

Homoousias and *Hypostasis*: the Christology of John of Damascus

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The Christology presented by John of Damascus in *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* is highly informed by the early ecumenical synods. John stands at the end of centuries of controversy over the person of Christ.¹ The ecumenical synods that preceded John were intended to establish unity within the Church by providing Christological definitions. John defends these definitions unequivocally against heretical beliefs concerning the person of Christ, Who, for John, is fully God and fully man. Without this hypostatic union, according to which two natures are united yet distinct in one individual, Christ could not relate fully to God or to man, a fact which would compromise his redemptive role. John establishes orthodox Christology convincingly with the support of the ecumenical councils and thus demonstrates the relation of orthodox Christology to fundamental tenants of the orthodox faith.

The first ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325CE condemned the Arian heresy, a belief concerning Christology which established a division within the Trinity by claiming that God the Father exists prior to and without God the Son. The Nicene synod presented the term *homoousios* and attributed it to the relation of the Son and the Father, decreeing that God the Son is to be understood as *homoousios*, consubstantial, with the Father.² This understanding had profound implications. As consubstantial with God the Father, God the Son exists from the beginning of time and must be considered fully divine. As a result, the incarnate Son cannot be understood as intermediate between divinity and humanity.³ Yet, the mystery of the Incarnation with respect to Christ's humanity and its relation to His divinity was still under debate at this point. Apollinaris of Laodicea made an early attempt to reconcile Christ's divinity and humanity, though this ended in heresy. Apollinaris argued that God the Word had taken the place of the human intellect in the person of Jesus Christ.⁴ According to Apollinaris, Jesus had a human body and the wisdom of God; this suggests that Jesus is a hybrid, a divine mind employing a human body. This fundamentally negates the humanity of Christ, for Apollinaris's position can only make sense if we deny in Christ the highest part of what it means to be human.⁵ As a result, Appolinaris's position was quickly condemned. In order to avoid the implications

¹ Andrew Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2004), 147.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

of this position, it became necessary to establish the full humanity of Christ without which Christ could not fulfill his redemptive role.⁶

John of Damascus presents the story of the Annunciation in his own work in order to establish the full humanity of Christ upon which redemption and salvation depend. He states that an angel of the Lord was sent to the holy Virgin, who was herself descended from the tribe of David. The angel informed her that she would bring forth a son named Jesus who would save his people from their sins.⁷ Here, John points to the genealogical connection between Jesus Christ and Adam; Christ can be understood as the new Adam, for Christ recovers what was lost for mankind because of Adam's rebellion. John states that Mary questioned her ability to conceive due to her virginity, and that the angel responded by informing her that she would conceive by the Holy Ghost in order to bear the Son of God.⁸ That immaculate and miraculous conception establishes that Christ was born free from original sin which allows him to be the most suitable model for sinless and virtuous behavior. John asserts that from the chaste and pure blood of the Virgin Mary, God compacted for Himself a body animated by a rational and intellectual soul.⁹ God Himself undergoes the ultimate sacrifice for man, saving man from death by the death of His Incarnate Son, as a fully human man possessing a human intellect and soul. However, God the Son is not bereaved of his divinity upon the Incarnation, for all men are born in sin and only God the Son can be born free from sin in order to model sinlessness and virtue. The Son is consubstantial with the Father, and, accordingly, "was by nature perfect God... The same became by nature perfect man. He did not change His nature and neither did He just appear to become man."¹⁰ Thus, by the descent of the Holy Ghost into the womb of Mary, God the Son became man and took up all that it means to be human apart from original sin while remaining fully divine.

John's understanding of Christ as fully human and fully divine relates back to the council of Ephesus in 431CE, which dealt with two conflicting opinions concerning the title of Mary as *Theotokos* or *Christotokos*, titles which describe the way in which Christ's divinity and humanity are understood. The Alexandrian position of Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria was the most widely accepted; it affirmed in unqualified terms that Jesus Christ the Son of God is fully God and fully man, possessing both a divine and a human nature.¹¹ For Cyril, Mary is *Theotokos* because the Incarnate one, Jesus Christ, was God living a human life and therefore she who gave birth to him gave birth to God.¹² The Antiochian position opposing that of Cyril belonged to Nestorius, Patriarch of

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Saint John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith from Writings: Saint John of Damascus, The Fathers of the Church.*, trans. by Frederic H. Chase Jr (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), III.iii.269.

⁸ *Ibid.*, III.ii., 270.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Louth, 147.

¹² *Ibid.*, 149.

Constantinople and native of Antioch. For Nestorius, Cyril's position could be reduced to the Apollinarian heresy, which renders Jesus Christ a divine-human hybrid.¹³ Nestorius sought to preserve the integrity of Christ's divinity and humanity by arguing that they should be kept separate by distinguishing between the acts Christ did as God and those He did as man.¹⁴ For Nestorius, Mary is to be understood as *Christotokos* because she gave birth to Jesus according to his humanity; she did not give birth to God, but to Jesus Christ the man. This position fails to unify the divinity and the humanity of the person of Christ to the point that it effectively argues that Jesus Christ exists in two persons, one human, and one divine. Furthermore, it seems to suggest that it is only after His birth that Jesus becomes divine, in which case the immaculate conception and the sinlessness of Jesus are called into question, thus contradicting the Nicene synod's declaration of the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father. Nestorius's position was condemned at the council of Ephesus and the position of Cyril was affirmed.¹⁵ While Cyril's doctrine was upheld, it was made it subject to clarificatory statement two years later called the 'Formula of Reunion' which Cyril developed with John of Antioch as an attempt to reconcile the Alexandrian and the Antiochian positions.¹⁶ The 'Formula of Reunion' sought to establish the unity of the natures which Cyril defended and also the integrity of the natures which Nestorius defended. The formula affirmed the unity of the person of Christ and Mary's title of *Theotokos*, but also established the integrity of two natures in Christ by stating that the divine nature of Jesus Christ the Word is consubstantial with the Father and that His human nature was consubstantial with man.¹⁷

John of Damascus's understanding of the unity of the person of Christ, Who is for John fully God and fully man, derives from Cyril's doctrine and the 'Formula of Reunion.' John asserts that the divine Word without being circumscribed came in His own person to dwell in the womb of Mary by which He became hypostatically united to rationally and intellectually animated human flesh without confusion, alteration, or division of His divinity.¹⁸ Like the 'Formula of Reunion,' John argues for maintaining the unity of the person of Christ and the integrity of his two natures which is necessary for his redemptive role. Furthermore, John claims that it is essential to the person of Jesus that his divinity is not circumscribed because this introduces change to the Godhead which is contrary to the perfect and eternal Divine. Thus, it is necessary to conceive of the two natures of Christ as distinct yet united in order to prevent the attribution of change to the Son when He became incarnate and the misunderstanding of Christ existing in two persons. John of Damascus argues for the integrity of Christ's divinity and humanity not as a duality but as two distinct natures unified in one person so that His

¹³ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Saint John of Damascus, III.ii., 270-271.

divinity remains perfect and unchanging. This allows for Christ to relate to both man and God in order to close the gap between the human and the divine. John asserts that the two natures of Christ were united to each other without causing change in either the divinity or the humanity, for “the divine nature did not give up its proper simplicity, and the human nature was certainly not changed into the nature of the divinity, nor did it become non-existent.”¹⁹ John’s statements here argue implicitly against the heresy of Eutyches which arose fifteen years after the council of Ephesus.²⁰ Eutyches taught that Jesus Christ possessed one nature after the union of humanity and divinity in the Incarnation, but that this nature was not consubstantial with man.²¹ While Eutyches attempted to hinder Nestorianism by arguing for the unity of Jesus Christ, he ultimately destroyed Christ’s humanity. For him, Christ is not human in any real sense. This opposes the decrees of the synods at Nicaea and Ephesus, which are necessary to John’s Christology and Christ’s redemptive role.

John of Damascus defends orthodox Christology by refuting Monophysitism, an idea that arose in response to the decisions of the ecumenical council of Chalcedon in 451CE during which Eutyches was condemned.²² This council is foundational for John: in fact, it directly informs John’s language concerning the hypostatic union. The council of Chalcedon was highly controversial and it intended to remedy the divide in the Church caused by the radical, prejudicial proceedings of Ephesus II. Before that council, the Patriarch of Constantinople, Flavian, condemned Eutyches for breaching the ‘Formula of Reunion,’ and Eutyches appealed to the Patriarch of Alexandria, Dioscorus.²³ Eutyches’s appeal to Alexandria was highly motivated by the commitment and loyalty which Alexandrian officials maintained concerning Cyril and his doctrines. Eutyches argued that his own Christology only repeated the teachings of Cyril who famously asserted “one incarnate nature of God the Word,”²⁴ and Dioscorus took on Eutyches’s appeal. At Ephesus II in 449CE, Flavian and his supporters were prevented from defending their position and from reading the *Tome of Pope Leo* which condemned Eutyches and provided additional conceptions of orthodox Christology.²⁵ The council of Chalcedon reversed the decisions of the second council of Ephesus and provided a Christological definition based on the ‘Formula of Reunion’ and the *Tome*. This put forward the doctrine on the hypostatic union that John maintains which asserts that Christ exists in two natures and one hypostasis.²⁶ This Christological doctrine created a fundamental schism. While it was generally well received in the West, some in the East would not accept the doctrine of the hypostatic union because they felt it contradicted Cyril’s

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, III.iii., 271.

²⁰ Louth, 149.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 149-150.

²³ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

doctrine of one nature after the Incarnation.²⁷ In Cyril's time, there was no sharp distinction between the terms nature and hypostasis, and so it came to be understood in the West that what Cyril meant by nature in his own doctrine was exactly what the Christology of the council of Chalcedon meant by the term hypostasis.²⁸ In the West, Cyril and the Christology of Chalcedon could therefore be reconciled; however, those in the East who could not accept Chalcedon, the Monophysites, remained in schism.

The Monophysites maintained that Christ was just as consubstantial with man as he was with God the Father by arguing for one composite nature both divine and human.²⁹ John takes up this issue by demonstrating that a composite nature for Jesus would prevent consubstantiality with both the Father and humankind which makes redemption and salvation impossible for man. John argues that compounding Christ's divinity and humanity causes him to be "neither consubstantial with His Father, who has a simple nature, nor with His Mother, because she was not composed of divinity and humanity."³⁰ Compounding Christ's humanity and divinity into one composite nature gives rise to a new nature, which is neither human nor divine, but something which would have to possess qualities human and divine and therefore oppose itself. John questions how one nature could possibly contain contradictory qualities; for example, how one nature could be both created and uncreated, and circumscribed and uncircumscribed.³¹ One nature cannot possibly contradict itself in such an extreme way. The consequences of such a nature would involve the necessary destruction of one of these opposing qualities in order to give way to the other. This would result in either a created and uncircumscribed nature which is absurd: a created and circumscribed nature which is certainly human, or an uncreated and uncircumscribed nature which is divine. Any of these scenarios are heretical for John because they compromise the necessary unity between Christ's two natures as it had been established in the early ecumenical synods. The two natures of Christ must remain distinct yet united in one person so that "that which was created remained created, and that which was uncreated, uncreated" and so on.³² For John of Damascus, the integrity of Christ's divinity and his humanity makes it so that Jesus "is joined to the Father and the Spirit by His divinity, while on the other He is joined by His humanity to His mother and to all men."³³ This allows for Jesus Christ to relate to both man and God, and He, standing on both sides, is able to close the gap in between the creation and the Creator.

The definitions of the ecumenical synods are foundational for John and they frame his entire conception of orthodox Christology. For John, God the Son is consubstantial with the Father and the Holy Ghost, existing before the ages without

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 150-151.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

³⁰ Saint John of Damascus, III.iii., 271

³¹ *Ibid.*, III.iii., 272.

³² *Ibid.*, III.iii., 274.

³³ *Ibid.*, III.iii., 275.

beginning. If there were a time when the Son did not exist, He would not be consubstantial with the Father; this indicates division within the Trinity and questions the ability of Jesus Christ as a redeemer and conqueror of death. While being perfect God, the Son became perfect man who during his human life became a mediator and model of obedience and virtue without which it is impossible to attain salvation.