Were They Monophysites?

V. C. SAMUEL

I

The sixth century Church historian, Zachariah of Mitylene, has preserved the story that before the Council of Chalcedon was adjourned one of the officers of the Byzantine court tried to persuade Dioscorus to accept the Council's Definition of the Faith and that he answered: 'Sooner would Dioscorus see his hand cut off and the blood falling on the paper than do such a thing as that'.[1] The Patriarch, however, had to pay for this stand; for he was sent in exile to Gangra in Paphlagonia where he died in 454. The vast majority of Christians in Egypt and a considerable part of the Church in Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia, even in opposition to a vigorous state policy of enforcing the Council, followed the lead of Dioscorus and renounced Chalcedon.

This ecclesiastical tradition, as is well known, is referred to as *monophysite* by almost any writer on the subject known to the Western world. Though some of them employ the epithet only as a convenient term of reference, the fact has to be granted that it implies an ascription of heresy. It is therefore necessary to examine whether there is any justifiable basis for such implicit attribution.

The term *monophysite* refers to the view that Christ had but one nature—*μονή* + *φυσικός*. Since the critics of Chalcedon defended the phrase 'One incarnate nature of God the Word'—*μία φύσις σεσαρκωμένη τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ λόγου*—it is plausible to argue that this was the idea which they endeavoured to disseminate in opposition to Chalcedon. But it should be noted that those who coined the term 'monophysite' and ascribed it to the ancient opponents of the Council of Chalcedon overlooked two facts. In the first place, the phrase 'One incarnate nature of God the Word' was not the creation of those non-Chalcedonians; but it had been made popular by Cyril of Alexandria long before the Council of Chalcedon ever met, and his orthodoxy was fully acclaimed at Chalcedon. Furthermore, sixth century Eastern defenders of Chalcedon defended also the phrase 'One incarnate nature of God the Word'.[2] Secondly, the Greek word *Mia* is not

[1] *Zachariah of Mitylene* (Eng. Tr. Hamilton and Brooks, Methune & Co., 1899), p. 44.

[2] *Severus of Antioch: Contra Grammaticum* (Syriac), I, pp. 107-108.

identical with *Mone*, and therefore the passage from *Mia Physis* to monophysite is not really permissible. In any case, the mere acceptance of the phrase 'One incarnate nature of God the Word' does not justify the ascription of monophysitism to anybody.

It is a fact that the ancient critics of Chalcedon did affirm of Christ that He was at the same time perfect God and perfect man. This admission, however, does not by itself answer the charge of monophysitism against them; for it could be that the perfect manhood which they acknowledged was employed by God the Son only as a passive vehicle of His redemptive work. The question really is: Was the manhood of Christ dynamic in the sense that it played its rôle in the work of redemption which God the Son accomplished?

We shall raise the question with reference to two of the most important men on the non-Chalcedonian side.

II

The Theological Emphasis of Dioscorus

Literature: One—There are a number of statements made by Dioscorus at Chalcedon which remain recorded in the *Minutes* of that Council. Two—His letters to Domnus of Antioch written before the Home Synod of Constantinople in 448 to be found in S. G. F. Perry: *The Second Synod of Ephesus*. Three—Two letters of Dioscorus written from the place of his exile, found included in the work of Zachariah of Mitylene.

So far as concerning terminology, Dioscorus opposed the phrase 'in two natures' and made it clear that he accepted 'of two natures'.[3] On the authority of Cyril, his illustrious predecessor, he defended the phrase 'One incarnate nature of God the Word'.

His view regarding Christ's manhood may be seen in his letter to Secundinus written from Gangra, the place of his exile. Quoting Hebrews 2:16, he writes: 'Not from angels did He take (the nature), but from the seed of the house of Abraham to which seed Mary was no stranger, as the Scriptures teach us. And again, "It was right that in everything He should be like unto His brethren", and that word "in everything" does not suffer the subtraction of any part of our nature: since in nerves, and hair, and bones, and veins, and belly, and heart, and kidneys, and liver, and lungs, and in short, in all the things that are proper to our nature our Redeemer's animated flesh, which was born of Mary, with a rational and intelligent soul, came into being without the seed of man'.[4] In the same letter a little later Dioscorus asks:

---

[3] *Mansi*, VI, 692.

[4] *Zachariah of Mitylene*, op. cit., pp. 45-46. Since the words from 'and in short' to the end of the sentence, as given in Hamilton and Brooks' translation of Zachariah's work, are misleading, the passage, as given here, which is a direct rendering from Syriac as found in Michael the Syrian who preserves Zachariah's work, is put in its place.

'For if, as heretics think, this was not so, how is He named our brother, supposing that He used a body different from ours?'

In the statements of Dioscorus made at Chalcedon and in his literary remains there are clear evidences to the effect that in his view there was a union of two natures in Christ, namely God the Son with manhood. The manhood was our manhood with the single exception that it was sinless. The two natures united, affirms Dioscorus, without confusion (σύγχυσιν), division (τομήν), change (τροπήν), and mixture (σύγκρασιν).[5] It should also be noted that at Chalcedon, when the reading of the Confession of Eutyches was interrupted, several men gave their impressions of the monk's views. One of them, Basil of Seleucia, said that Eutyches satisfied himself with the simple statement that 'God the Word became man by assumption of flesh'. Immediately Dioscorus, while pointing out that the words of Basil were not borne out by recorded evidence, made it clear that in his view also the idea that was being read into Eutyches was heretical.[6] In other words, Dioscorus never questioned the reality of Christ's manhood.

His emphasis may be put in these words. The Person of Jesus Christ was the Person of God the Son in His incarnate state, in which there was a union of the divine nature of God the Son with manhood. This happened at the very moment when the Virgin conceived Him in her womb, so that the divine and the human came together into a focal point as it were, and the entire life of our Lord thereafter was a continuation of that focal point. Neither in the union nor in the life following it there was confusion, mixture, change or division of the natures. Therefore, Christ was perfect God and perfect man in the real sense every moment of His life.

Granting that Dioscorus did not accept the Chalcedonian Definition of the Faith, is it not legitimate to say that he has maintained the reality of Christ's manhood with the same force as the leading men at the Council did? It should also be borne in mind that the only point on which Dioscorus and his successors disagreed with the Chalcedonian Definition was on its use of the phrase 'in two natures'. In fact, if the 'in' were substituted by 'of' he would have subscribed to it.

III

Severus of Antioch

The most important theologian belonging to the non-Chalcedonian body in the fifth and the sixth centuries is Severus

---

[5] *Mansi*, VI, 677. This is found in a statement made by Dioscorus at the first session of the Council of Chalcedon on 8th October, 451, namely fourteen days before the Council drew up its definition of the faith on 22nd October with the four famous adverbs—'unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably'.

[6] *Mansi*, VI, 633–636.

of Antioch. During the reign of Zeno, in 512, he was appointed Patriarch of the Syrian see. In 518, when Justin I came to the throne, he had to leave the city and live in retirement till his death in about the year 540. Even to this day the Syrian Church refers to him as 'the Crown of the Syrians, the eloquent mouth and pillar and teacher of the whole Church of God'.[7]

Literature: A prolific writer, Severus has left behind him a large number of his literary productions, many of which are extant in Syriac translations. His major works now available are the following. A volume containing the correspondence of Severus with Nephalius, and the letters exchanged between Severus and Sergius the Grammarian; *Le Philalethes; Contra Grammaticum* in three parts; *Against Julian*; several collections of his letters; homilies; and hymns.

To understand the point of view of Severus a word is necessary about his background. After the Council of Chalcedon, though opposition to it was illegal according to the ruling of the State, its critics defied imperial orders and called in question the authority of the Council. This they did both by organizing themselves against the Council and by criticizing the Chalcedonian Definition of the Faith. Of these two, it is with reference to the second that Severus made his contribution.

Though the critics of the Council had several objections to the Council, the most important of them all was their opposition to the phrase 'in two natures'. Their argument against it may be put in this way: The term 'nature'—physis (φύσις) in Greek—meant either *ousia* or *hypostasis*; in either sense the phrase was objectionable; therefore it should be discarded.

These men stood in the tradition set up by the Cappadocian Fathers. During the latter half of the fourth century they had offered a definition of the term *ousia* and *hypostasis*. *Ousia* meant, according to their interpretation, the dynamic reality which lies behind a concrete existence. In itself *ousia* is not concrete; but when it is individuated a concrete being comes into existence; and that is a *hypostasis*. 'Manness', for instance, is an *ousia*; but a particular man is a *hypostasis*.

The Chalcedonian phrase 'in two natures', they argued, cannot be defended either in the sense of 'in two ousias' or in that of 'in two hypostases'. If it is taken in the first sense, it would mean that Christ was not man concretely; and if taken in the second sense it would lead to the doctrine that Christ consisted in two concrete beings, and nullify His personal unity.

Faced with the challenge, Eastern Chalcedonians endeavoured to defend the Council in two ways. Firstly, they made a large collection of proof-texts from the writings of Cyril of Alexandria, and tried to make out that the great Alexandrine theologian had anticipated the phrase 'in two natures'. Secondly,

---

[7] This is a quotation from the *diptychs* of the Syrian Orthodox Eucharistic Service.

while admitting that the term 'nature' meant only either *ousia* or *hypostasis*, they endeavoured to fix on it the former meaning.

Severus of Antioch criticized both these efforts. In his *Philalethes* he showed that the proof-texts drawn from the writings of Cyril did not prove the thesis of the defenders of Chalcedon. At this point, as at several others, the work of R. V. Sellers is most definitely weak.[8] He seems to be persuaded that the Chalcedonian thesis was tenable. The point of the criticism of Severus against the Chalcedonian efforts was that some of the proof-texts had been taken out of contexts in which Cyril had clearly argued against speaking of Christ as two natures after the incarnation, some had mutilated crucial words used by Cyril, and some proved nothing. Severus also pointed out that without ever adopting 'in two natures' and always opposing it, Cyril had taught the reality of Christ's manhood, and that therefore, to conserve the affirmation that Christ was really man, the phrase 'in two natures' was not necessary at all.

The Chalcedonian attempt to fix the meaning *ousia* on 'nature' was criticized by Severus on the ground that it would explain away the reality of Christ's concrete life in the world of space and time. The fact therefore is that of the sixth century defenders of Chalcedon and their critic, it was the latter who maintained the reality of Christ's manhood with greater force than the former.

Severus maintained that 'nature' with reference to Christ should be taken only in the sense of *hypostasis*, and that He was 'of two natures', namely 'of two hypostases'. God the Son, for instance, is *Hypostasis*; and manhood which He assumed, though it was not in existence nor was it a *hypostasis* before that happened, in union with Himself it came into being and became hypostatic. God the Son, says Severus, individuated manhood from Mary in union with Himself and assumed it as His own. Therefore, Christ was 'of two natures'. Severus opposed 'in two natures', because, in his view, the 'in' was tantamount to explain away the union of the two natures. Though he defended the phrase 'One incarnate nature of God the Word', he insisted that without the epithet 'incarnate' the expression 'one nature' should not be employed at all. As already noted, sixth century Eastern defenders of Chalcedon, especially those among them against whom Severus wrote his works, were willing to accept the phrase 'One incarnate nature of God the Word'. Therefore, the difference between Eastern Chalcedonians and their critics in ancient times is not that the former accepted 'two natures' and the latter asserted 'one nature'. On the contrary, the difference lay in that the former insisted on '*in* two natures' and the latter on '*of* two natures'. The term 'nature', if taken in the sense of *hypostasis*, the phrase 'in two natures' is certainly objectionable.

---

[8] Sellers: *The Council of Chalcedon* (London, S.P.C.K., 1953); *see* specially pp. 283–301.

It was, as already noted, by fixing the meaning *ousia* on 'nature' that sixth century Eastern Chalcedonians endeavoured to defend the phrase 'in two natures'. The early Chalcedonian effort in this direction did not take into account the hypostatic character of Christ's manhood, and that is what is known as the theory of *anhypostasia.* This theory came to be severely censured by Severus, and it was after his time that Leontius of Byzantium improved on it and propounded his theory of *enhypostasia.* In the incarnation, Leontius maintained, God the Son assumed the human *ousia*; but when He united it to Himself in the womb of the Virgin, the human *ousia* received its *hypostasis* in the *Hypostasis* of God the Son.

The question whether this exposition of Leontius is in any way an improvement on what Severus, the critic of Chalcedon, had already taught, cannot be discussed in the present context. We can only leave the matter for the judgement of the readers.

Severus rejected 'in two natures' and defended 'of two natures' and 'one incarnate nature of God the Word'. By the phrase 'of two natures' he did not mean that the manhood of Christ had been in existence before the incarnation, neither did he imply that it was absorbed or lost in Godhead after the union.

As to the status of Christ's manhood two emphases in the teaching of Severus may be specially noted. One of them is found in his work against Julian of Halicarnassus, and the other in one of his theological letters. During the second quarter of the sixth century Julian propagated the theory that Christ was sinless because in Him God the Son assumed the unfallen manhood of Adam. Death and decay, insisted Julian, were the result of the fall. Since Christ assumed the manhood of Adam before the fall, although He voluntarily tasted death, His manhood was both sinless and incorruptible. Severus refuted this theory and affirmed that in Christ God the Son assumed manhood from the fallen humanity, because it was the fallen man that needed a Saviour, and that the Redeemer's manhood was corruptible.

'God the Only-begotten Son', insisted Severus, 'who was before the ages and uncreated, took created flesh possessing rational soul from the seed of David and Abraham'. The flesh 'was holy from the time of its formation. It is not because He (God the Son) is incapable of making it all of a sudden immortal and impassible that He left it to remain subject to suffering and death, but it is because He willed that he (man), for whom it is natural to suffer, should not triumph over death by a forcible exercise of power that befits God'.[9] In the incarnation, maintains Severus, God the Son assumed the individuated manhood that continued from the fallen Adam. Therefore, the manhood was mortal and corruptible; it became immortal and incorruptible only by the resurrection. God the Son who assumed it did not from the beginning make it immortal and incorruptible, because

[9] This is the translation of a passage from the Syriac manuscript of Severus' work against Julian (No. 12158 British Museum).

He wanted it to undergo in reality all the experiences proper to man with the single exception of sin. In other words, though united with God the Son, the manhood of Christ had its natural expressions and experiences in the fullest way.

The second emphasis of Severus on the question of the reality of Christ's manhood to which reference may be made is to be found in his discussion of the status of the manhood after the resurrection of Christ. Severus is emphatic that 'the flesh remained flesh even after the God-befitting resurrection. It shines in all the glory that becomes God. As the body of God it is divine, but it has not been changed into the *ousia* of God.[10]

A passage from Severus' *Contra Grammaticum* may be reproduced to indicate the theological concern of Severus:

> God the Only-begotten Son became of the same substance with us and was united hypostatically to one flesh animated with a rational soul. By means of this the entire human *ousia* and the whole race became united in love with the divine nature, to which formerly it had been a stranger. Therefore, as it is written, we became partakers of the divine nature, having been made worthy of the original harmony. As by participation we obtain divine gifts and immortality which had been lost to us because of the trespass of Adam.[11]

The Christology of Severus is through and through soteriologically determined. It was by being led by this deep concern that he opposed the Chalcedonian Definition of the Faith. The phrase 'in two natures', he believed, was destructive of the doctrine of salvation, because, in his view, it could affirm only that Christ existed in two concrete centres of being, in which case there was no real incarnation.

IV

Conclusion

The two men of the non-Chalcedonian body to whom reference is made clearly affirm that Christ was both perfect God and perfect man, and that the manhood was not merely a passive vehicle of divine operation. On the other hand, they maintain that in union with God the Son the manhood of Christ remained real and dynamic, and that it underwent all the experiences proper to man with the sole exception of sin. Moreover, Severus in particular holds that the manhood of Christ had been created mortal and corruptible, and that it itself stood in need of redemption which was vouchsafed to it only by means of a life of obedience and suffering.

Bearing in mind the fact that the Christology of Severus was

---

[10] See *Patrologia Orientalis*, Vol. XII, p. 238.
[11] *Contra Grammaticum* (Syriac), I, p. 200.

worked out in the sixth century, are we to say that it is monophysite? Does the Church in the context of which it was brought out and handed down deserve the characterization monophysite? These questions may be left with the readers for further thought and study.

And if there is no difference between the teaching of Severus and that of Cyril, it seems equally clear that Timothy Aelurus and Philoxenus are to be counted as orthodox as Dioscorus.

Had the leaders of the Monophysites been unsound in the faith, the task facing the upholders of 'two natures after the union' would have been easier. But the latter had to deal with teachers—not 'heretics', but 'distinguishers'—who understood the meaning of Nestorianism and Eutychianism, and at the same time were satisfied that what had been said by the Fathers in their expositions of the Creed of Nicaea, the one and only Faith, guaranteed the truth against every heresy.

It should be understood that the Monophysite theologians were not heretics; nor were they regarded as such by leading Chalcedonians.

R. V. Sellers