

## HT501 Analytical Report

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McGuckin, John Anthony. 1995. *On the Unity of the Christ: St. Cyril of Alexandria*. Popular Patristic Series. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

### Summary

*On the Unity of the Christ* is the thirteenth volume within the Popular Patristic Series, authored and translated by Professor John A. McGuckin. As the title suggests, the central theme of the book is the development of Christology in the early fifth century. The book focuses on the life and theological influence of Saint Cyril of Alexandria (376-444 AD) during his disputes with the Syrian monk turned Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius (386-450 AD).

The book is in two main sections. The first half provides the reader a history of Cyril and Nestorius respectively, particularly relating to the developing political and religious contexts they both find themselves in. The author then provides a summary of Cyril's developed Christology prior to and leading up to the Council at Ephesus (431 AD), and outlines his theological issues with the Patriarch of Constantinople and what Cyril considered to be a dangerous departure from the agreed Christology of Nicea (325 AD).

Cyril was adamant in affirming that, "*He who was eternal God became man, while ever remaining what he was, that is, eternal God.*"<sup>1</sup> Nestorius however was

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. 36

concerned that the infinite God could not fully incarnate human flesh<sup>2</sup>, and therefore taught that Jesus must have had two separate natures (*'Physis'*<sup>3</sup>) which came to be referred to as dyophysitism, a foundational concept within Nestorius's teaching. This, for Cyril, was a condemnable form of dualism, rendering it a theological heresy worthy of confronting.

Although the council at Nicea in 325 AD had affirmed Christ's consubstantial nature with the Father in its rejection of Arianism, the church had not ceased wrestling with the creative language to balance Christ's humanity and divinity. The development of Christology was in its infancy, and so too were the ecclesiological forms of governance to enforce council agreed orthodox. The author takes us on a journey towards understanding some of the political nuances in play as two Bishops, two Cities, and two theological concepts threatened the stability of Rome's empire.

In the second half of the book, the author provides us with a selection of the English translations of the original preserved writings of Cyril in which his Christology is unpacked.<sup>4</sup> Writing in rhetoric style, Cyril poses for himself questions pertaining to Nestorius's teaching on the dual natures of Christ. In these letters we are transported inside the theological mind and motivations of Cyril as he confronts Nestorianism through a wide variety of suppositions, presuppositions, using logic, old and new

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 19 Nestorius also labelled Cyril a heretic for maintaining the title "Mother of God" and accused him guilty of mythologizing the faith like the Greeks did with their gods mixing up divinity and humanity without distinction.

<sup>3</sup> **Physis** (/ˈfɑɪˈsɪs/; Ancient Greek: φύσις [pʰýsɪs]) is a Greek theological, philosophical, and scientific term usually translated into English as "nature" ([source](#)).

<sup>4</sup> Primary Sources: E. Schwartz, J.P. Mingne, Commentary on the Twelve Prophets (Oxford 1868), and others referenced from p 135.

testament scripture as well as philosophy.

Some of the main arguments made by Cyril include the “Theotokos” (God-bearer) in which Cyril argues that Mary must be permitted the name Mother of God, to which Nestorius prefers Mother of Christ<sup>5</sup>. Cyril also argues that a number of essential theological principles are at stake, including blood atonement stating, *“How could his body possibly give life to us if it were not the very body of him who is Life?”*<sup>6</sup>. Essentially, Cyril’s arguments posit Nestorius’ teaching as having *“split him into two sons”*<sup>7</sup>, and goes to great lengths to show how the eternal Christ pre-existed the incarnation and must have by necessity, for representation and salvation, been equally divine and human at the same time, and *“the Christ is in no way divided.”*<sup>8</sup> *If Cyril were to reject Nestorianism wholly, who would he account for Christ’s “inner subjectivity.”*<sup>9</sup> *“This was the key question of all his writings after 428”* as well as the thesis of *On the Unity of the Christ.*<sup>10</sup>

### **Analysis #1 Deconstructing the Author’s Narrative (1,000)**

McGuckin briefly mentions that not all commentators agree on the pristine legacy of Cyril. He notes the charges of *“racism, riot and murder”*<sup>11</sup>, but simply dismisses these accusers of *“wishing to discredit Cyril’s theology”*. Those questioning the character or

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 52  
<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 60  
<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 82  
<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 108  
<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 39  
<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 39  
<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 14

motivations of Cyril, according to McGuckin, “*read the events naively.*”<sup>12</sup>

It’s difficult however to dismiss history and the secular forces at work during this period. For example, the church hadn’t yet developed a “*Dialogical vision of theology*”<sup>13</sup> and when church authority decided to tackle an issue, someone had to be right, and someone had to be condemned. Theological ideas were not the only things at risk, but positions of power and the reputations of those that held them. Rome, Alexandria, and emerging Constantinople were not only power bases for the church, but the empire itself. Both Cyril and Nestorius were characters not battling concepts of Christology in a vacuum, but within a complex and tense socio-political context.

The author does give a brief overview of Cyril’s rise through the ranks of the church on the coattails of his uncle Theophilus, the late Archbishop of Alexandria. The book doesn’t however delve into the complexities of allegiance with the Roman emperor, and the compromising positions this might have caused for Cyril. This was a time of seeming continuous geopolitical change in the Roman Empire. While Emperor Theodosius II had personally selected Nestorius to help establish the Church in Constantinople as an emerging seat of authority, Cyril wasn’t a powerless theologian but had the ear of Rome as well with direct lines to Pope Celestine. He used these connections to solicit the authority needed to create the council at Ephesus. In my opinion, the author is selective in what is shared, which does a disservice to the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 15

<sup>13</sup> Kärkkäinen, pg 5. Veli-Matti. Christian Theology in the Pluralistic World: A Global Introduction. Eerdmans, 2019.

reader's capacity to fully appreciate socio-political elements concurrently at work alongside the Church's developing Christology. The council at Ephesus was weighted with coercive worldly power, and had to have influenced the nature of the proceedings and pursuit of a truly ecumenical Christology. One can't help considering the resulting charges of heresy on Nestorius were politically motivated as much as they were religiously.

Also, the author states that *"It was Cyril's destiny to be the one who articulated a definitive vision of Christology during this time"*<sup>14</sup>, but fails to acknowledge that Christology was in no way finalized by Cyril. In fact, one could argue his aggressive posture towards defeating perceived heresy produced a hyper insistence on the divinity of Christ's bodily form. This opened the door for further and necessary debates towards the mystery in the hypostatic union later hammered out in the Council at Chalcedon. *"Early Christians did not identify the persons of the Trinity in only one way."*<sup>15</sup>

Although a brilliant theologian, I believe much of his work against Nestorius was personal and reactionary, resulting in the swinging of the theological pendulum back towards the divinity of Christ. History continues to repeat itself through this period in church history as Christology's emphasis continues to change, *"each approach ended up denying itself and passing over into the opposite, so that there was no solution to the problem created by their dualistic thinking of Christ."*<sup>16</sup> Cyril, by over emphasizing a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 15

<sup>15</sup> Soulen, pg 46. The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity: Distinguishing the Voices. WJK, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Torrance, p. 53

*theology from above, ends up becoming guilty of dividing Christ as well.*<sup>17</sup>

As Soulen points out, it was the early believers' faith that kept pressing them “to make explicit a distinct variety of different patterns of naming according to a certain implicit logic and progression.”<sup>18</sup> I would include Nestorius in the fold of believers wrestling with these distinctions, not the dangerous heretic that Cyril accused him of being.

The author could have also introduced the reader to more of the known history surrounding the accusations, tactics and politics involved which put some necessary chinks in the armor of Cyril. For example, “*the label Nestorianism is questionable because we do not know for sure whether Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople actually taught this doctrine.*”<sup>19</sup> Cyril, the prolific writer that he was, seems to have taken on the role of defining and developing Nestorius' own Christology. One gets the sense from McGuckin's narrative that Nestorius either didn't write himself, or Cyril was better equipped to write for each of them. The Emperor Theodosius II condemned Cyril for his behavior, calling him a “*proud pharaoh*”<sup>20</sup>, and I would have liked to read more about Cyril's relational difficulties, and why Nestorius, although much less motivated for a fight it seems, was not an easy Bishop to dispose of.<sup>21</sup> The author's skimming over of Nestorius's defense and exclusive focus on Cyril's theological

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<sup>17</sup> Council of Chalcedon responds and introduced the “hypostatic union” in Christ.

<sup>18</sup> Soulen, p. 46. *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity: Distinguishing the Voices*. WJK, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Kärkkäinen, 245.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 47.

<sup>21</sup> The “Robbers Council” of Ephesus II reveals that Nestorius continued to have significant support within the Church as well as influential connections in Rome.

concerns left me suspicious of the narrative being presented, leaving me feeling as though Nestorius was being given the short end of the stick.

It's important to note that Nestorius believed Jesus Christ was sent from God. I could be wrong, but I've yet to read anything that suggested he had directly denied the divinity of Christ, but was motivated to protect the divine Logos from becoming mired in finite sinful flesh. Naming Mary the mother of God for Nestorius was doing just that. His concern, unlike Arianism or Gnostic dualism, seemed to be a matter of terminology and a lack of creative language more than opposing the deity of Christ. *"We are free to suggest any theory about the mode of the Incarnation which commends itself to us, provided that we do not lose sight of the fundamental truth that God and man are brought together in the Person of Jesus Christ."*<sup>22</sup> As Karkkainen notes during this period, *"The challenge was not so much affirming Christ's divinity, but "rather if Christians could affirm Christ's humanity."*<sup>23</sup> Cyril was so adamant that Christ not be divided that even Nestorius' rather common sense statement, *"it is impossible to believe that God would have a mother"*<sup>24</sup> was dissected to be heresy.

While my brief analysis of the author's narrative may seem like I'm giving Nestorius a pass on his error and critiquing Cyril too harshly. I am not. His teaching and reactions towards Cyril, as well as his possible deceptive ways of delaying his Bishops at the first council of Ephesus are open for debate. I simply had a difficult time

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<sup>22</sup> Grant, pg 4.

<sup>23</sup> Kärkkäinen, pg 238.

<sup>24</sup> Kärkkäinen, pg 245.

appreciating Cyril's influence as *purely Christological* and defensive of Nicean orthodoxy as the Patristic Series portrays. The church was newly minted institutionally within the secular culture it was commissioned to save. Cyril and Nestorius were equally armed with the world's coercive powers, thus at minimum diluting the pure pursuit of uniting theology and what we can now see was lacking Christopraxis.<sup>25</sup>

## **Analysis #2 Christology of Character: Theology from above in the person of Cyril**

Heresy and church councils aside, what kind of person was Cyril of Alexandria? Can a persistence on a *theology from above*<sup>26</sup> have an effect on our own character development into the nature of Christ himself?

While reading the writings of Cyril, I was simultaneously mesmerized by his powers of logic and application of scripture as I was his derogatory and rather self-affirming nature of the rhetorical style he employed in his writing. Cyril wasn't only defending orthodox views, but demeaning the people that held them. He frequently shamed Nestorius and his followers as "*profaners, apostates, pigs, dogs, crazed of mind, babblers, stupid, of servile mentality, and mad.*"<sup>27</sup> This uncharitable posture seems to betray what the author suggests as Cyril's motivation in the first place. "*Cyril is*

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<sup>25</sup> Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ*, xiii. Christopraxis: "Christology's implications for life in community, discipleship, social concern, and healing" (Kark 226).

<sup>26</sup> Kärkkäinen, pg 238, 243. Theology from above is the "violation of the biblical insistence on Jesus, the human person, as the way to the knowledge of God (John 14:6). This Alexandrian Christology, of which Cyril was championing, focused on the divinity of Christ "emphasized soteriological questions and expressed its doctrine of salvation in terms of deification or divinization, that is, union between the divine and human."

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 68, 74, 83, 107



*motivated by a profoundly mystical understanding of the indwelling power of god, one that makes the incarnation of the Logos not merely a theological nicety of dogmatic history, but the primary way in which a Christian person experiences the presence of the Lord and the effects of his deifying grace.*"<sup>28</sup> Really? Had Cyril experienced the deifying grace of the same Jewish Jesus incarnate among broken humanity? Was Cyril suffering from a theology from above, a Christology so bent on systematic, linear logic that he had lost sight of the ultimately revelation of love and mercy in the material form of Christ himself? Cyril reminds me of some of the Reformers who believed God's enemies to be flesh and blood believers that didn't accept their theological formations in whole, and whose concept of victory was the silencing of dissent in the church.

Did Cyril know how to dialogue with and respect those who disagreed with him? Was he convinced that defending Christological ideas was a sufficient form of worship, and becoming like the human Christ an option? *"The incarnation of God as man is not a static event, but rather the pattern and archetype of a process."*<sup>29</sup> Could we be guilty of glorifying the Patristic Fathers for the ends that it produced, without concern for the means that produced them? If so, what does this say about our own Christology?

## Summary

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. pg 33

<sup>29</sup> Torrance, p 35. *The Mediation of Christ*. 1992. Helmers & Howard: Colorado Springs.

*“The Nicene fathers were not slaves themselves. They saw salvation in spiritual terms alone.”*<sup>30</sup> Cyril, and Nestorius were operating from positions of worldly, positional, and coercive power structures. Cyril’s Alexandrian focus lended his focus towards the divinity of Christ, while Nestorius pulled towards the opposite direction and inadvertently separated Christ’s humanity from the very divinity he sought to protect. Cyril and Nestorius become important instruments in the development of Christology. The book *On the Unity of the Christ* focuses more on the victor of the council at Ephesus, and leaves us wondering if Nestorius was treated fairly and raises suspicions about the author’s hand picked history.

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<sup>30</sup> Kärkkäinen, 238.