

# CHALCEDONIANS AND MONOPHYSITES

OR

THE NATURE OF CHRIST'S INCARNATION AND THE  
CREATION OF A SCHISM

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Perhaps the most important theological question ever asked is the one Christ asked his disciples as they were entering Caesarea Philippi: "who do you say that I am?"<sup>1</sup> If we affirm with St. Peter that Jesus is "the Christ, the son of the living God,"<sup>2</sup> then the following question naturally arises: since Jesus Christ is the Son of God, what does it mean for him to be both God and man? Indeed, one might say that most theological debates throughout church history have been either directly or indirectly dealing with the church's affirmation of St. Peter's words. One such debate - the subject of this paper - was the Monophysite controversy. This controversy was centered around the question of whether Christ in his incarnation had two natures or just one. A pivotal event in this controversy was the Council of Chalcedon which affirmed that Christ had two natures. Sadly, however, this council resulted in a schism which still lasts today between those churches that accepted the belief in two natures and those that did not. The Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and most Protestant Churches belong to the former group; and the Coptic and Armenian Orthodox churches and the Jacobite Syrian Church, which are commonly called the Oriental Orthodox or Monophysites, belong to the latter group. Although there were many reasons (cultural, political, linguistic, &c) contributing to the Monophysites' rejection of Chalcedon, I am only going to focus on their theological reasons for rejecting the council. As will be seen, the Monophysites' rejection of the Council of Chalcedon stems more from a disagreement with *how* the fathers at the council chose to formulate their definition of faith rather than any fundamental difference in *what* they or the fathers were trying to express regarding Christ's incarnation; both parties were trying to affirm that Christ was consubstantial with God and consubstantial with mankind while remaining one unified person.

In order to properly understand the Council of Chalcedon and why the Monophysites rejected it, our attention must briefly turn to Nestorianism, Cyril of Alexandria, and Eutychianism. Twenty years prior to the Council of Chalcedon, the Council of Ephesus ended the Nestorian controversy. Nestorianism was a Christological heresy which said that Christ was composed of two separate natures each with their own person. The main opponent of Nestorianism was Cyril of Alexandria, and the problem he saw with Nestorianism was that it divided Christ in two. Thus, a key feature of his Christology was its insistence on the personal unity of Christ, which he described

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. 16:15 (ESV)

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 16:16 (ESV)

with the phrase: “μία φύσις τοῦ θεοῦ λόγου σεσαρκωμένη.”<sup>3</sup> St. Cyril usually considered the terms *φύσις*, *ὑπόστασις*, and *πρόσωπον* to be equivalent, and what he designated by them was “concrete individuality, a living, concrete unity, a ‘person.’”<sup>4</sup> Along with stressing Christ's personal unity, St. Cyril was careful not to conflate the divine and human aspects of Christ into a new substance.<sup>5</sup> After his death, however, one of his followers, an archimandrite in Constantinople named Eutyches, was accused of mixing the divine and human in Christ because he would not admit that Christ's humanity was consubstantial with mankind.<sup>6</sup> The accusation of Eutyches and his later condemnation initiated events that would lead to the Council of Chalcedon which wanted to protect against any kind of confusion between the divine and human in Christ (Eutychianism). However, the fathers at the council also wanted to protect against dividing Christ like Nestorianism which they believed “was a force more dangerous to the Church than Monophysitism.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the fathers gathered at Chalcedon wanted to remain faithful to St. Cyril whom they regarded as such an authority on Christology that they thoroughly examined Pope Leo I's “tome” to make sure that it was in agreement with St. Cyril's Christology before they accepted it.<sup>8</sup>

Given this background information, we are now prepared to look at how the council's definition accomplished its theological aims. The first part of the definition reads:

...we all with one voice confess our Lord Jesus Christ one and the same Son, the same perfect in Godhead, the same perfect in manhood...the same consisting of a reasonable soul and body...the same...born from the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, as touching the manhood...<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Georges Florovsky, *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 8, *The Byzantine Fathers of the Fifth Century*. Edited by Richard S. Haugh. Translated by Raymond Miller, Anne-Marie Dollinger-Labriolle, and Helmut Wilhelm Schmiedel. (Vaduz, Europa: Buechervertriebsanstalt, 1987), 286.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>5</sup> John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1975), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Georges Florovsky, *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 8, *The Byzantine Fathers of the Fifth Century*, 291.

<sup>7</sup> Meyendorff, 27, quoted from V.V. Bolotov, *Lektsii po istorii drevnei Tserkvi*, IV, 3, (Petrograd, 1918), 317.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

As is readily apparent, the Chalcedonian definition repeatedly uses "the same" when referring to the subject of the divine and human qualities of Christ to indicate that the subject is one and the same entity or person; this usage is significant because it is a guard against Nestorianism, and it demonstrates the faithfulness of the fathers present at the council to St. Cyril's insistence on the unity of Christ. The definition then continues with its most important section:

...one and the same Christ, Son, Lord Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way abolished because of the union but rather the characteristic property of each nature being preserved, and concurring into one person [πρόσωπον] and one hypostasis, not as if Christ were parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ...<sup>10</sup>

The most significant feature of this section is the distinction made between person (ὑπόστασις) and nature (φύσις), which Fr. John Meyendorff describes as "Chalcedon's essential and original contribution to Christology."<sup>11</sup> This distinction is important because it allowed the fathers at the council the ability to discuss both the singular and dual aspects of Christ.<sup>12</sup> That is to say, Christology now had an explicit language with which it could precisely signify the "who" of Christ and "what" the "who" was. Thus, the fathers could more precisely guard against conflating the dual aspects of Christ since they had removed from φύσις any notion of concrete individuality or subsistence, and instead regarded it more abstractly. Simply put, what the council was trying to affirm about Christ is that he is one "who" (a person) who possesses two "whats" (a divine and human nature) that are united together under a single subject of reference (his person) but not mixed together into a new nature or substance.

It is clear from the preceding that the Chalcedonian definition explicitly condemned any kind of Nestorianism; however, the Monophysites still rejected it. To help understand this rejection, our attention will now turn to the objections of Severus of Antioch who, as Fr. Georges Florovsky notes, was "one of the most important persons and the most important theologian of the non-Chalcedonians;"<sup>13</sup> and whose " theological system also became the official

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>13</sup> Georges Florovsky, *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 9, *The Byzantine Fathers of the Sixth to Eighth Century*. Edited by Richard S. Haugh. Translated by Raymond Miller, Anne-Marie

doctrine of the Syrian Jacobites, of the Coptic Christians in Egypt and of the Armenian Church."<sup>14</sup> However, before proceeding to Severus, it should be noted that the Monophysites viewed themselves as the defenders of Cyril's faith, and Monophysite theologians such as Severus of Antioch and Philoxenus of Hierapolis would codify Cyril's Christology;<sup>15</sup> as such, they were adamant about not deviating from anything of Cyril's, even the words he used and how he used them; thus, they considered *φύσις* and *ὑπόστασις* to be equivalent terms. As we proceed, this equivalency and the Chalcedonian definition's use of the phrase "in two natures" to indicate that Christ had two natures after the union should thus be kept in mind.

In the second part of his work against Nephalius (a former non-Chalcedonian), Severus lists some of his objections to the Chalcedonian definition. At the beginning of this work he provides a statement of faith:

Now we ourselves,...believe...and confess that the only-begotten Son of God, who is equal in essence to the Father...,came down at the end of days and became incarnate and was made man - that is, he was united to flesh which had a soul possessed of reason and intelligence by means of a free and hypostatic union from the holy Spirit and from the ever-virgin Mary, Mother of God; and that his nature was one, even when the Word had become incarnate...and we know him as simple, and not as compound, in that which he is understood to be God, and composite in that which he is understood to be man.<sup>16</sup>

Except his remarks about one nature, much of Severus's language is very similar to that of the Chalcedonian definition; however, Severus is completely lacking any specific *term* with which he can describe Christ's divine and human aspects; the best he can do is say "that which." Yet it is clear that he is trying to affirm that Christ is fully God and fully man. He continues:

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Dollinger-Labriolle, and Helmut Wilhelm Schmiedel. (Vaduz, Europa: Bieververtriebsanstalt, 1987), 104.

<sup>14</sup> Georges Florovsky, *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 8, *The Byzantine Fathers of the Fifth Century*, 327.

<sup>15</sup> Georges Florovsky, *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 9, *The Byzantine Fathers of the Sixth to Eighth Century*, 35-36.

<sup>16</sup> Severus of Antioch, *Severus of Antioch: The Early Church Fathers*, ed. and trans. Pauline Allen and C.T.R. Hayward (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 59.

...For since we believe him to be Emmanuel, even the same God the Word incarnate out of two natures which possess integrity (I mean out of divinity and out of humanity), we know one Son, one Christ, one Lord. We do not affirm that he is known in two natures, as the Synod of Chalcedon declared as dogma....<sup>17</sup>

There are two interesting things going on in this passage. The first is Severus' subtle distinction between the phrases "out of two natures" and "in two natures," and the second is the connection between affirming the unity of Christ and denying two natures. Severus' then gives his reasons for why he prefers the phrase "out of two natures" instead of "in two natures":

For the phrase 'out of two natures' in fact denies that they are two, and demonstrates that he himself is one through composition, and that those things out of which he was compounded as the same Lord did not cease to exist because they were joined together without confusion; and that same one continues firm and unshaken after the sublime union. That formula, which is expressed as 'two (natures) after the union' is one of those things which have no substance: for if two persisted, they would not be united, since union is that which erases duality.<sup>18</sup>

As is clear from this passage, Severus is not opposed to speaking about two natures *per se*, but rather saying that there are two natures *after* the union, which is indicated by the phrase "in two natures," because it seems to introduce a division in Christ; he is otherwise in agreement with Chalcedon that it is the same unified subject after the union as before the union and that there is no conflation between the divine and human attributes of Christ; but again, he lacks a specific *term* to designate "those things out of which he [Christ] was compounded." Moreover, Severus' objection to the phrase "in two natures" or that there are two natures after the union is predicated upon maintaining that the terms *φύσις* and *ὑπόστασις* mean the same thing, namely, person. Throughout the preceding passages, this equivalency has been implied, but Severus explicitly states it later in his work:

But it is plain to all those who are even moderately educated and learned in the dogmas of orthodoxy that it is the nature of a contradiction to say concerning the one Christ that on the one hand there are two natures, but

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 60.

on the other one hypostasis. For the person who speaks of 'one hypostasis' necessarily affirms one nature as well.<sup>19</sup>

For Severus, the Chalcedonian definition by its very wording either eradicates Christ's unity because it is supposedly saying that Christ is two persons (Nestorianism); or it leads to a contradiction because it is saying that Christ is one "who" (a person) who possesses two "whos" (a divine and human person) that are united together under a single subject of reference (his person) but not mixed together into a new person; which, of course, is utter nonsense. Thus, in Severus' mind, in order to maintain the unity of Christ, one must deny the notion of two natures after the union.

Our inquiry into the Monophysites' rejection of the Council of Chalcedon may now be summarized. Both the Chalcedonians and the Monophysites were opposed to Nestorianism and Eutychianism, and each were trying to express the same thing about Christ; namely, he was consubstantial with God and consubstantial with mankind while remaining one unified person. In order to combat these two heresies, the fathers at the Council of Chalcedon chose to distinguish between the terms *φύσις* and *ὑπόστασις*. The Monophysites did not accept this distinction; and consequently, when the Monophysites heard the definition speak of Christ as having two natures, they understood it either as meaning two persons, despite the definition explicitly saying that Christ was a single unified person, or they understood it as leading to a contradiction. Thus, the Monophysites rejected the Council of Chalcedon not so much because of *what* the fathers present were trying to say about Christ's incarnation but more because of *how* the fathers chose to express their understanding of the incarnation.

Although the root of the Monophysite controversy was, at least in some respects, due to a difference in defining terms, one should not suppose that healing this schism is as easy as it might appear. The Monophysite controversy continued long after the council of Chalcedon and only started to die down after those lands, which were predominantly Monophysite, were conquered by the Moslem hordes. The Monophysites were condemned as heretics at the next two Oecumenical councils: Constantinople II (553) and Constantinople III (680-681). Severus was also specifically condemned as a heretic at the latter council. The distinction made by the Chalcedonian definition between *φύσις* and *ὑπόστασις* laid the foundation for all subsequent orthodox theology, especially that in the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 63.

east - what would later become known as "Byzantine theology," which has certain distinctives not derivable from Monophysite Christology and therefore not acceptable to them. On a brighter note, however, the controversy does point to where the search for unity should start - not just unity between Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians but between all disparate Christian churches. Since we often times take for granted how we use and define certain terms, it is paramount that an agreement on terminology be reached by both opposing parties *before* discussing the issues that divide them so as to mitigate the chances of misunderstandings. Only in this way should the search for unity begin.



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