.17–18. See McGuckin, *St. Cyril* 368 n. 9. For a discussion of the political struggle between Constantinople and Alexandria, see W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1972); Wilfred Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity: From Its Origins to 451 C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 1991).

around the absolute centrality of the Son's impassible nature. This, not the need to emphasize the human, was his primary concern. For this reason he resisted Cyril's "mia physis" slogan to the end.⁵² The following passage typifies Nestorius's reasons for suspecting Alexandrian thought:

All the human things, which now men are ashamed to predicate of him, the Evangelists were not ashamed to predicate, those which without being ashamed they made over to the divine nature through the union of the natural hypostasis: God suffering the sufferings of the body because he is naturally united in nature, thirsting, hungering, in poverty, in anxiety, meditation, praying. . . . And the properties of God the Word they set at nought and make them human. . . . Surely it is an awful and dreadful thing to conceive this and to tell men what and what sort of thought they have concerning the Son, that he is both made and created and that he had been changed from impassible to passible and from immortal to mortal and from unchangeable to changeable. . . .⁵³

Nestorius's concerns about the "Godness of God" clearly weigh more heavily upon his mind than the historical or human Jesus.

Theodoret

Given his unfortunate end, it would not be unfair to say that Nestorius was not the best of ancient theologians (pace Milton Anastos⁵⁴). He certainly was no match for Cyril either intellectually or politically. Another Antiochene theologian, however, Theodoret of Cyrus, presented Cyril with a far more sophisticated challenge. Theodoret probably wrote the so-called "Formula of Reunion," which made possible the reconciliation of the sees of Antioch and Alexandria after the Council of Ephesus. Since Cyril signed this document, it is likely that he respected the abilities of the theologian responsible for it. In fact, some scholars have noted that Cyril and Theodoret both seemed to have learned from the other's critique.⁵⁵ While such an exchange of ideas certainly took place, we should not conclude that the two theologians were in fundamental agreement. Theodoret's thought remained characteristically Antiochene. The impassible triune God of the Nicene faith, not the human Jesus, went to the heart of his Christology.

⁵² Cyril was fond of the phrase *mia physis tou theou logou sesarkomene* ("one incarnate nature of the Word of God made flesh"); this phrase, unbeknown to him, originated with Apollinarius. See *To Eulogius*, Wickham 62.17; *Third Letter to Nestorius*, Wickham 24.16.17; this formula is discussed at length by Grillmeier 475–83, and McGuckin, *St. Cyril* 207–12.

⁵³ Nestorius, *The Bazaar of Heracleides*, trans. G. R. Driver and L. Hodgson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925) 92–93; see the comments by Anastos, *Nestorius* 135–37.

⁵⁴ Anastos states that Nestorius was "in many respects the profoundest and most brilliant theologian of the fifth century" (*Nestorius* 123).

⁵⁵ Especially Young, *Nicaea to Chalcedon* 271–74.

Cyril's ideas, in Theodoret's view, came uncomfortably close to denying this fundamental doctrine.

Theodoret clearly articulates these concerns in his treatise *Eranistes* written in 447 or 448.⁵⁶ Some scholars believe that this text preserves Theodoret's response to Eutyches and the growing chorus of more strident monophysite voices emerging in the years leading up to the Council of Chalcedon. Nevertheless, Frances Young has argued convincingly that Theodoret's Christology did not really change much from the days when he was contending with Cyril, and I am not convinced that Eutyches was the only single-nature theologian Theodoret had in mind when he was writing this text.⁵⁷ While Theodoret may have learned from Cyril, this did not induce him to refrain from critique.

In any case, *Eranistes* represents Theodoret's mature thought. Clearly he read and understood the arguments of his opponents; he even gave them a fair hearing, despite the sarcastic title.⁵⁸ But what does this treatise tell us? The text is quite explicit: Theodoret sought both to avoid denying that Christ had a human soul (Apollinarius) and to avoid attributing suffering to the nature of the Word (Arius/Eunomius).⁵⁹ The following passage taken from the prologue to the *Eranistes* typifies Theodoret's position:

To call the godhood and the manhood of the Lord Christ one nature is the error filched from the follies of Apollinarius. Again the attribution of the capacity of suffering to the divinity of the Christ is a theft from the blasphemy of Arius and Eunomius. Thus the main principle of their teaching is like beggars' gabardines—a cento of illmatched rags.⁶⁰

We can see clearly here that the fundamental impulse behind Theodoret's two-nature solution is to stress that Christ is a complete human being and to insist that God as God the Word remains safely separate from the sufferings of that human being. Those who think otherwise—the unfortunate “collector” (*eranistes*) of the dialogue—have departed from the faith of Nicaea.⁶¹ However, because the anti-Apollinarian theme in Antiochene christological writing has received

⁵⁶ References are to the critical text of G. H. Ettliger, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Eranistes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975). All translations are from *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, Philip Schaff, ed. (Buffalo and New York, 1892; reprint: Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994). This is still the only English translation; I have modified it where necessary. On the dating of *Eranistes*, see Ettliger, *Theodoret* 4.

⁵⁷ See Theodoret *Epist.* 180, as quoted by G. L. Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics* (London: SPCK, 1940) 150.

⁵⁸ Young, *Nicaea to Chalcedon* 275. The word “eranistes” means “collector.” The title of the work, therefore, implies that Theodoret considered his opponents to be mere assemblers of ideas that have no real coherence.

⁵⁹ This point is made quite explicitly in the prologue of the treatise, 61–62.

⁶⁰ 62.3–6.

⁶¹ See 64.4; 165.2,7; 227.19; 261.5.

so much scholarly attention, it is easy not to notice that Theodoret believed the denial of impassibility of God to be the more insidious error.

The depth of Theodoret's interest in this issue is reflected in the structure of the *Eranistes* itself. The text is comprised of three dialogues: "The Immutable (*atreptos*)," "The Unconfused (*asygchytos*)," and "The Impassible (*apathes*)." Theodoret used all of these terms as variations on the theme "the impassibility of God." All three reflect his basic stance: any position that does not adequately articulate the two natures of Christ inevitably threatens God with suffering and turns away from the insights of the Council of Nicaea.

In the first dialogue, "The Immutable," Theodoret's mouthpiece, Orthodoxus, attempts to point out the silliness of Eranistes' poor efforts to claim that God the Trinity cannot change while, at the same time, clinging to an overly literal interpretation of John 1:14, "the Word became flesh." Eranistes, like Cyril, prefers to adhere to the biblical language, but Orthodoxus presses the point, insisting that the passage must be understood to mean that the Word took a complete humanity. Without this qualification, he reasons, the Word has either changed into flesh (which would compromise his immutable nature as God) or he has only appeared to be human (which is docetism). In a similar way, Orthodoxus suggests, we must interpret a variety of texts, including some of Cyril's other favorites, such as Philippians 2:6-8 and Hebrews 2:14-17.⁶²

On the one hand, the first dialogue does underscore Theodoret's fears that a one-nature Christology would overwhelm the humanity of the incarnate Word; in this sense it fleshes out the anti-Apollinarian theme introduced in the prologue. However, the motive for this fear seems to be that such a Christology leaves God defenseless against mutability, change, and suffering. Theodoret is asking a very basic question: If we accept as a point of departure the conclusion that God the Word cannot change and the Word's humanity is a real humanity, what kind of Christology must we have?⁶³ In other words, his commitment to divine impassibility pushes his Christology in a certain direction. The problem for Theodoret, or at least Orthodoxus, is that this full humanity must not be allowed to come too close to the immutable God.

In the second dialogue, "The Unconfused," Orthodoxus attempts to give the monophysite position of Eranistes a fair hearing. Both agree at the beginning that any christological synthesis must avoid the twin perils of Arius and Apollinarius. For Orthodoxus, however, only uncompromising insistence on the two-nature formula will accomplish this; he seems especially worried about degrading the dignity of the Godhead. "Is it not impious and shocking," he declaims, "while main-

⁶² See 89.27-32; 205.6-12.

⁶³ See 65.11 ff.

taining that a soul united to a body is in no way subject to confusion, to deny to the Godhead of the Lord of the universe the power to maintain its own nature unconfounded or to keep within its proper bounds the humanity which he assumed? Is it not, I say, impious to mix the distinct, and to commingle the separate? The idea of one nature gives ground for suspicion of this confusion."⁶⁴ In this dialogue Orthodoxus and Eranistes do not disagree about the full humanity of the Word incarnate, but, in Theodoret's view, Eranistes fails to protect the divine nature from mutation or contamination.

The final dialogue, "The Impassible," cuts, as Frances Young says, "nearer the bone."⁶⁵ Clearly Orthodoxus understands that suffering must be attributed to the one Christ, but he recoils at Eranistes' willingness to say that God suffered, even when he does so with qualification. When challenged to explain how he could say this, Eranistes falls back on the old formula of Cyril: "we say that the Word suffered impassibly" (*apathos auton peponthenai phamen*). To this Orthodoxus retorts: "Who in their senses would ever stand for such foolish riddles? No one has ever heard of an impassible passion or an immortal mortality. The impassible has never undergone passion, and what has undergone passion could not possibly be impassible."⁶⁶ Theodoret cannot understand what Eranistes could possibly mean. According to John McGuckin, for Cyril, affirming that the impassible suffered impassibly was his way "deliberately to [state] both sides of the paradox with equal force and absolute seriousness of intent, refusing to minimize either reality."⁶⁷ For Theodoret, this could only be a foolish intellectual carelessness that blasphemed the Trinity and compromised God's transcendence. This, not a deep concern for the history and humanity of Jesus, best accounts for the form and shape of his Christology. Cyril and Theodoret read the same narratives about Christ. Both knew that the texts described a suffering Christ. Cyril was more willing than Theodoret, however, to allow the particular language of the text a kind of priority, even when doing so meant that one would be forced to speak of things like impassible suffering. For Cyril, the text controls his thinking about impassibility; for Theodoret, impassibility controls his thinking about the text.

CONCLUSION

The evidence assembled here indicates that the impassibility of God and not the humanity of Jesus was the driving force behind the christological debates of the fifth century. In a sense, we should understand these debates as the unfolding of the implications of the Council of Nicaea and not as a shift of attention from God to the human. While Nicene theologians pondered the mystery of the Son's relation-

⁶⁴ Ibid. 139.33–140.4.

⁶⁶ 218.30–34.

⁶⁵ Young, *Nicaea to Chalcedon* 282.

⁶⁷ McGuckin, *St. Cyril* 185.

ship to the Father in the inner life of the godhead, the theologians of the fifth century fixed their attention on the Son and the Son's economy; this differs significantly from the modern interest in the historical details of the human Jesus. Still, it would certainly be a great mistake to say that the humanity of Christ was unimportant. Cyril, Nestorius, and Theodoret all understood that minimizing the human compromised our salvation; as Gregory Nazianzus had pointed out several decades before the controversy, "what is not assumed is not redeemed." None of the three theologians under consideration here forgot that Jesus was a man, and it is simply wrong to characterize Nestorius and Theodoret as more appreciative of the humanity of Christ than Cyril.

When it came to developing the implications of this conviction, however, Cyril and the Antiochenes followed different paths. What would happen to God if God came into direct contact with human nature and was affected by the passions associated with that nature? While none of these authors was willing to say that God suffered in God's own nature because of the Incarnation, when it came to the economy of the Word the issues were different. From Cyril's perspective, talk about Christ should highlight the fullness of God's participation with us. Theopaschite language could be used both because the Scriptures had used it and because it heightened the sense of wonder before God's voluntary condescension. The entire weight of Cyril's Christology pushes on the paradox of Incarnation: the infinite has become finite, the impassible passible, the divine human. For him, the Antiochenes feared the implications of the Scriptures, preferring their philosophical commitments to the plain sense of the narrative. Oddly, Cyril, who as an Alexandrian is supposed to be more "allegorical" in his interpretations, in this instance is more "literal."

Nestorius and Theodoret surely had a point when they worried that Cyril's Christology blurred the distinction between God and human, threatening God's "godness." Nicaea raised the stakes: the Son is no mediator, but God himself. If Jesus is this Son incarnate, and if the New Testament insists on speaking of him as experiencing normal human pathos, then why should one not say, with Cyril, that the Word suffered? Such a claim made the Antiochenes exceptionally uneasy because it seemed to drag God down into the mess of humanity and compromise his divinity. The specter of Arius and Eunomius loomed large. Yet, is their resistance not basically a reluctance to affirm the fullness of God's participation with us, a fear of even contemplating the possibility of a truly radical kenosis? With a two-nature Christology the divine rests safely isolated from the human, tucked up in heaven and transcendent. How, one wonders now as Cyril wondered then, are we saved? Is this not just another form of mediation? Has God touched the world at all? The Antiochenes clung to a mediated presence, while Cyril, albeit with plenty of qualification, announced that God's presence in Christ was unmediated and direct:

Jesus is the "one incarnate nature of the Word."⁶⁸ Jesus is the second person of the Trinity. Jesus is the New Adam, and because of him we share in the future of the new humanity.

Based upon these observations, I would argue that textbook accounts of the christological controversy are in need of revision. We should take care not to imply that somehow the Antiochene theologians anticipated modern historical method in their discussion of the humanity of Christ. Antiochene theologians had no interest at all in anything like the modern attempt to recover a historical Jesus. Moreover, Antiochene Christology, far from being a low Christology, actually worried more about protecting the Son's divinity than it worried about the details of Jesus's human life. As a Christology, it was fairly "high." Indeed, it is striking how infrequently Jesus is mentioned; the term of preference is "Christ." If my reading of the controversy is correct and the fullness of God's presence is really at the heart of what Cyril sought to affirm, then it would be fair to say that Cyril's position is logically the same as Nicaea, while, ironically, the Antiochene position has more in common with anti-Nicene theology. Nicaea affirmed the unmediated participation of the Son in God; Cyril affirmed the unmediated participation of the Son with us. Anti-Nicenes and Antiochenes both proposed mediation as a way to minimize the implications of a Christian narrative that seemed to speak recklessly about God and humanity drawing near each other. While we need not say that Nestorius and Theodoret were absolutely wrong in their desire to insist that God and humanity must never be confused, it seems to me that there is good reason that the Christian tradition has preferred Cyril's vision to theirs.⁶⁹

Finally, although, Nestorius and Theodoret were not interested in history and the human Jesus, there is a way in which they do anticipate modern Christology. In the same way that ancient Antiochene thinkers kept God and humanity separate by focusing on God's impassibility, many contemporary theologians keep God and humanity separate by focusing on Jesus and Jesus's humanity. Jesus is not the unmediated presence of the second person of the Trinity, but a man, with a profound sense of God, who points the way to the transcendent mystery beyond himself. Ironically, some of these theologians would also claim without hesitation that God suffers.⁷⁰ Yet we might ask

⁶⁸ On the importance of this phrase in the history of the controversy, see McGuckin, *St. Cyril* 207–12.

⁶⁹ The christological language of Chalcedon was heavily influenced by the language of Cyril and only minimally by Antiochene notions; see McGuckin, *St. Cyril* 226–43. McGuckin's arguments challenge the more popular notion that Chalcedon was a victory for Leo and Antiochene two-nature thought. McGuckin offers a convincing linguistic analysis of the Chalcedonian formula that suggests a very different assessment of the Council.

⁷⁰ For example Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 3–16, 246–72; see also Russell R. Reno, "Feminist Theology as Modern Project," *Pro Ecclesia* 5 (1996) 405–26.

how. Where does God contact the world? How does a god who is absolutely transcendent contact our pathos at all? If we do not have a sufficiently incarnational Christology, we may even today complain with Cyril: "they do not understand the economy."⁷¹

Reflecting on the mystery of suffering, Annie Dillard asks the question, "Does God touch the world at all?"⁷² Were Cyril to respond to this question, he would have said yes. Nestorius and Theodoret, however, were not so sure. And many moderns would answer yes but not specify where God does touch the world. Perhaps the lesson we can best learn from the christological controversy of the fifth century is that Christian theology, in particular Christology, should pay attention to the particular words that narrate to us the story of salvation. Cyril recognized in those narratives shocking claims about the fullness of God's participation with us in the concrete person of Jesus. He understood that those narratives provide the grammar of Christian discourse, and that to those narratives other convictions, for example the impassibility of God, should be subordinate. Nestorius and Theodoret backed away from the implications of the Incarnation. Cyril did not.

⁷¹ Second Letter to Succensus, Wickham 90.18–19.

⁷² Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 47–49.



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