

The Christology of the Coptic Orthodox Church

Fr. Shenouda M. Ishak and Dn. Anthony Bibawy

1. Introduction

The Christology of the Coptic Orthodox Church is none other than the Miaphysite Alexandrian Christology as expounded by its great theologians and patriarchs, mainly Athanasius (20th) and Cyril of Alexandria (24th), and defended thereafter by their successors, the most prominent being Dioscorus (25th), Timothy II (Aelurus) (26th), and Theodosius (33rd). This Christological tradition is based on the elucidation of several Scriptural passages, primarily *John* 1:14: “the Word became flesh”; as well as *Philippians* 2:5-8: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation (Gr. *ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν*; lit: “emptied Himself”), taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross”. According to such passages and in agreement with Nicene Orthodoxy, in the understanding of these Egyptian Fathers the *Logos*, the Son, the Word, is eternally begotten of the Father and equal to Him, being of the same essence with Him (*homoousios*). Nevertheless, He is the same Word, *Logos*, and Son, who took upon Himself a full humanity with body, soul, and spirit, and became consubstantial with us therefore becoming Emmanuel, i.e. God with us. Thus, He has a double consubstantiality, with the Father according to His divinity, and with us in His humanity, forming “one composite nature and *hypostasis*” but without mixing, confusion, or alteration.

For the Alexandrian Fathers, these were basic and necessary understandings of the nature of Christ and no different than the Antiochenes, but there was further elucidation needed as to the relationship between His divinity and humanity. The debates with the Antiochenes and those sympathetic to their Christology were founded upon different understandings of this relationship between the divinity and humanity in the Person of Christ. For the Alexandrians, Christ is one Lord, one Son, one nature, one *hypostasis*, one activity, and one will, i.e. He is the “one incarnate nature of the divine *Logos*”.¹ As is stated in the pre-communion confession at the end of the divine liturgies used in the Coptic Orthodox Church: “Amen. Amen. Amen. I believe, I believe, I believe and confess to the last breath; that this is the Life-giving Flesh that Your Only-Begotten Son, our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ took from our lady, the lady of us all, the holy Mother of God, Saint Mary. He made It One with His divinity without mingling, without confusion, and without alteration (...) Truly, I

¹ The appellation of “Miaphysites” is always used by the Oriental Orthodox Churches to express the Orthodox formula of St. Cyril of Alexandria “One incarnate nature of the divine *Logos*”.

believe that His divinity departed not from His humanity for a single moment nor the twinkling of an eye (...)"

This was not merely a misunderstanding and difference of semantics based on differences of terminologies and definitions between the two Christological schools, but it was based upon different ontological premises that have serious implications on fundamental Trinitarian, soteriological, sacramental, and anthropological Christian theologies. Unfortunately, these differences persist until our day and time to varied degrees between the Chalcedonian and the non-Chalcedonian Churches (Oriental Orthodox; Miaphysite)² in spite of ongoing ecumenical dialogue among the two groups.

In the following sections, the contribution of some of these Egyptian Fathers to the understanding of Coptic Orthodox Christology will be elaborated in a chronological fashion beginning with Athanasius in the fourth century until Theodosius in the sixth century at the time of Justinian I.

2. *Athanasius*

When Athanasius, the 20th Patriarch of Alexandria, wrote most of his works discussing the nature of Christ, it was in the setting of the Arian controversy that consumed the great majority of his patriarchate and life. The main focus of his anti-Arian works was apologetic in responding to the attacks of the Arians against the doctrine of the divinity of the Son and His equality with the Father. However, his Christology was not limited to mere anti-Arian apologetics and polemics. The depth of his understanding of the Person of Christ was much more comprehensive and permeating into the divine economy for the salvation, redemption, and restoration of humanity to immortality and incorruption.

The importance of the eternity of the Son and His equality with the Father was not just an argument revolving around ontology, but equally so the sufficiency of the Ransom of the Cross for all of humanity and the restoration of the image of God in which man was created. The Ransom was sufficient because He is the sinless God Who took flesh and offered Himself of His own will as the pure and impeccable Sacrifice on behalf of Adam's transgression and for the forgiveness of sins. The Sacrifice was eternal because He is the eternal God, Son of the Father, Who offered Himself up once for all. He is the only One Who is able to restore the Image since He is God after Whose image man was created. Since He is the Life and the Resurrection, only He can bring man back to immortality and incorruption through His Resurrection.

The following quotes express these aspects of Athanasius' Christology:

The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father's Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection. It was by surrendering to death the body which He had taken, as an offering and

² The non-Chalcedonian, or Oriental Orthodox family of Churches includes the Coptic Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Malankara Orthodox Syrian (Indian) Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox Täwäḥädo, and Eritrean Orthodox Täwäḥädo Churches.

sacrifice free from every stain, that He forthwith abolished death for His human brethren by the offering of the equivalent. For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required. Naturally also, through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection. For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all.³

What, then, was God to do? What else could He possibly do, being God, but renew His Image in mankind, so that through it men might once more come to know Him? And how could this be done save by the coming of the very Image Himself, our Saviour Jesus Christ? Men could not have done it, for they are only made after the Image; nor could angels have done it, for they are not the images of God. The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone, the Image of the Father, Who could recreate man made after the Image.

In order to effect this re-creation, however, He had first to do away with death and corruption. Therefore He assumed a human body, in order that in it death might once for all be destroyed, and that men might be renewed according to the Image. The Image of the Father only was sufficient for this need.

He then proceeds to give his famous illustration of a stained portrait that can only be re-drawn if the subject of the portrait comes and sits for it again.⁴

Who was made the Ransom for the sins of all.⁵

The clarity and scope of Athanasius' Christological teaching is further demonstrated in his *Letter to Epictetus*. From this *Letter* "we understand that some heterodox groups, having proceeded on the assumption, incidentally combated by Athanasius, that the Manhood of Christ was a *Hypostasis* or Person, and since the Trinity is a trinity of Persons, not of Essences, they argued that if Christ is truly man having a distinct personality from the Son then the Triad will be a Tetrad. To avoid this, one class identified the *Logos* and the Man, either by assuming that the *Logos* was changed into flesh, or that the flesh was itself non-natural and of the Divine Essence. The other class excluded the Man Jesus born of the Virgin from the Trinity, explaining His relation to God on the lines of the heretics Marcellus and his pupil Photinus or the Nestorians".⁶

Thus he writes:

8. (...) Again, they will blush deeply who have even entertained the possibility of a Tetrad instead of a Triad resulting, if it were said that the Body was derived from Mary. For if (they argue) we say the Body is of one Essence with the Word, the Triad remains a Triad; for then the Word imports no foreign element into it; but if we admit that the Body derived from Mary is human, it follows, since the Body is foreign in Essence, and the Word is in it, that the addition of the Body causes a Tetrad instead of a Triad.

9. When they argue thus, they fail to perceive the contradiction in which they involve themselves. For even though they say that the Body is not from Mary, but is coessential with the Word, yet none the less (the very point they dissemble, to avoid being credited with their real opinion) this on their own premises can be proved to involve a Tetrad. For as the Son,

³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, Tr. and ed. by a religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), II. 9, 35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, III. 13-14, 40-42.

⁵ *Ibid.*, VI. 40, 73-74.

⁶ Shenouda M. Ishak, *Christology and the Council of Chalcedon* (Denver, CO: Outskirts Press, 2013), 19.

according to the Fathers, is coessential with the Father, but is not the Father Himself, but is called coessential, as Son with Father, so the Body, which they call coessential with the Word, is not the Word Himself, but a distinct entity. But if so, on their own shewing, their Triad will be a Tetrad. For the true, really perfect and indivisible Triad is not accessible to addition as is the Triad imagined by these persons. And how do these remain Christians who imagine another God in addition to the true one? For, once again, in their other fallacy one can see how great is their folly. For if they think because it is contained and stated in the Scriptures, that the Body of the Saviour is human and derived from Mary, that a Tetrad is substituted for a Triad, as though the Body created an addition, they go very far wrong, so much so as to make the creature equal to the Creator, and suppose that the Godhead can receive an addition. And they have failed to perceive that the Word is become Flesh, not by reason of an addition to the Godhead, but in order that the flesh may rise again. Nor did the Word proceed from Mary that He might be bettered, but that He might ransom the human race. How then can they think that the Body, ransomed and quickened by the Word, made an addition in respect of Godhead to the Word that had quickened it? For on the contrary, a great addition has accrued to the human Body itself from the fellowship and union of the Word with it. For instead of mortal it is become immortal; and, though an animal body, it is become spiritual, and though made from earth it entered the heavenly gates. The Triad, then, although the Word took a body from Mary, is a Triad, being inaccessible to addition or diminution; but it is always perfect, and in the Triad one Godhead is recognized.⁷

Although the Nestorian controversy had not yet occurred, Athanasius indirectly anticipates this particular weakness in Antiochene Christology approximately a century earlier.

3. Cyril of Alexandria

Cyril of Alexandria, the 24th Patriarch of Alexandria, continued in the Christological tradition of Athanasius. His earlier writings prior to the Nestorian controversy were mostly exegetical but imbued with dogmatic teachings, particularly Christological to continue answering the Arian factions still present and active along with Jews and pagans in Alexandria. Once he got word of Nestorius' opposition to the title of "*Theotokos*",⁸ and felt that there was some resulting disturbance within the monastic communities in Egypt, he wrote his letter to the monks of Egypt in 429. Cyril's concern was not that this was merely an injustice to the Holy Virgin Mary, but much more significantly a heresy against Emmanuel, the Son of God Who took flesh and was born from her.

From Nestorius' sermons as well as his replies to the first two letters written to him by Cyril, it became much more evident that Nestorius was distinguishing the Son of God from the man Jesus such that they were not unified in nature or *hypostasis*, but rather only by grace or conjunction.⁹ This

⁷ *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* [NPNF], ed. Ph. Schaff, and H. Wace (repr. Grand Rapids, 1951), second series, vol. 4, 573-574.

⁸ Nestorius' preference for the title *Christotokos* is discussed in John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 27-29.

⁹ Nestorius preached a *prosopic* union with the understanding that *prosopon* could be used in two different senses, either "subjectivity" or "person" similar to *hypostasis*, or "face; mask," i.e. the appearance of something or someone. The meaning of *prosopic* union for Nestorius was that Christ was two *prosopon* (i.e. two subjects) that are interconnected so that the perception or appearance of

created the same concern and more so for Cyril than what Athanasius had expressed in his *Epistle to Epictetus*. If the Word had not made that flesh His own resulting in one Christ, one nature, and one *hypostasis*, then God is no longer a trinity, but a quaternity with there being a fourth *hypostasis*, the Christ or the man Jesus, worshiped along with the Holy Trinity. Furthermore, if the Word had not suffered and died in the flesh then redemption was not fulfilled. Consequently, if it is not the flesh of the Son of God that is partaken of in the Eucharist, then that flesh is not life-giving, i.e. that of a mere man, making it useless and we would thus not be granted immortality and incorruption by partaking of it.

The following quotes from Cyril of Alexandria's works should give a fuller picture of the key aspects of his Christology.

3a. Double Consubstantiality

In his letter to Acacius of Melitene, St. Cyril explains:

(...) who was begotten before ages from the Father according to divinity and 'in recent days' for us and for our salvation was begotten of Mary, the Holy Virgin, according to His humanity, that the same one is consubstantial with the Father according to His divinity and consubstantial with us according to His humanity (...) He is the same before ages and 'in recent days', and clearly that He is from God the Father as God, and from a woman according to the flesh as man. For how might He be thought to be consubstantial with us according to His humanity and yet begotten of the Father according to His divinity, I say, unless the same one is thought to be and said to be God and man as well?¹⁰

3b. Hypostatic Union

One of Cyril's primary concerns was preserving the single-subjectivity of Christ while maintaining the integrity of His divinity and humanity. He expressed this in terms of a *hypostatic* union. "The person of the *Logos* is the sole personal subject of all the conditions of his existence, divine or human. The *Logos* is, needless to say, the sole personal subject of all his own acts as eternal Lord (the creation, the inspiration of the ancient prophets, and so on), but after the incarnation the same one is also the personal subject directing all his actions performed within this time and this space, embodied acts which form the context of the human life of Christ in Palestine. The phrase 'the selfsame' recurs time and again in his writings as a way of insisting on this doctrine of single-subjectivity as the keystone of the entire Christology debate".¹¹

The *hypostatic* union (*henosis kath' hypostasin*) means that, for Cyril, "the union of *two* distinct levels of reality, Godhead and manhood, takes place dynamically because there is only one individual subject presiding over both, the one person of the incarnate deity. He was well aware, however, that *hypostasis* had another technical meaning (...) connoting 'concretely realized existence' or

them in the end becomes one *prosopon*. For further discussion concerning Nestorius' Christology, see McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria*, 126-174.

¹⁰ Ishak, *Christology and the Council of Chalcedon*, 178f.

¹¹ Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. and ed. J. A. McGuckin (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 40-41.

simply 'real'. He delights in running the *two* associations together in his use of 'hypostatic union'; that is (a) the union is effected because there is only one personal subject of the divine and human actions, the same one being at once God and Man, and (b) the union is a real and concrete event, or as we might say 'a substantive reality' not a cosmetic exercise".¹²

In his *Third Letter to Nestorius* (par. 4), Cyril "talks of the *hypostatic* union as a 'natural union', by which he means a radically concrete union 'such as the soul of man has with its own body'".¹³

In his *Second Letter to Nestorius* (paragraphs 4 and 6), Cyril proposed the doctrine of *hypostatic* union to summarize his central objections to Nestorius' theories:

Because the Word *hypostatically* united human reality to himself 'for us and for our salvation,' and came forth from a woman, this is why He is said to have been begotten in a fleshly manner (...) but if we reject this *hypostatic* union as either impossible or unfitting, then we fall into saying that there are two sons.

The *hypostatic* union epitomizes Cyril's key point about the Lord Christ being one. It demands a clear affirmation that the *Logos* was the sole direct subject of all the incarnate acts, and this was something Nestorius was loath to admit so simply. Again, in his third letter, Cyril used the phrase to push him towards such a view: "We reject the term conjunction (*synapheia*) as being insufficient to signify the union (...) As we have already said, the Word of God, *hypostatically* united to the flesh, is God of all and master of all" (parag. 5; cf. Anathemas 2 and 3).

3c. Natural Union

The most celebrated Christological formula of Cyril is the *Mia Physis* "One Nature", from which the faithful followers of the true Cyrillian Orthodoxy derive their name Miaphysites. It is a confession that our Lord Jesus Christ is "one incarnate nature of God the *Logos*" (Gr. μία φύσις Θεοῦ Λόγου σεσαρκωμένη). The *Mia Physis* formula, therefore, means "One *Physis* of God the Word made flesh". Cyril used the "natural union" along with the "*hypostatic* union" to make clear that any dividing of the one Person, Jesus Christ, the *Logos* incarnate, is altogether impossible.

In Cyril's letter 17, the Third Letter to Nestorius, written on behalf of the Synod which he held in Alexandria in late 430, the "natural union" (ἕνωσις φυσική) is expressed in the following words:

4. (...) We do not say that the Word of God has dwelt in Him who was born of the Holy Virgin, as if in an ordinary man, for this might imply that Christ was a God-bearing man. Even though it is said that: 'The Word dwelt among us' (*John* 1:14) and 'all the fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily' in Christ (*Colossians* 2:9), nonetheless we understand that in terms of His becoming flesh we must not define the indwelling in His case as if it were just the same as the way He is said to dwell in the saints; for He was naturally united to, but not

¹² McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria*, 212.

¹³ *Ibid.*, fn. 66.

changed into, flesh, in that kind of indwelling which the soul of man can be said to have with its own body.

5. There is, therefore, One Christ and Son and Lord, not as though a man simply had a conjunction with God as though in a unity of honour or sovereignty, for equality of honour does not unite natures. Indeed Peter and John have equality of honour with one another since they are both apostles and holy disciples, but these two are not one. We do not conceive the manner of the conjunction in terms of juxtaposition (for this is not enough for a natural union, nor indeed in terms of a relational participation in the way that ‘being joined to the Lord we are one spirit with Him’ as it is written (*1 Corinthians* 6:17)). In fact we reject the term ‘conjunction’ as being insufficient to signify the union.¹⁴

The Third of the Twelve Anathematisms of Cyril and his synod, subjoined to the above-quoted letter 17 rejects any separation of the two subsistences (*hypostases*) after the union, since they are brought together in “a natural union” (“ἕνωσιν φυσικήν”). Thus it states: “If anyone shall after the [*hypostatic*] union divide the *hypostases* in the one Christ, joining them by that connexion alone, which happens according to worthiness, or even authority and power, and not rather by a coming together, which is made by natural union: let him be anathema”.¹⁵

3d. Four Adverbs

In his *letter* 39 written to John of Antioch, Cyril states what was understood later on to be “the four adverbs”:¹⁶

(...) for there is One Lord Jesus Christ (*1 Corinthians* 8:6), even though we do indeed take cognizance of the difference of natures *out of which* we say the ineffable union was formed.

9. Those who say that there was a mixture or confusion or blending of God the Word with the flesh, let your Holiness think fit to stop their mouths, for such people are probably spreading such rumours about me, as though I had thought or said this. But I am so far from thinking anything of the kind that I consider that anyone who thinks there could ever be the shadow of a change (*James* 1:17) in the divine nature of the Word must be completely mad. For he ever remains what he is and does not change or undergo alteration. Moreover, all of us confess that the divine Word is impassible, even if in his all-wise economy of the mystery he is seen to attribute to himself the sufferings that befall his own flesh. What is more, the all-wise Peter says: ‘And so Christ has suffered for us in the flesh,’ and not in the nature of the ineffable deity (*1 Peter* 4:1). He bears the suffering of his own flesh in an economic appropriation to himself, as I have said, so that we may believe him to be the Saviour of all...¹⁷

3e. Distinction “Only in Contemplation”

For Cyril, the *hypostatic* and natural union effected through the incarnation in the one Christ and one Son no longer allows the language of “two natures”¹⁸ or any

¹⁴ *Ep.* 17:4-5, quoted as trans. by McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria*, 269.

¹⁵ NPNF, second series, vol. 14, 211.

¹⁶ Ishak, *Christology and the Council of Chalcedon*, 255-285, cf. without commingling (or confusion) (*asyngchytos*), without change (*atreptos*), without separation (*achoristos*) and without division (*adiairetos*).

¹⁷ *St. Cyril, letter 39*, parag(s). 8-9, in McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria*, 346-347.

¹⁸ [Editor’s note:] *St. Cyril* admits the Orthodoxy of two nature language (under specific qualifications excluding a sense of double personhood); see H. Van Loon, *The Dyophysite Christology of Cyril of Alexandria*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 96 (Boston: Brill, 2009); John A.

sort of duality even though He is fully divine and fully human. Any sort of dualistic language after the union would suggest that a full union of natures had not occurred. That being stated, he does allow for the mind to perceive only by contemplation how the two can be joined together. Thus in his letter to Acacius of Melitene, he writes (*Ep. 40*, paragraphs 12-14):

12. (...) when we have the idea of the elements of the one and unique Son and Lord Jesus Christ, we speak of two natures being united; but after the union, the duality has been abolished and we believe the Son's nature to be one, since he is one Son, yet become man and incarnate. Though we affirm that the Word is God on becoming incarnate and made man, any suspicion of change is to be repudiated entirely because he remained what he was, and we are to acknowledge the union as totally free from merger.

13. (...) we have written in the Chapters: 'Whoever allocates the terms to two persons or subjects and attaches some to the man considered separately from the Word of God, some as divine to the Word of God the Father alone, shall be anathema'. By no manner of means have we abolished the difference between the terms though we have caused their separate division to a Son, the Word of the Father, and to a man thought of as a separate woman-born son, to be discarded. The nature of the Word is, by general consent, one but we recognize that he is incarnate and became man, as I have already stated.

14. (...) Accordingly when the mode of the incarnation is the object of curiosity the human mind is bound to observe two things joined together in union with each other mysteriously and without merger, yet it in no way divides what are united but believes and firmly accepts that the product of both elements is one God, Son, Christ and Lord.¹⁹

So no distinction was possible in reality as such. Only a purely rational distinction can be made.

3f. One Activity and One Will

A Christology of *hypostatic* and natural union allows for only one will and one activity in Christ whether it be His sayings, His suffering, His miracles, or any other activity attributed to the one Incarnate *Logos*. One example of Cyril's teaching on this point is from his *Quod Unus sit Christus* (i.e. That Christ is One) written c. 438 as a dialogue. Here are some selections from this dialogue by way of dispute with Hermias represented by the letter "B" and St. Cyril's reply represented by the letter "A":

"B. So in the case of the evangelical and apostolic preaching, one must not divide the words or the acts in this way?"

"A. Certainly not, at least not as referring to two persons or two *hypostases* divided from one another and completely diverging into distinct and separate spheres. For there is only one Son, the Word who was made man for our sake. I would say that everything refers to Him, words and deeds, both those that befit the deity, as well as those which are human".

McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy. Its history, theology and texts*, Supplements, 23 to *Vigiliae Christianae* (Leiden-New York-Cologne: Brill, 1994; repr. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004) and articles in this volume (including note 25 in the article by John A. McGuckin).

¹⁹ Cyril of Alexandria, *Select Letters* ed. and tr. by L. R. Wickham (Oxford, 1983) 49, 51; quoted in Ishak, *Christology and the Council of Chalcedon*, 287-288.

“B. So even if He is said to have been wearied by the journey (*John* 4:6), to have hungered (*Matthew* 4:2), and to have fallen asleep (*Matthew* 8:24), would it be proper, tell me, to attribute these things which are petty and demeaning to God the Word?”

“A. Such things would not be at all fitting to the Word, if we considered him nakedly, as it were, not yet made flesh, or before He had descended into the self-emptying. Your thoughts are right on this. But once He is made man and emptied out, what harm can this inflict on Him? Just as we say that the flesh became His very own, in the same way the weakness of that flesh became His very own in an economic appropriation according to the terms of the unification. So, He is ‘made like His brethren in all things except sin alone’ (*Hebrews* 2:17). Do not be astonished if we say that He has made the weakness of the flesh His own along with the flesh itself. He even attributed to himself those external outrages that came upon Him from the roughness of the Jews, saying through the voice of the Psalmist: ‘They divided my garments among them, and cast lots for my clothes’ (*Psalms* 22:18), and again: ‘All those who saw me sneered at me, they wagged their tongues, they shook their heads’ (*Psalms* 22:7).²⁰

A (...) Since He is God by nature, He is conceived of as beyond suffering, and then He chose to suffer so that He might save those under corruption, and so became like those on earth in all respects, and underwent birth from a woman according to the flesh. As I have said, He made His very own a body capable of tasting death and capable of coming back to life again, so that He Himself might remain impassible and yet be said to suffer in his own flesh. In this way He saved what was lost (*Matthew* 18:11) and openly said: ‘I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his own life for the sake of the sheep’. And again: ‘No one takes my life from me; I lay it down of my own accord. I have the authority both to lay it down and to take it up’ (*John* 10:11, 18). It does not pertain to any one of us, nor to any common man, to have the authority to lay down his life and take it up again. Yet the Only-Begotten and True Son has laid it down and taken it up again, thereby pulling us out of the snares of death.²¹

3g. *Formulary of Reunion* (433)

The *Formulary of Reunion* was the letter of reconciliation sent by John of Antioch with his Christological statement to Cyril to mend their split after the Council of Ephesus, 431. Even though it stated a “union of two natures”, we think that the language was ambiguous enough to allow for an Antiochene interpretation of this phrase to mean that Christ remained “in two natures” after the Incarnation. Therefore, Cyril in his *Epistle 39* to John of Antioch accepted the *Formulary* with some important addenda, primarily the phrase “the same”, to emphasize the *hypostatic* and natural union in the one Christ and deter from any Antiochene interpretation. Unfortunately, we think that this did not suffice in averting criticism on both sides. The ardent anti-Nestorians criticized Cyril for accepting the *Formulary* and the Antiochenes felt that Cyril had reneged on his previous stance. Cyril had no choice but to clarify his position in letters to Acacius of Melitene and Succensus of Diocaesarea restating his belief in the *hypostatic* and natural union.

Over time, it became blatantly obvious that the Antiochenes were readily willing to anathematize Nestorius (except Theodoret of Cyrillus who only did so under pressure in session VIII of the Council of Chalcedon) yet continue to preach Nestorianism under the names of its founders, Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Therefore, it appeared that the *Formulary of Reunion*

²⁰ McGuckin, *On the Unity of Christ*, 107.

²¹ *Ibid.* 127f.

had no real effect in reconciling the two opposed Christologies of Alexandria and Antioch.²²

Physis for the Alexandrians was understood as a double notion of physical attributes and concurrently a concrete reality. Therefore, *physis* was in a sense considered to be synonymous with *hypostasis* with the understanding that *hypostasis* meant a concrete individual reality.²³

Therefore, as Timothy II (Aelurus) clarified in his *Refutation of the Synod of Chalcedon and the Tome of Leo*: “There is no nature (i.e. *substantia*) which has not [its] *hypostasis*, and there is no *hypostasis* which exists without its *prosopon*; if, then, there are two natures, there are of necessity two *prosopa*; but if there are two *prosopa*, there are also two Christs, as these new teachers preach”.²⁴

This is what has separated the Antiochenes from Cyril and the Coptic Orthodox Church since the fifth century until our day and time. We think that the *Formulary of Reunion* did not provide a solution, because the “union of two natures” for the Antiochenes meant a union of attributes and not concrete realities in the fuller understanding of *physis*.

The sensitivity to this very point and the rejection of any manner of two-nature Christology after the incarnation is expressed by Dioscorus and the Second Council of Ephesus: According to the Acts of the Second Council of Ephesus (449 A.D.), which was preserved and read in the first session of the Council of Chalcedon (paragraphs 492-495): “492. Dioscorus bishop of Alexandria said: ‘Do you allow this language—speaking of two natures after the incarnation?’ 493. The holy council said: ‘Anathema to whoever says this!’ 494. Dioscorus bishop of Alexandria said: ‘Since I need both your voices and a show of hands, let anyone who is unable to cry out raise his hand.’ 495. The holy council said: ‘Anathema to whoever says two!’”

“During the reading at Chalcedon some Oriental bishops tried to deny this (I:496)”. The reaction was as follows: “(I:497) The most devout Egyptian bishops said: “We said it then and we say it now””.²⁵

4. Dioscorus (444-454)

In order to discuss the unjust condemnation of Dioscorus at the Council of Chalcedon, (451), there would need to be a detailed discussion of the minutes of the Home Synod of Constantinople, (448), the Second Synod of Ephesus, (449), as well as the Council of Chalcedon. However, this discussion is beyond the

²² For a detailed discussion of the *Formulary of Reunion*, its Antiochene Dyophysite interpretation, and its aftermath, see McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria*, 114-121; Ishak, *Christology and the Council of Chalcedon*, 97-102, 587-606.

²³ For further elucidation on the definitions and progression of understanding of *ousia*, *physis*, *hypostasis* and *prosopon*, see McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria*, 138-145.

²⁴ Ishak, *Christology and the Council of Chalcedon*, 591 quoting ed. Nau, *Patrologia Orientalis* xiii, fasc. 2, 228f., as quoted in, R. V. Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon* (London: S.P.C.K., 1953), 260.

²⁵ Ishak, *Christology and the Council of Chalcedon*, 590, quoting Richard Price and Michael Gaddis, *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon* vol. 1 (Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 219.

scope of this article.²⁶ The focus here will be the exoneration of Eutyches at Second Ephesus, Dioscorus' conditional condemnation of Eutyches at the Council of Chalcedon, as well as his Miaphysite Christology.

Leo of Rome had named the Second Council of Ephesus, (449), *latrocinium*, the "Robber's Council", because his *Tome* was not read and Eutyches was not condemned in accordance with the Christology that he had expressed in that *Tome*.²⁷ Eutyches was even later condemned by both Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonian Fathers. Irrespective of Eutyches' real faith, the faith that he expressed at that Synod was considered Orthodox not only by Dioscorus, but by almost the entire Synod.²⁸ When later scrutinized at the first session of the Council of Chalcedon concerning his acceptance of Eutyches' faith, Dioscorus conditionally condemned him saying: "If Eutyches holds opinions contrary to the doctrines of the Church, he deserves not only punishment but hell fire. For my concern is for the catholic and apostolic faith and not for any human being. My mind is fixed on the Godhead, and I do not look to any person nor care about anything except my soul and the true and pure faith".²⁹

The reality is that Dioscorus was not a Monophysite or Eutychian. He was rather a staunch Miaphysite and Cyrillian who rejected the Antiochene formulation of a two-nature Christology.

One of his letters was written to the monks of the Henaton, a monastery situated nine miles from Alexandria, saying: "God the *Logos*, consubstantial with the Father, at the end of the ages for our redemption became consubstantial with man in the flesh, remaining what He was before".³⁰

Also in his letter to Secundinus, Dioscorus says:

Omitting many urgent matters, this I declare: that no man shall say that the holy flesh which our Lord took from the Virgin Mary by the operation of the Holy Spirit, in a manner which he himself knows, was different from and foreign to our body (...) For Paul has said (...) 'It was right that in everything He should be made like unto his brethren' (*Hebrews* 2:16, 17), and that word, 'in everything,' does not suffer the subtraction of any part of our nature; (...) the flesh which was born of Mary was compacted with the soul of the Redeemer, that reasonable and intelligent soul, without the seed of man (...) For He was like us, for us, and with us, not in phantasy, not in mere semblance, according to the heresy of the Manichaeans, but rather in actual reality from Mary the '*Theotokos*'. To comfort the desolate, and to repair the vessel that had been broken, He came to us new (...) He became by the dispensation like us, that we by his tender mercy might be like Him. He became man (...) that we by grace might become the

²⁶ For the English translation of the minutes of these councils with comments, please see Price, *Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*. There is further commentary and discussion in the follow-up to these volumes: *Chalcedon in Context, Church Councils 400-700*, ed. by Richard Price and Mary Whitby (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).

²⁷ Leo's *Tome* (*Ep.* 28) was a letter written to Flavian of Constantinople after the Home Synod in Constantinople, 448 CE, discussing his Christology in light of the condemnation of Eutyches. For a detailed discussion as to why the Oriental Orthodox family of Churches rejects the *Tome* of Leo, please see Ishak, *Christology and the Council of Chalcedon*, 565-681, especially 565-573.

²⁸ See discussion in Ishak, *Christology and the Council of Chalcedon*, 131-145.

²⁹ Chalcedon, the first session, parag. 168 in Price, *Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, vol. 1, 159.

³⁰ Ishak, *Christology and the Council of Chalcedon*, 180.

sons of God. This I think and believe; and if any man does not think this, he is a stranger to the faith of the apostles.³¹

Timothy II (Aelurus), Dioscorus' successor, quotes from two of his letters in few lines which represent the true faith. Thus Dioscorus writes: "My declaration is that no man shall assert that the flesh, which our Lord took from holy Mary, through the Holy Spirit, in a manner known only to Himself, is different from or alien to our body".³²

At the Council of Chalcedon, 451, where he was unjustly condemned, he makes several comments as to his true miaphysite Orthodox faith:

We speak of neither confusion nor division nor change. Anathema to whoever speaks of confusion or change or mixture.³³

Clearly Flavian was deposed for this reason, that he spoke of two natures after the union. But I have quotations from the holy Fathers Athanasius, Gregory and Cyril saying in numerous passages that one should not speak of two natures after the union but of one incarnate nature of the Word. I am being cast out together with the Fathers. I stand by the doctrines of the Fathers, and do not transgress in any respect. And I have these quotations not indiscriminately or in a haphazard form but in books. As all have asked, I too request that the rest be read.³⁴

I accept 'from two [natures]'; I do not accept 'two'. I am compelled to speak brashly: my soul is at stake.³⁵

Mark, this is what I object to: there are not two natures after the union.³⁶

The 'valiant Dioscorus', proclaiming to all hearers the oneness of the incarnate nature of Christ with the homely and obvious example drawn from Christ at the Cana marriage-feast became the type of the embattled ascetic leader proof against the intellectual pitfalls laid by his adversaries.³⁷

Furthermore, Anatolius of Constantinople stated: "It was not because of the faith that Dioscorus was deposed. He was deposed because he broke off communion with the lord Archbishop Leo and was summoned a third time and did not come".³⁸

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Price, *op. cit.*, parag. 263, 185.

³⁴ Ibid., parag. 299, 190.

³⁵ Ibid., parag. 332, 194.

³⁶ Ibid., parag. 341, 196.

³⁷ W. H. C. Frend, *Rise of the Monophysite Movement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 141; quoting the following, *ibid.*, n. 4, 141-142: "Makarius of Tkou relates how at Chalcedon Dioscorus put the argument to his accusers. 'When our Saviour Jesus Christ was invited to the marriage feast at Cana, was it in his quality as God or in his quality as man?' 'In his quality as man', they replied. 'Very well', said Dioscorus, 'And when he changed the water into wine, did he do that as God or as man?' 'Obviously as God', replied the assembly again. 'Well you see', concluded Dioscorus, 'that his divinity was never separated from his humanity and thus the separation proclaimed in the *Tome* of Leo was anathema!' See E. Amélineau, "Le Christianisme chez les anciens Coptes," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 14 (1886): 308-345 at 324.

³⁸ Price, *Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, vol. 2, 198, session V, parag. 14. It should be noted that Leo began with excommunicating Dioscorus at least six months prior to the Council of Chalcedon. For a full discussion of this accusation against Dioscorus, see Ishak, *Christology and the Council of Chalcedon*, 480-483.

He is moreover supposed to have written to Juvenal of Jerusalem, still at Chalcedon: “Cursed be anyone who assumes two natures in the Messiah after the indivisible unity...! Cursed be anyone who assumes in the Messiah two properties and two activities”.³⁹

Dioscorus is supposed to have written to Emperor Marcian: “How can the rebellious Leo have dared to open his mouth and blaspheme the Most High by saying: we must confess in the Messiah two natures and two characteristics and [two] activities, since the holy church confesses one nature of the incarnate God without mixing or change; [even in death] the divinity of my master was not separated from his humanity, not even for a moment.”⁴⁰

He furthermore stresses that the Lord Jesus Christ has never been divided in all his works. Thus, in the confession of faith which he is said to have made at Chalcedon he declares: “The Lord Jesus, Emmanuel, our God, has never been divided in all his works; but [he is] one only Lord, one only nature; he has only one will; and Godhead has been united with manhood, as the soul is united with the body. This is my declaration and confession—I, the least, Dioscorus, the poor”.⁴¹

Concerning the same point he also says: “I know full well, having been brought up in the faith, that He has been begotten of the Father as God, and that the Same has been begotten of Mary as man. See Him walking on the sea as man, and Creator of the heavenly hosts as God; see Him sleeping in the boat as man, and walking on the seas as God; see Him hungry as man, and bestowing nourishment as God; see Him thirsty as man, and giving drink as God; see Him stoned by the Jews as man, and worshipped by angels as God; see Him tempted as man, and driving away the demons as God; and similarly of many instances”.⁴²

5. Timothy Aelurus (454-477)

The repercussions of the Council of Chalcedon were devastating and longlasting. Those who remained loyal to Dioscorus and the Cyrillian Miaphysite faith in rejection of the two-nature Christology of the Chalcedonian definition and the *Tome* of Leo were unjustly labeled Eutychian and Monophysite. In fact, when real monophysites appeared in Egypt, Timothy II (Aelurus), the 26th Patriarch of Alexandria and successor of Dioscorus, wrote against them condemning their heresy just as he did the two-nature Christology of the Council of Chalcedon and

³⁹ Aloys Grillmeier with T. Hainthaler, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. II, part 4, tr. O. C. Dean (London: WJK, 1996), 34, quoting from Nau, F., in *Journal Asiatique* X, 1, 278, with Syriac text, 64.

⁴⁰ Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, quoting Nau, *Patrologia Orientalis*, 254, with Syriac text on 36.

⁴¹ This confession is found in a fragment of a lost work of Dioscorus in the Bohairic dialect of Coptic: ed. and trans. by W. H. P. Hatch, *Harvard Theological Review* (1926): 19, 377-384. Sellers (32, fn. 3) quoted this confession of Dioscorus with a comment saying: “if it is not his, it undoubtedly sums up his point of view”.

⁴² Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon*, 32; quoting *Chron. Zacharias of Mitylene* iii, I, trans. Hamilton and Brooks, pp. 45f.; S.G.F. Perry, *The Second Synod of Ephesus*, 392.

the *Tome* of Leo.⁴³ This is further expressed in the *Encyclical* of Basiliscus which he drafted along with Peter the Fuller of Antioch and which was accepted at the Third Synod of Ephesus, 476, where 700 bishops attended and condemned the Council of Chalcedon and the *Tome* of Leo.

6. *Theodosius (535-567)*

The line of non-Chalcedonian patriarchs of Alexandria remained faithful to the Cyrillian Miaphysite Christology and never accepted the Council of Chalcedon or the *Tome* of Leo. One of these fathers, Theodosius (33rd Patriarch) stands out in combination with Severus of Antioch and Anthimus of Constantinople who together worked towards a reunification of the churches after the deep schism of the Council of Chalcedon. This, unfortunately, never happened,⁴⁴ and his rejection of the Council of Chalcedon and the *Tome* of Leo led to his exile by Emperor Justinian to Constantinople until the end of his life.

7. *Contemporary Ecumenical Movement*

The Coptic Orthodox Church began its involvement in ecumenical interchurch dialogue in the 1960s for the sake of healing the wounds of schism from which it was severely persecuted over the centuries, particularly in the two centuries between the Council of Chalcedon and the Islamic invasion of Egypt (641). The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria always desired reconciliation, but when reconciliation was not on the table to be discussed, it underwent (at times) persecution for the sake of the faith as shown by examples like Dioscorus, Timothy II, and Theodosius.

The latest stage of this dialogue with the Orthodox Church (i.e. the Eastern/Byzantine Orthodox family of churches) had led to the First Agreed Statement in Egypt, 1989, and the Second Agreed Statement in 1990 at Chambésy, Geneva, Switzerland; both Statements have been recognised by the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church. This Second Agreed Statement was formally accepted by just a few churches in both families of Orthodoxy including the Coptic Orthodox Church, not by all. Therefore, there has been a recent re-initiation of the dialogue between the two families to finish what they started.⁴⁵

⁴³ For discussion concerning Timothy II's actions against the monophysites, see Ishak, *Christology and the Council of Chalcedon*, 114-123. For discussion concerning Timothy II's criticism of Leo's first and second *Tomes*, see *ibid.*, 566-567.

⁴⁴ Justinian I took action against these three Miaphysite leaders due to the influence of Pope Agapetus I of Rome. For discussion concerning this history, see *ibid.*, 521-523 and 667.

⁴⁵ OCP Media Network "Joint Commission for the Dialogue between Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches Revamped: Communique Available". Orthodoxy Cognate Page. November 26, 2014. <http://theorthodoxchurch.info/blog/news/joint-commission-for-the-dialogue-between-eastern-orthodox-oriental-orthodox-churches-revamped-communique-available/> (last accessed October 20, 2016).

There has been less theological progress in the interchurch dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox family of Churches.⁴⁶ In fact, the matter of Christology has not yet been raised in formal dialogue.

Recently, the Anglican Church has signed a Christological agreed statement with the Oriental Orthodox family of Churches.⁴⁷

The Coptic Orthodox Church continues to pray for the reunification of the churches in its liturgical supplication: “Let the schisms of the church come to an end”.

⁴⁶ There was a Common Declaration signed between Pope Paul VI of Rome and Pope Shenouda III of Alexandria in 1973 in Rome which has never been recognized by the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church. In 1988, there was also a Declaration of Agreement on Christology between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church drawn up by the Joint commission and unanimously accepted by the full membership of the commission. However, when the Common Christological Declaration was signed between Pope John Paul II and the Catholicos Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, Khanania Mar Dinkha IV in 1994, the previous declarations of 1973 and 1988 could not bear any weight because it is impossible to reconcile Miaphysite and Nestorian Christologies.

⁴⁷ <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/103502/Anglican-Oriental-Orthodox-Agreed-Statement-on-Christology-Cairo-2014.pdf> (last accessed May 28, 2015).