

HELLENIC COLLEGE HOLY CROSS
GREEK ORTHODOX SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

WE BELIEVE IN ONE LORD JESUS CHRIST,
THE ETERNAL WORD WHO BECAME MAN FOR OUR SALVATION:
A CHRISTOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF CHALCEDONIAN AND NON-
CHALCEDONIAN PERSPECTIVES & ST. ATHANASIUS, ST. CYRIL AND
POPE LEO I ON HOW THE LOGOS HIMSELF INCARNATE
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INTRODUCTION

The mystery of the Incarnation “The Word became flesh, He lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that He has from the Father as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.” (Jn. 1:14 NJB). Yet for centuries, Christians have wrestled with how to speak about this great mystery. How can the eternal Word, the Logos, take on flesh without ceasing to be divine? How can humanity and divinity be united in one person without confusion, change, separation, or division? And the most important question: what kind of unity?

In the year 451 AD, the Council of Chalcedon sought to define this mystery in the following definition.

“...ἐπόμενοι τοίνυν τοῖς ἁγίοις πατράσιν ὁμολογοῦμεν πάντες ἐν καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν Υἱὸν, τὸν Κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν, τὸν αὐτὸν τέλειον ἐν Θεότητι καὶ τέλειον ἐν ἀνθρωπότητι, τὸν αὐτὸν ἀληθῶς Θεὸν καὶ ἀληθῶς ἄνθρωπον, ...

ἐν δύο φύσεσιν ἀσυγχύτως, ἀτρέπτως, ἀδιαιρέτως, ἀχωρίστως γνωριζόμενον..¹.”

“...Following the holy Fathers, we all with one voice confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man...

¹ Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (Nicaea I to Lateran V), Georgetown University Press, 1990

acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved...²”

While the Church of Rome accepted this definition and much of the Byzantine world, it was rejected by several major Churches in Egypt, Syria, Armenia, and Ethiopia. These non-Chalcedonian churches preferred the language of Saint Cyril of Alexandria: “μία φύσις τοῦ Θεοῦ Λόγου σεσαρκωμένη” translated as “One incarnate nature of God the Word.” The objection was that St. Cyril never used the exact Chalcedonian phrase “in two natures” (ἐν δύο φύσεσιν). In fact, he often criticized that formula, especially when used by Nestorius or Theodoret, because he believed it implied a division in Christ. Though Cyril’s formula had been accepted by earlier councils and was aimed at affirming Christ’s full humanity and full divinity in one united reality, later generations misunderstood it. Some accused it of sounding too much like Apollinarianism, the heresy that denied the full humanity of Christ. However, as this paper will show, Cyril’s language was not heretical. Rather, it was rooted in a careful defense of both Christ’s divinity and humanity. Miaphysites (non-Chalcedonians) later argued that Chalcedon used Cyril’s words but changed their meaning.

² Richard Price and Michael Gaddis, *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, 3 vols. (Liverpool University Press, 2005).

This paper seeks to explore these differences and similarities, not by taking sides, but by listening carefully to the theological insights of both Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian traditions. Through a study of key theological figures, especially St. Cyril, St. Athanasius, and Pope Leo I (440-461 AD). Particular attention will also be given to their views on the role of St. Mary as Theotokos and on the meaning of Christ's suffering and death. This study hopes to show that, despite historical divisions, both traditions uphold a deep and reverent faith in the same Lord Jesus Christ.

ST. ATHANASIUS & THE MYSTERY OF INCARNATION

At the beginning, we can see how both families agree with and accept St. Athanasius's Christology and his terminology. St. Athanasius did not describe Christ's humanity as a vessel or an external garment but as reality proper to the Logos. In *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* (On the Incarnation), Athanasius writes: “λαμβάνει ἑαυτῷ σῶμα, καὶ τοῦτο οὐκ ἄλλοτρίῳ τοῦ ἡμετέρου.³” “He took for Himself (ἑαυτῷ) a body, and this was not alien (ἄλλότριον) to ours.” Also in his letter, *Epistle to Epictetus* “ἴδιον ἑαυτοῦ τὸ σῶμα⁴” “the body that was His own.⁵” The use of the word ἴδιον (idion), meaning “one’s own” or “proper to,” using it

³ Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* 8, in St. Athanasius on the Incarnation: The Greek Text, ed. Archibald Robertson (London: David Nutt, 1893), 12.

⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Epistle to Epictetus* (Πρὸς Ἐπίκτητον), in *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 26, cols. 1057–1070, ed. J.-P. Migne

⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Epistle to Epictetus*, in *Select Treatises of St. Athanasius in Controversy with the Arians*, translated by John Henry Newman and Archibald Robertson (Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1881), 227.

many times in most of his writings with the same meaning, is very important for us to understand St. Athanasius. As Donald Fairbairn explains, this term signals that Christ's humanity is not something external or temporarily joined to the Logos, as if God were merely just using a human body, but rather He took our humanity and made it truly belong to the Word, without sin. In another explanation, the Logos took our humanity and made His humanity. In Athanasius's thought, this means the Logos did not unite Himself to a human person, but rather took human nature such that the humanity was personally His and inseparable from His divine identity.

According to Fairbairn, this reflects the "hypostatic union" between Christ's divinity and His humanity, where the humanity of Jesus is fully real and complete, while it's ours (humanity) but also belongs to the Logos personally.⁶ Thus, Athanasius affirms that the Word did not dwell in "someone else," but lived a fully human life as His own life. This rules out any Nestorian separation between two persons and also avoids Apollinarian reduction of humanity to something partial. It also gives us the first hint as to why the Alexandrian Church refused Pope Leo's (Tomas Loan) explanation about the Chalcedon statement.

⁶ Donald Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the early Church* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2003). 75- 77

ST. CYRIL THE 24TH POPE^{7*} OF ALEXANDRIA CHRISTOLOGY

At the heart of both families is St. Cyril of Alexandria's Christology. One of his famous expressions, “μία φύσις τοῦ Θεοῦ Λόγου σεσαρκωμένη”, “one incarnate nature of God the Word.”⁸ This phrase is usually accused of being misled by Apollinarians, the heresy that claimed Christ had no human mind or soul, only a human body animated directly by the Logos. However, the Alexandrian fathers, including Athanasius and Cyril, were the most aggressive fighters against this heresy. Historically, this heresy did not find a foothold in Alexandria. Thomas Weinandy notes, “By *mia physis* Cyril is not saying that Christ is one nature or essence (*physis*), in the sense of quiddity, as if the divine nature and the human nature were ontologically united, through mixture and confusion, so as to form a common third nature (quiddity) which would be neither fully divine nor fully human. ... Rather, Cyril primarily used *mia physis* to emphasize that Christ is one being or reality – one entity⁹” Therefore, to accuse Cyril's formula “one incarnate nature of God the Word” of being Apollinarian is historically inaccurate. The Alexandrian Fathers and the Coptic Church were never confused about Christ's full humanity; they were the Church's most vigorous defenders of it. This Christology

⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea. *Ecclesiastical History*. Translated by Kirsopp Lake. Loeb Classical Library, Vol. 2. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926. Book 7, Chapter 7. (*The earliest known historical reference to the title “Pope” (πάπας / papa) being used specifically for a bishop, and in particular for the Patriarch of Alexandria, Heraclas, (who served from 232–248) comes from a letter written by Dionysius of Rome (Bishop of Rome, 259–268).

⁸ McENERNEY, JOHN I. Letters 1–50 (The Fathers of the Church, Volume 76). Catholic University of America Press, 1987. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt32b26n>.

⁹ Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 192.

of St. Cyril is exactly our understanding as Oriental Orthodox, and it is even written and completely practiced in our traditional liturgy every day.

Cyril, when he said, the one incarnate nature, does not mean that the divine Logos swallowed up or erased the humanity. Instead, it means that the Word (the Logos) personally united to Himself full human nature, ‘body, soul, and mind,’ in a real, inseparable union. As Cyril himself explains: *“Who is Very God of Very God, Light of Light, He through Whom all things were made, both those in Heaven and those on earth, having for our salvation come down and abased Himself unto emptiness, was both made flesh and made man, that is, having taken Flesh of the holy Virgin and made it His own from the womb, He underwent birth as we, and proceeded Man of a woman, not losing what He was, but even though He assumed flesh and blood, thus too abiding what He was, God that is by Nature and in truth: (And neither do we say that the Flesh was turned into the Nature of Godhead nor yet that the Ineffable Nature of God the Word was borne aside into the nature of the flesh; for It is Unchangeable and Invariable, ever abiding wholly the same, according to the Scriptures:) and seen, and a Babe, and in swaddling clothes, being yet in the lap of the Virgin that bare Him,”*¹⁰ John McGuckin emphasizes this point clearly: “Cyril was absolutely committed to the full integrity of Christ’s

¹⁰ John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril Of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts*(BRILL, 2015). Pg. 268

humanity: rational soul, human mind, real body. His term 'one nature' refers to one subject, not to the reduction of the humanity.¹¹” Thus, Cyril’s language defends the mystery of the Incarnation without falling into either confusion (Apollinarianism) or separation (Nestorianism).

The reason Cyril insisted on “one nature” was not to deny Christ’s humanity, but to affirm the unity of Christ’s person. In his mind, if we say "two natures" after the union without qualification, it could sound like there are two separate subjects, one divine and one human, cooperating side by side. Against this danger, Cyril insisted that after the Incarnation, we should speak of one nature (μία φύσις), not a single nature, because the divinity and humanity were united without confusion or change. Furthermore, Khaled Anatolios explains that for Cyril, humanity was not independent or autonomous; it was made proper to the Logos, meaning that the Word Himself lived a fully human life without ceasing to be divine. “...The Son and Word is the subject of human experiences... Cyril speaks of the 'union according to appropriation' (καθ' ὑπόστασιν) by which the Son comes to own the human condition¹².” Therefore, Cyril’s “one nature” formula preserves both the full divinity and the full humanity of Christ, unified in the one person of the Word. “μία φύσις τοῦ Θεοῦ Λόγου σεσαρκωμένη” is a positive expression of the hypostatic

¹¹ John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril Of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts*(BRILL, 2015). Pg. 178

¹² Khaled Anatolios, "The Soteriological Grammar of Conciliar Christology," *Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (2014): 170–171.

union, not an Apollinarian confusion of natures, but a real, living union of the Word with our complete human reality.

POPE LEO'S TOME: THE LOGOS DID NOT SUFFER

While Pope Leo I's Tome to Flavian (449 AD) was celebrated in the West and became central to the Council of Chalcedon's definition, it has long drawn criticism from Chalcedonians themselves, theologians, and modern scholars for what it omits. Unlike St. Cyril of Alexandria, who consistently declared that the Logos himself was born, suffered, and died, Leo never explicitly states that the person of the Word is the subject of all of Christ's human experiences. Instead, Leo's Christology focuses on the distinction between the two natures and their corresponding activities, expressed most famously in the Latin phrase: "Each form performs the actions that belong to it in communion with the other: the Word performs what pertains to the Word, and the flesh carries out what pertains to the flesh¹³". At first glance, this affirms the unity of the person acting through both natures; however, it also leaves room for a functional division. Pope Leo never directly identifies the Logos as the one who is born or suffers. His Christology, though formally orthodox, does not match the existential boldness of Cyril's assertion that the Word Himself became flesh. (John 1:14) Moreover, Weinandy

¹³ Leo the Great, *Letter 28* (Tome to Flavian), *trans. in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 12, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 38.

also explains that “What Leo failed to note is that the actions which revealed that Jesus was God were done as a man. If they were not done as a man, he would not have revealed that it is indeed the Son of God who is a man¹⁴.”

This structural ambiguity in Pope Leo's thought has prompted concerns across traditions. John McGuckin, in his study of the Christological controversies, writes: “Nowhere does Leo directly say, in Cyril’s language, that the Word himself suffered, or that the Word himself became flesh.¹⁵” Instead, Leo's language, though affirming a single person, is so strongly committed to the distinct operations of each nature that it may suggest parallel activity, leading to the very problem of dual subjectivity that Cyril so strongly dissented in Nestorius. Leo’s phrase “agit... quod proprium est” (each nature acting what is proper to it) preserves formal orthodoxy, but at the risk of obscuring the hypostatic unity. This contrast becomes clearer when compared to St. Cyril’s consistent affirmation that ὁ Λόγος ἐσάρκωται, “the Word was made flesh,” not by joining to a man but by personally taking on humanity as his own. In contrast, Leo repeatedly uses terms like “assumpsit hominem” (he assumed man) without ever qualifying that the humanity was his own, using the language of *idios* (ἴδιος), as Athanasius had. As we also point out, Leo tends to speak of the flesh being acted upon or suffering, not of the Logos

¹⁴ Weinandy O.F.M., Thomas. *Does God Suffer?* (p. 213). University of Notre Dame Press

¹⁵ John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril Of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts*(BRILL, 2015). Pg. 238

personally undergoing death or birth. This distinguishes him from the Alexandrian fathers.

From these scholars' perspective, most have a Chalcedonian background; Leo's Christology failed to express the deep unity that Cyril so powerfully upheld: one incarnate nature, one subject, one divine life lived in full human life and experience. Thus, while Chalcedon affirmed Leo's Tome, many Eastern Christians saw in it a subtle return to duality, a step back from the Logos himself incarnated that was offered by Athanasius and Cyril.

CHALLENGING THE COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON

The Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, Definition of Faith, often called the *Horos*, tried to articulate a Christology that would satisfy both Eastern and Western theological traditions. However, its final formula leaned heavily on the framework presented in Pope Leo I's Tome and other Bishops who were later condemned by the Chalcedonians themselves. The final formula continues the same stress on the distinction of Christ's two natures without clearly stating that the divine Logos Himself is the acting subject of both divine and human operations. The Definition states: “γνωριζόμενον ἐν δύο φύσεσιν ἀσυγχύτως, ἀτρέπτως, ἀδιαιρέτως, ἀχωρίστως” “recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without

division, without separation¹⁶.” This fourfold formula, ἀσυγχύτως (without confusion), ἀτρέπτως (without change), ἀδιαιρέτως (without division), and ἀχωρίστως (without separation), became the cornerstone of Chalcedonian Christology. While it strongly declared that the two natures remain distinct in the one person of Christ, it never explicitly names the eternal Logos as the personal subject who was born of the Virgin, suffered, and died. Instead, the statement describes the union in terms of the properties and boundaries of the natures, not in terms of who is acting.

This theological structure, while formally orthodox, left unresolved the most important concern raised by the Alexandrian tradition, especially in the writings of St. Cyril of Alexandria, who repeatedly explained that “the Word himself became flesh” (ὁ Λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο, John 1:14). Cyril's own preferred formula, μία φύσις τοῦ Θεοῦ Λόγου σεσαρκωμένη ("one incarnate nature of God the Word"), was notably absent from Chalcedon's final statement. Instead, the Definition affirms that “we confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ... recognized in two natures” (ἐν δύο φύσεσιν), which was a formulation Cyril had previously rejected when used by Nestorius and Theodoret. John McGuckin notes that while the council appeared to follow Cyril's teaching, it actually shifted the theological emphasis: “Chalcedon did not produce a true synthesis between Cyril's

¹⁶ Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum, vol. 2.1, ed. Eduard Schwartz (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1927–1933), 129.

Christology and Antiochene theology, but effectively prioritized Antiochene terminology and concepts.¹⁷ This created discomfort among many Eastern Christians. The formula “in two natures” led many Miaphysites to believe that Chalcedon had smuggled in a kind of dual subjectivity, even if unintentionally. Khaled Anatolios notes that while Chalcedon and Leo preserved formal orthodoxy, they largely restricted themselves to describing the two natures and did not unambiguously express the personal union in which the Word Himself is the subject of human experiences. I would like to share Anatolios' writings as a famous Chalcedonian scholar:

"Chalcedon had not succeeded in unambiguously locating the unity of person. [...] It can also be argued that the modern tendency in Western theology to rely on Chalcedon as the only 'Christological' council has resulted in the inclination toward just such a Christology of juxtaposition, which is much clearer in affirming the two distinct natures than the location and dynamism of the union¹⁸."

In this way, Chalcedon canonized a Christology of distinction, but did not resolve the question of agency. They described what Christ is, God and man in two natures, but not always who Christ is in a unified, personal sense. This left the non-

¹⁷ John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril Of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts*(BRILL, 2015). Pg. 238

¹⁸ Khaled Anatolios, "The Soteriological Grammar of Conciliar Christology," *Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (2014) page 174

Chalcedonian churches and Pope Dioscorus I of Alexandria (Saint only at the non-Chalcedonian Churches), to conclude that, with all the respect of the Chalcedonian good intentions, Chalcedon preserved the language of unity while drifting from the bold clarity of Cyril and Athanasius, who declared without hesitation that the divine Logos Himself became fully and personally man.

WHAT BOTH FAMILIES' CHRISTOLOGY IS TODAY

Chalcedonians say Christ is one person with two natures, divine and human, fully united without separation, confusion, or alteration. St. Mary gave birth to the person of Jesus, who is fully God and fully man. But this tradition stresses preserving the distinction between the divine and the human.

Non-Chalcedonians also say that our Lord Jesus Christ is fully divine and fully human, but we do not speak of “two natures” after the union. Instead, we use Cyril’s phrase “one incarnate nature,” because we want to emphasize that the humanity and divinity are truly real in Christ, not just joined like two boards with glue, or not like most Chalcedonian art tries to portray Christ with two faces. (One human side, dull, and the divine side, bright) St. Cyril explains this well: “The Word took what was ours and made it His own” (idios). He says this not to confuse or mix the divine and human, but to show that God personally entered human life. Fairbairn puts it beautifully: “For Cyril, grace is not merely divine help—it is God

Himself giving Himself to us.¹⁹” St. Mary gave birth not just to someone guided by God, but to God Himself incarnate.

CONCLUSION

The mystery of the Incarnation in John 1:14, NJB, remains the heart of Christian faith for all traditions. Despite the painful historical divisions and while we can see there is a lot of missing affirmation from Leo and the Chalcedon language that God the Logos, Himself was born from the Virgin Mary and suffered on the Cross. Yet, a careful study of both Christologies show that the families now deeply and reverently affirm the same essential truth: God the Logos himself truly became man. Both families uphold the confession that Christ is fully divine and fully human, without confusion or change, and yet without division or separation.

Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Christology lies in the reverent confession of the double birth of the Logos, the Son is eternally begotten (γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς, "begotten from the Father") before all ages, outside of time. The same Son, the same divine Word, was born in time from the Virgin Mary (γεννηθέντα ἐκ τῆς Μαρίας τῆς Παρθένου), entering human history.²⁰ St.

¹⁹ Donald Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the early Church* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2003). Pg. 64

²⁰ Donald Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the early Church* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2003).

Athanasius and St. Cyril insisted that the humanity of Christ was not an external instrument but truly His own (ἴδιον).

Looking deeply, one can say that the distinction between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Christology lies mostly in the realm of thought, how the mystery is expressed, not whether the mystery is believed. Both understand that Christ is not a mere man united to God, but God incarnate. Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian traditions unite in the deepest confession of the Church: We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man, the eternal Word who became man for our salvation.