

Theopatheia: Nestorius's main charge against Cyril of Alexandria

Paul Gavriljuk

Theology Department, University of St Thomas, 2115 Summit Ave/JRC 153, St Paul, MN 55105, USA
plgavriljuk@stthomas.edu

Abstract

Was Cyril of Alexandria a theopaschite? In order to resolve this controversial issue, this paper will look at Cyril's Christology with Nestorius's eyes. The charge of *theopatheia* appears from the very beginning in Nestorius's correspondence with Cyril and retains its central place in Nestorius's work *Liber Heraclidis*. The paper discusses Nestorian arguments against Cyril's position and Cyril's counter-charges. The conclusion is reached that Nestorius asserted unqualified divine impassibility. Cyril, in contrast, held a qualified view of the divine impassibility and maintained that neither divinity suffered alone, apart from humanity (in which case the assumption of humanity would be superfluous), nor humanity suffered alone, apart from and in sharp contrast to the impassible divinity (in which case the reality of divine involvement in the incarnation would be put at risk).

Was Cyril of Alexandria a theopaschite? This question has received attention in the recent studies of Joseph Hallman, John McGuckin, Steven McKinion, John O'Keefe, Thomas Weinandy, and other scholars.¹ Some modern theologians have hailed Cyril as a forerunner of contemporary emphasis on divine suffering. Others, on the contrary, consider Cyril to be inconsistent at best, and at worst falling prey with the majority of the patristic authorities to the alien Greek philosophical concept of divine *apatheia*.

In what sense, then, and with what qualifications was Cyril defending *theopatheia*? In order to attempt to resolve this highly controversial issue, I propose to look at Cyril's Christology with Nestorius's eyes. In my judgement,

¹ Joseph Hallman, 'The Seed of Fire: Divine Suffering in the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius of Constantinople', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5 (1997), pp. 369–91; John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy. Its History, Theology, and Texts* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994); Stephen McKinion, *Words, Imagery, and the Mystery of Christ* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); John J. O'Keefe, 'Impassible Suffering? Divine Passion and Fifth Century Christology', *Theological Studies* 58 (1997), pp. 39–60; *idem*, 'Kenosis or Impassibility: Cyril of Alexandria and Theodoret of Cyrus on the Problem of Divine Pathos', *Studia Patristica* 32 (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), pp. 358–65; Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), pp. 177–210.

in the recent studies this interpretative angle of vision has not been pursued systematically.

At the very beginning of his first substantive theological response to Cyril, *Ad Cyrillum II*, written in 430, Nestorius singled out *theopatheia* as the most problematic feature of Cyril's theology. Nestorius wrote:

You [Cyril] thought that they [the Fathers] had said that the Word, who is coeternal with the Father, is passible (*παθητὸν*). Look closely, if you please, at the precise meaning of their words, and you will find that the inspired chorus of the Fathers has not said that the consubstantial divinity is passible (*παθητήν*), nor that divinity, coeternal with the Father, was begotten, nor that divinity rose from the dead when raising his destroyed temple.²

It was precisely the allegation that Cyril did away with the divine impassibility that became a battle cry of the Oriental party, which supported Nestorius. While Cyril's second and third letters to Nestorius received the majority approval from the bishops who went to Ephesus in 431, many shared reservations about Cyril's notorious 12 anathemas appended to the third letter.³ The pamphlet war under the banner of anti-theopaschitism began shortly before the council of Ephesus.⁴ Among the Oriental bishops, Andrew of Samosata and Theodoret of cyrus voiced their disagreement. In their opinion, Cyril had a lot of explaining to do. John of Antioch received the chapters as an open affront to his own position. A rival assembly of the

² Nestorius *Ad Cyrillum* 2.3. See the discussion of this passage in L. Wickham, *Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. xxxvi.

³ The question whether the anathemas adequately reflected the opinion of the church at large was debated for the next 100 years, to be finally resolved at the fifth ecumenical council, which canonized them. We should note that Cyril's chapters undoubtedly had enthusiastic supporters at the council of Ephesus, such as Acacius of Melitene and Proclus, future bishop of Constantinople. On the history of the 12 chapters see Norman Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 175–6; Joseph Mahé, 'Les Anathématismes de Saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie et les Evêques Orientaux du Patriarchat d'Antioche', *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 7 (1906), pp. 505–42; H.-M. Diepen, 'Les Douze Anathématismes au Concile d'Éphèse et jusqu'en 519', *Revue Thomiste* 55 (1955, repr. 1967), pp. 300–38; J. McGuckin, 'The "Theopaschite Confession" (Text and Historical Context): A Study in the Cyrilline Re-interpretation of Chalcedon', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 35 (1984), p. 243.

⁴ Cyril Ep. 10.2; *Ad Eulogium*. Cyril wrote three explanatory apologies: *Apologia xii capitulorum contra Orientales* (ACO 1.1.7.33–65) in response to Andrew, *Apologia xii capitulorum contra Theodoretum* (ACO 1.1.6.107–146) before 431, and a more balanced *Explicatio duodecim capitum* after the council of Ephesus.

43 bishops, which John held upon his late arrival in Ephesus, deposed Cyril, demanding that he repudiate the 12 anathemas.

While Cyril and Nestorius were both held under house arrest in Ephesus, Emperor Theodosius II requested that two delegations, representing the two hierarchs, should defend their cases before him in Constantinople. According to the report of the Oriental party, when Theodosius II heard Bishop Acacius, the spokesman of the Cyrillian party, saying that the Godhead was passible, the emperor was so scandalized that he theatrically tore apart his cloak on account of such blasphemies.⁵ Nevertheless, the winds of popular dissatisfaction with Nestorius were too strong in the capital for the emperor to be governed by considerations of theological propriety alone. As a result of negotiations, Cyril was reinstated in his see in Alexandria, whereas Nestorius was deposed and escorted to his former monastery in Antioch. Writing from his monastic exile years later, Nestorius would represent the Oriental party as heroic confessors of the divine impassibility, who courageously confronted Theodosius II with the following ultimatum: 'Even if the Emperor treats us with violence, we shall not be persuaded to admit a suffering God.'⁶

Nestorius shared the common concern of the whole patristic tradition for a language that would most appropriately describe divine action in the world. He believed that the only pattern of involvement worthy of God was one that did not in any way override the divine perfections of impassibility and immutability. The central preoccupation of Nestorian piety and theology was to purify the theological discourse of any suggestion of divine suffering.⁷ Nestorius considered popular 'God in the womb – God in the tomb' Christology to be a piece of barbaric impiety. Cyril once sarcastically remarked that

Out of his excessive piety he [Nestorius] blushes at the degree of the self-emptying and cannot bear to see the Son who is co-eternal with God the Father, the one who in every possible respect is of the same form as he who begot him and equal to him, descend to such a humble level.⁸

For Nestorius, it was above all else unworthy of God to suffer and die as a mere mortal. Time and again Nestorius returned to his favorite charge of

⁵ Ep. ad eos qui Ephesi, in ACO 1.1.7.77.

⁶ Nestorius Liber Heraclidis 2.1, trans. G. R. Driver, *Nestorius: The Bazaar of Heracleides* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), p. 284.

⁷ 'Do you allot the suffering to human being alone, fending it off from God the Word to avoid God's being declared passible? This is the point of their pedantic, muddle-headed fictions.' Cyril *De symbolo* 31, trans. Wickham, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 131. Cf. Hallman, 'Seed of Fire', p. 371.

⁸ Cyril *Contra Nestorium* 4.5 (ACO 1.1.6.85).

theopatheia in his *Liber Heraclidis*.⁹ Towards the end of his life he wrote a treatise with the revealing title *Adversus Theopaschitas*, only meager fragments of which have survived. Overall, Nestorius's criticism remained without substantial development from the beginning to the end of the controversy inasmuch as he never took back his allegation that Cyril preached a suffering God.¹⁰

In his more theologically perceptive moments Nestorius admitted that Cyril was not just bluntly asserting that God in his own nature was endowed with anthropomorphic features, such as suffering and mortality. Nestorius conceded that, at least in word, Cyril admitted that the divine nature was impassible.¹¹ What profoundly puzzled Nestorius was the fact that Cyril could in the same breath claim that God the Word was the subject of all the human experiences of the incarnation.¹² In Nestorius's opinion, shared widely by the Orientals, Cyril's controversial dictum that 'the Word suffered impassibly' (ἀπαθῶς ἔπαθεν) was a desperate attempt to cover up the Alexandrian's real intention to forgo the divine impassibility altogether.

Nestorius claimed that Cyril's formula 'the Word suffered impassibly' or 'the impassible suffered' was a blatant contradiction at best and theological double-talk at worst. 'The same', Nestorius was quick to point out, 'could not be by nature impassible and passible.'¹³ Cyril should quit speaking in riddles, saying one thing and implying another. If Mary did not give birth to God the Word before all ages, why call her *Theotokos*? If divine nature did

⁹ Nestorius *Liber Heraclidis* 1.1.49; 1.2.7; 1.3.

¹⁰ As Cyril complains in *Ad Successum* 2.4 (ACO 1.1.6.161).

¹¹ 'Those who pass for orthodox [i.e. the Cyrillians] . . . attribute unto him [Christ] in word a nature unchangeable, impassible and without needs, and they ascribe unto him all sufferings and every need of the body and make over all the things of the soul and the intelligence to God the Word in virtue of an hypostatic union.' *Liber Heraclidis* 1.2, trans. Driver, Nestorius, pp. 93–4.

¹² 'For the one you first proclaimed as impassible and not needing a second generation, you subsequently introduce (how I know not) as passible and newly created.' *Ad Cyrillum* 2.6, trans. McGuckin, *Christological Controversy*, p. 366.

¹³ *Liber Heraclidis* 1.3, trans. Driver, Nestorius, p. 97. Cf. *Liber Heraclidis* 1.2, trans. *ibid.*, p. 94: 'And, like those who change him from his nature [i.e. the Arians], at one time they [the Cyrillians] call him now impassible and immortal and unchangeable, and afterwards they prohibit him from being then called immortal and impassible and unchangeable, being angry against any one who repeatedly calls God the Word impassible [i.e. the Nestorians].' Cf. also Theodoret, *Eranistes* 218.303–4: 'Who in their senses would ever stand for such foolish riddles? No one has ever heard of an impassible passion or an immortal mortality. The impassible has never undergone passion, and what has undergone passion could not possibly be impassible.' For discussion of this passage see O'Keefe, 'Impassible Suffering', p. 57; R. A. Greer, *Theodore of Mopsuestia: Exegete and Theologian* (Westminster: The Faith Press, 1961), pp. 36–7. Cyril takes this critique on in *Quod unus* 766B, 775E–776C.

not suffer, why make God the subject of the suffering in the flesh? If God is immortal, why speak of him as dying in his mortal body? If the claim that God was born of a woman, suffered and died has no literal force, why continue to use such provocative expressions? Such was the set of problems with which Nestorius challenged Cyril.

Nestorius believed that a sharp distinction between the properties of the two natures was an effective and simple solution to all the ambiguities and contradictions that Cyril's Christology presented. The Nestorian tradition followed this central point of Nestorius's theology and consistently emphasized a rigid demarcation of the corresponding properties and actions of the two subjects in Christ. This conviction was expressed, for example, in a later Nestorian confession of faith:

We believe in one divine nature, everlasting, without beginning, living and quickening all, powerful, creating all powers, wise, imparting all wisdom, simple spirit, infinite, incomprehensible, not compounded and without parts, incorporeal, both invisible and immutable, impassible and immortal; nor is it possible, whether by itself, or by another, or with another, that suffering and change should enter in unto it . . . For the (divine) substance cannot fall under the necessity of change and suffering, because if the Godhead underwent change, there would no longer be a revelation but a corruption of godhead, and if again the manhood departed from its nature, there would no longer be salvation, but an extinction of the manhood.¹⁴

This early seventh-century creed, directed against the Severian *θεοπασχίται*, totally ruled out any possibility of the divine nature's sharing in the experiences of the human nature. The Nestorians could not allow the thought that God could act in a way that might impinge upon his impassibility; that he could genuinely participate in the human experiences to the point of suffering, without ceasing to be what he is. To admit this would be to abrogate the fundamental division between Creator and creation. This train of thought would lead, so Nestorius argued, to a confusion of the corresponding properties of the two subjects and would ultimately jeopardize the integrity of Christ's divinity.¹⁵

¹⁴ Babai the Great (?), 'The Creed of the Bishops of Persia delivered to Kosroes in the year 612', trans. Luise Abramowski and Alan E. Goodman, *A Nestorian Collection of Christological Texts* (Cambridge: CUP, 1972), 2.88–89, 91.

¹⁵ 'The properties of God the Word they set at naught and make them human.' *Liber Heraclidis* 1.2.136, trans. Driver, Nestorius, p. 93.

In Nestorius's judgement, it was because Cyril blurred the distinction between the two centers of action that he was a theopaschite, despite all his protestations to the contrary. We must ask in turn, was Nestorius on target in his analysis of Cyril? In what sense precisely was Cyril a theopaschite? Cyril's own writings offer no easy answers to my last question.

We would do Cyril a great disservice if we measured his theological achievement by the degree to which he distanced himself from the allegedly philosophical axiom of the divine impassibility. To interpret Cyril in this way is to impose a dichotomy between the biblical God who suffers and the philosophical deity who does not – a misleading framework, which many interpreters of patristic theology have endorsed.¹⁶ Cyril did not see the choice between divine impassibility and passibility as an either/or matter; nor did he view the abandonment of divine impassibility as a liberation of the gospel from the shackles of Greek philosophy.¹⁷

¹⁶ The contrast between the mutable and passible God of 'biblical religion' and the immutable and impassible God of Greek philosophy has been drawn sharply in a number of studies. Consider, for example, the following general statement made by R. S. Franks back in 1917: 'The Biblical idea of God is religious, not philosophical, and as such is, especially in the Old Testament, frankly anthropomorphic. Hence God is represented as both mutable and passible.' For the Greek philosophers, on the contrary, 'one of the chief features of this idea [of God] was the conception of the divine immutability and impassibility'. Franks, 'Passibility and Impassibility', *Encyclopedia of Religious Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1917), 9.658. A ground-breaking essay in this arena is A. J. Heschel's *The Prophets* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962). Heschel's ideas were partly anticipated by Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). See also R. B. Edwards, 'Pagan Dogma of the Absolute Unchangeableness of God', *Religious Studies* 14 (1978), pp. 305–13; F. House, 'The Barrier of Impassibility', *Theology* 83 (1980), pp. 409–15; O. T. Owen, 'Does God Suffer?', *Church Quarterly Review* 158 (1957), pp. 176–83; C. C. Cain, 'A Passionate God?', *Saint Luke's Journal of Theology* 25 (1981), pp. 52–7; Edmond Jacob, 'Le Dieu souffrant: un thème théologique vétérotestamentaire', *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 95 (1983), pp. 1–8; Jean Galot, 'La révélation de la souffrance de Dieu', *Science et Esprit* 31 (1979), pp. 159–71; Geir Hoaaas, 'Passion and Compassion of God in the Old Testament: A Theological Survey of Hos 11: 8–9, Jer 31:20, and Isa 63:9, 15', *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 11 (1997), pp. 138–59; R. A. Bauckham, 'Only the Suffering God Can Help: Divine Passibility in Modern Theology', *Themelios* 3 (1984), pp. 6–12; J. Y. Lee, *God Suffers for Us: A Systematic Inquiry into a Concept of Divine Passibility* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), esp. pp. 28–32, 100–3. Jerry D. McCoy applied this conceptual framework specifically to Cyril's Christology in 'Philosophical Influences on the Doctrine of the Incarnation in Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria', *Encounter* 38 (1977), pp. 362–91.

¹⁷ O'Keefe frames this question as an either/or issue in his article 'Kenosis or Impassibility' (see n. 1 above). O'Keefe concludes that Cyril was more biblical and less philosophical, while Theodoret was more philosophical and less biblical in their

The attribution of human emotions and experiences to God is regarded by the biblical authors themselves as a problem of anthropomorphism, not necessarily as an advantage over non-anthropomorphic descriptions of God. To affirm simply that the divine nature is passible is to open a Pandora's box of theological problems. Divine impassibility had its proper function in the framework of patristic negative theology and was not intended to rule out all emotionally colored characteristics of God or God's involvement in creation. Divine impassibility served as an apophatic qualifier of all divine emotions and as an indicator of God's perfect freedom over his emotions.

For Cyril, both qualified divine impassibility and qualified divine passibility were necessary for a sound theology of incarnation. The affirmation of impassibility was a way of protecting the truth that the one who became incarnate was truly God. Admitting a qualified passibility secured the point that God truly submitted himself to the conditions of the incarnation. For Nestorius, impassibility functioned in a radically different way: it ruled out any possibility of divine involvement in human suffering as unworthy of God.

In Cyril's view, the key Nestorian concern for the distinction of the two natures was a relatively trivial point, one which did not deserve to be emphasized repeatedly.¹⁸ Cyril, in turn, proposed a different starting point for understanding the incarnation. For him, the words of the kenotic hymn of Phil. 2:5–11 provided a point of entry into the meaning of the christological article of the creed.¹⁹ In his early treatise *Ad augustas*, written shortly after the outbreak of the Nestorian controversy in 428, Cyril observed: 'a discussion of the emptying (ὁ περὶ τῆς κενώσεως λόγος) must take precedence over the other points'.²⁰ In his third letter to Nestorius, Cyril inserted the explanatory words 'emptied himself' in the middle of his brief restatement of the second

respective views on the issue of divine pathos (p. 365). While I agree with the point that the protection of divine impassibility was an overriding concern of Nestorianism, I do not find the supposed opposition between the bible and Greek philosophy to be a helpful key to interpreting Nestorius's concern.

¹⁸ Cyril, as we noted earlier, deemed the terminology of the two natures quite acceptable, as long as it did not undermine the oneness of Christ. See *Ad Eulogium*.

¹⁹ See esp. Cyril *De symbolo* 13. The centrality of Phil. 2:5–11 in Cyril's theology has been noted by several scholars. See P. Henry, 'Kénose', *Dictionnaire de la Bible: Supplement* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1957), 5.92; F. Young, *From Nicaea*, 260; O'Keefe, 'Impassible Suffering', pp. 46–9. A fuller list of Cyril's favorite scriptural loci includes: 2 Cor 8:9; Heb 2:14–17; and John 1:14.

²⁰ *Ad augustas* 4 (ACO 1.1.5.28), trans. Rowan A. Greer, 'Cyril of Alexandria, "To Pulcheria and Eudocia On the Right Faith"' (unpublished, n.d.), p. 3.

article of the creed.²¹ Cyril remained faithful to his rule in his later writings: any interpretation of the incarnation had to do justice to Phil. 2:5–11.²²

Two problems loom large in Cyril's numerous expositions of the kenotic hymn: who was the subject of the emptying and what did the emptying consist of?²³ Theodore of Mopsuestia made a sharp distinction between 'the one who is in the form of God' and 'the one who is in the form of a slave'.²⁴ He taught that God's indwelling of the man Jesus was only quantitatively different from his indwelling of the prophets and the saints of the past. God chose to dwell in the saints 'by his good pleasure' (κατ' εὐδοκίαν) on the grounds that they were worthy of his nearness. As Theodore pointed out in his *De incarnatione*, Jesus excelled all other human beings in virtue and moral insight, and for that reason was worthy of God's indwelling 'by good pleasure' to the highest degree.²⁵

Nestorius, following Theodore, held that the subject of the emptying was 'the form of a slave', a passible man indwelt by the Word.²⁶ It was a God-bearing man who became poor, suffered, was emptied out of his human life and died. The Nestorians believed that any involvement of the Word in the emptying would violate his impassibility.

Cyril disagreed in principle with such an interpretation. He stressed that something unique and absolutely unparalleled had happened in the incarnation. Cyril believed that, by speaking of Christ as merely a God-bearing man, Theodore and Nestorius missed the very nerve center of the gospel.²⁷ Following Athanasius, Cyril objected that the difference between God's presence in Christ and in deified human beings was not merely a matter of degree of grace.²⁸ The difference was qualitative, and for that reason all

²¹ *Ad Nestorium* 3.3: 'And we declare that the only-begotten Word of God . . . came down for our salvation, emptying himself, he it is who was incarnate and made man, that is to say, took flesh of the holy Virgin, making it his own (ιδίαν αὐτὴν ποισάμενος) from the womb . . .'. Trans. Wickham, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 17.

²² Kenosis is the major theme of Cyril's christological dialogue *Quod unus sit Christus*. Cf. also *Scholia* 12.

²³ *Ad augustas* 18 (ACO 1.1.5.35).

²⁴ Theodore *De symbolo* 6.

²⁵ Theodore *De incarnatione* bk 7.

²⁶ Nestorius *Ad Cyrillum* 2.6; Theodoret *Eranistes* 3.

²⁷ *Ad Nestorium* 3.4; anathem. 5.

²⁸ In *Quod unus* 75 1B–C Cyril argued that it was the implication of the Nestorian teaching that 'Christ surpassed the holy prophets who came before him only in terms of the amount of grace and its duration, and this was what constituted his pre-eminence'. Trans. McGuckin, *On the Unity of Christ*, p. 98. Cf.: 'He [the Evangelist] does not say that the Word came into flesh; he says he became flesh in order to exclude any idea of a relative indwelling, as in the case of the prophets and the other saints.' In *Joannem*

christological statements required a grammatical subject that would make this fact clear. In his *Ad Nestorium* II Cyril explained:

It was not the case that initially an ordinary man (ἄνθρωπος κοινός) was born of the holy Virgin and then the Word simply settled on him (καταπεφοίτηκεν ἐπ' αὐτόν) – no, what is said is that he underwent fleshly birth united from the very womb, making the birth of his flesh his very own.²⁹

Cyril insisted that it was not a man indwelt by God, but God the Word incarnate who was the subject of all statements about Christ. In his letter to the monks of Egypt Cyril asked: 'Well, my friends, would the fact that the Word of God only dwelt in a man be enough to connote his self-emptying?'³⁰ If there was no qualitative difference between God's sanctification of the saints and God's participation in the life of Christ, one would have to conclude that God, in all three persons, emptied himself in the souls of all those whom he indwelt. Besides, if the God-bearing man Jesus was worthy of worship, so should all ordinary believers be who were endowed with the Spirit of God. Thus, Cyril met the accusation of *theopatheia* with the counter-charge of *ἀνθρωπολατρία*.³¹

Ascribing the emptying exclusively to the human subject, as Theodore and Nestorius did, also led to the following problem, which Cyril pointed out repeatedly: human nature is already empty and powerless and, therefore, incapable of further emptying out. Drawing upon 2 Cor 8:9, Cyril observed that since humanity was 'utterly poor' in the eyes of God, it could not possibly 'become poor'. Poverty and emptiness are humanity's natural condition; they cannot in principle become its voluntary goals in the incarnation. One cannot give up what one does not possess.³² Only the one in whom the fullness of God dwelt could become empty, only the one who was rich was in a position to give up his riches for the sake of others. The emptying of a mere human being was not an emptying at all.³³ In his *Explicatio duodecim capitum*, written

1.9.95E, trans. Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 106. Cf. *Contra Nestorium* 2.4.41; 3.2 (ACO 1.1.6.60); 4.3 (ACO 1.1.6.83); *Explicatio Duodecim Capitum* 16–22 (ACO 1.1.5.21); *Scholia* 2, 17–19, 23, 25, 35; *Ad monachos* 14, 19–21; *Quod Unus* 717A, 741D–E, 750C–D.

²⁹ *Ad Nestorium* 2.4, trans. Wickham, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 7.

³⁰ *Ad monachos* 14, trans. McGuckin, *Christological Controversy*, p. 253. Cf. *Quod unus* 734E, 750C.

³¹ Cyril advanced these arguments in *Scholia* 18, 24; *Quod unus* 771B; 732E; *Contra Nestorium* 4.6 (ACO 1.1.6.89).

³² Cyril, *In Lucam* 11; *Ad monachos* 13.

³³ 'If it was simply and solely a man born of a woman [which is what Nestorius implied by calling Mary 'man-bearer'], then how did he possess such fullness so as to be

under house arrest in Ephesus in the late summer of 431, Cyril underlined that the notorious 12th anathema was written specifically against those who were 'saying that an ordinary man (ἄνθρωπος κοινὸς) endured the cross for our sake'.³⁴

Nestorius and the Orientals quite legitimately objected that they had never claimed that Christ was a mere man, that Cyril had created a straw man for the sake of polemic. They could attest that the Oriental Christians suffered a great deal from the Arians for holding unflinchingly to the confession of Nicea.³⁵ This is a measure of just how far they were from the heresy of anyone who taught that Christ was not fully God. On these grounds Cyril's psilanthropist objection (i.e. the objection against the claim that Christ was a mere man) could be quite easily dismissed. As Rowan Greer observed in his study of Theodore, Cyril and his supporters in their belligerent moments proved unwilling to recognize this point.³⁶

In the vicinity of the psilanthropist objection was another problem that Nestorius would never be able to get away with. As I have already mentioned, in his attempt to protect the divine impassibility, Nestorius introduced a sharp demarcation between the two subjects of Christ's experiences and actions. He wanted to make sure that Christ's human experiences were not ascribed to the divine nature in any way. Inevitably, this move made a human individual *alone* the subject of the emptying. In Cyril's opinion, the Nestorians went too far in their seemingly pious effort to protect God's dignity:

They fail to bear in mind God's plan and make mischievous attempts to shift the suffering to the man on his own, in foolish pursuit of false piety. Their aim is that the Word of God should not be acknowledged as the Savior who gave his own blood for us but instead that Jesus, viewed as a distinct individual man, should be credited with that.³⁷

understood as "emptied out"? Or in what lofty state was he formerly positioned that he could be said to have "humbled himself"? Or how was he made in the likeness of men if he was already that beforehand by nature? . . . Or how could he be said to have been "emptied out" if he was assuming the fullness of the deity? *Scholia* 12, trans. McGuckin, *Christological Controversy*, p. 305. Cf. *Quod unus* 730B, 777A–B.

³⁴ *Explicatio duodecim capitum* 31. Cf. *Quod unus* 763B, 766C.

³⁵ Theodore mentions that his church suffered under a local Arian persecution. See *De incarnatione* bk 6. This may partially explain why Nestorius was nicknamed 'incendiary' for overzealously persecuting Arians in Constantinople. See Socrates, *H.E.* 7.29.

³⁶ Greer, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, p. 43.

³⁷ *Ad Succensum* 4, trans. Wickham, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 91. Cf. *Explicatio duodecim capitum* 13–14: 'Why would he [the Word] empty himself out if the limitations of the manhood made him ashamed? Or if he was going to shun human characteristics who was it that compelled him by force or necessity to become as we are? For this reason we apply

Nestorius attempted to defend himself by proposing to Cyril the following false dilemma: either the human or the divine subject suffered. The denial of the former led to the acceptance of the latter. But to claim that God suffered in his divinity was, for Nestorius, both a blasphemy and an absurdity. In order to make this idea apparent, Nestorius used the following linguistic trick: he substituted 'God' as the grammatical subject of all those sentences in the gospels that spoke of Christ's human experiences. Among Nestorius's favorite paraphrases were the words of the angel to Joseph before the flight to Egypt: 'Rise, take up God and his mother'³⁸ (Matt 2:13) and the words of Christ before his arrest: 'Why do you seek to kill me, a God who has told you the truth?'³⁹ Touching upon the subject of the Eucharist, Nestorius stressed that Christ did not say 'He who eats my Godhead (θεότητα) and drinks my Godhead', but 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.'⁴⁰ To substitute 'God' for the human subject in any of these sentences would be a piece of vulgar theologizing unworthy of God. As Nestorius saw it, *theopatheia* was the necessary implication of Cyril's attack upon his own two-subject Christology.

Cyril responded to this accusation that he nowhere said that 'bare divinity' suffered or died. God did not suffer 'nakedly' (γυμνωσ), that is, outside the limitations of his self-emptying.⁴¹ If man did not suffer alone, neither did God suffer on his own. Cyril was determined to resist any attempt at dividing the gospel sayings into those passages pertaining to the divinity and those speaking about the humanity of Christ.⁴² Instead of speaking of the two subjects leading two loosely connected lives, Cyril preferred to speak of the single subject, one divine Word, and to refer to him as existing in two distinct states: apart from the incarnation and within the framework of the incarnation.⁴³ Outside of the incarnation, the Word was characterized

all the sayings in the Gospels, the human ones as well as those befitting God, to one prosopon.' Trans. McGuckin, *Christological Controversy*, p. 287. See also *Contra Nestorium* 3.2 (ACO 1.1.6.58, 60); Prooem 2 (ACO 1.1.6.33); 2.10 (ACO 1.1.6.47).

³⁸ Nestorius Quaternion 21, trans. McGuckin, *Christological Controversy*, p. 370.

³⁹ John 8:40. Cyril *Contra Nestorium* 2.10 (ACO 1.1.6.47), trans. Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 157.

⁴⁰ Nestorius Quaternion 4 (ACO 1.1.2.51), trans. McGuckin, *Christological Controversy*, p. 376. Cf. *Contra Nestorium* 4.7 (ACO 1.1.6.90).

⁴¹ Cyril *Quod unus* 764B: '[The Word] is not given on behalf of us nakedly (οὐ γυμνὸν), as it were, or as yet without flesh, but rather when he became flesh.' Trans. McGuckin, *On the Unity of Christ*, p. 114. Cf. *Quod unus* 754E, 758B, 773A; *Ad augustas* 31 (ACO 1.1.5.50); 11 (ACO 1.1.5.31).

⁴² See esp. *Ad Nestorium* 3, fourth anathema.

⁴³ The distinction is made explicitly in *Quod unus* 727C–D, 728B–C.

by all the divine perfections and negative attributes. In that state clear-cut distinctions between the Creator and creation obtained and anthropomorphic descriptions of divine action were not to be construed literally: God could be said to act like a man, but he could not be said to become human in order to act in this way.

Within the confines of the incarnation, the language of the negative attributes still obtained, since the Word had not abandoned his divine status. At the same time, something new happened in the incarnation, so new and unparalleled that it became possible to predicate human experiences of God the Word, not considered 'nakedly', but within the framework of the incarnation. While God in his omniscience 'knew our frame', in the incarnation he became a participant in our weaknesses and in this sense it was possible to speak of an utterly unique divine acceptance of human limitations.⁴⁴

In the incarnation it became entirely legitimate, even necessary, to make the divine Word the grammatical subject of the passages that Nestorius used to prove his point. Thus, according to Cyril, the statements 'God wept' or 'God was crucified' were theologically legitimate, as long as it was added that the subject was God-in-the-flesh, and not God outside of the framework of the incarnation.⁴⁵

Cyril believed that a way of coming to terms with the newness of the incarnation was to resort to language fraught with paradoxes:

We see in Christ the strange and rare paradox (*παράδοξον*) of Lordship in servant's form and divine glory in human abasement.⁴⁶

He who was above all creation was in our human condition; the invisible one was made visible in the flesh; he who is from the heavens and from on high was in the likeness of earthly things; the immaterial one could be touched; he who is free in his own nature came in the form of a slave; he who blesses all creation became accursed; he who is all righteousness

⁴⁴ *Ad augustas* 29 (ACO 1.1.5.47): 'But even if it is right for something of human experience to be evident to him [God the Word], nevertheless he has not yet been called to the very experience of our weaknesses. But when he embraced our flesh, he was "tempted in every respect." Consequently, we do not say that He had been ignorant before, but that to the knowledge suitable to God which he possessed was added that which came through experience itself. And he did not become sympathetic (*συμπάθης*) from his being tempted. Why? Because he was and is merciful by nature as God.' Trans. Greer, 'Cyril of Alexandria, "To Pulcheria and Eudocia On the Right Faith"', p. 29.

⁴⁵ This point is especially well brought out by McGuckin, *Christological Controversy*, p. 191.

⁴⁶ *Quod unus* 753B-C, trans. McGuckin, *On the Unity of Christ*, p. 101.

was numbered among the transgressors; life itself came in the appearance of death.⁴⁷

He who as God is all perfect submits to bodily growth: the incorporeal has limbs that advance to the ripeness of manhood; he is filled with wisdom who is himself all wisdom. And what say we to this? Behold by these things him who was in the form of the father made like unto us; the rich in poverty; the high in humiliation; him said to 'receive' whose is the fullness as God. So thoroughly did God the Word empty himself!⁴⁸

Nestorius objected that to have recourse to paradoxical language of this kind meant only to beg the question. To repeat the objection already mentioned, how could one and the same person both suffer and not suffer?⁴⁹ Nestorius argued that what Cyril called a paradox was in fact a lamentable contradiction for which the two-subject Christology had a cure.

Cyril, predictably, disagreed. In the passages quoted he pointed out that the same paradoxical logic applies to all the other negative predicates that secured Christ's unmistakably divine identity – invisibility, incorporeality, incorruptibility, immutability and the like – and were also put in creative tension with Christ's human characteristics. Cyril was committed to preserving 'the strange and rare paradox' of the Lord's coming in servant's form, the coming which was quite unlike any other divine manifestation through human agents. The paradoxical language made it crystal clear that in Christ we do not find two distinct agents – God and a saint – but one divine Word incarnate.⁵⁰ Even pressed with the charge of *theopatheia*, Cyril never gave up insisting that the paradox of the impassible who accepted the conditions of *pathos* was ultimately irreducible.⁵¹ This is what it means to say that God did not simply act like a man, but *became* one.

We come now to the question: what was the point of securing one undivided subject of the emptying? What did the self-emptying of the one divine Word precisely consist of? Both Cyril and Nestorius agreed that the self-emptying was not to be seen as a corruption or degradation of divinity.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 723E, trans. *ibid.*, p. 61. Cf. *Explicatio duodecim capitum* 11.

⁴⁸ Cyril In Lucam 5, trans. R. P. Smith, *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, homily 5 (Astoria, NY: Studion Publishers, 1983), p. 63. 1:29. Cf. In Lucam 1.1; *Ad augustas* 31 (ACO 1.1.5.51).

⁴⁹ *Quod unus* 766B.

⁵⁰ *Ad Nestorium* 3. 8, anathem. 2 and 3.

⁵¹ On this point see Wickham, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. xxxiii.

The Word remained what he was, namely God, and did not abandon his divine status.⁵²

The question, then, has to be pressed with a new force: what was it that happened in the emptying? If there was any change at all, how should this change be described? Nestorius, following Theodore, explained that the emptying consisted in the conjunction (συνάφεια) of humanity with the divine Word. Cyril responded that conjunction was something that 'any other man could have with God, being bonded to him as it were in terms of virtue and holiness'.⁵³ If conjunction was no more than an external appending of human nature to the divine, in what sense was it emptying? What was the Word emptied of? Theodore was adamant that insofar as one could speak of emptying or change, these experiences could be ascribed only to the man assumed, not to God who did the assuming.⁵⁴

Cyril responded that the emptying did not consist in merely appending humanity to a divinity that remained unaffected. The incarnation for Cyril meant God's 'descent to the limits of humanity' and his allowing of 'the limitations (μέτροι) of the manhood to have dominion over himself (ἐφ' ἑαυτῷ τὸ κρατεῖν)'.⁵⁵ Thus, the Word's submission to the limitations of human existence entailed a temporary restraint of divine power and other perfections.

As Cyril stressed on many occasions, the Word remained impassible in his own nature throughout the incarnation. Some interpreters of Cyril isolate this claim in Cyril's writings and argue that at the end of the day Cyril abandoned his radically theopaschite claims and made the same concessions to the philosophical axiom of divine impassibility as did his Nestorian opponents. On this reading, Nestorius was a thoroughgoing philosophical impassibilist, whereas Cyril was an inconsistent and hesitating theopaschite. Were it not for his inadequate philosophical framework, Cyril would have seen the light and joined the circles of those who advocate unrestricted divine suffering today.⁵⁶

⁵² Cyril Scholia 5; *Ad monachos* 23.

⁵³ Quod unus 733B, trans. McGuckin, *On the Unity of Christ*, p. 74.

⁵⁴ Theodore of Mopsuestia *Catechetical Homilies* 6.6; 8.7.

⁵⁵ Quod unus 760C, trans. McGuckin, *On the Unity of Christ*, p. 110. Cf. *Ad augustas* 44 (*ACO* 1.1.5.58–9).

⁵⁶ J. D. McCoy proposes process metaphysics as a more suitable philosophical framework for understanding the divine passibility. Cyril, on McCoy's reading, was captivated by the static metaphysical scheme of later Platonism. See his 'Philosophical Influences' (see above, n. 16). Cf. Joseph M. Hallman, *The Descent of God: Divine Suffering in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 125–45.

Such a reading of the evidence puts patristic theologians into quite artificial boxes of ‘biblicists’ and ‘philosophers’, ‘theopaschites’ and ‘impassibilists.’ Nestorian ‘impassibilism’ represented a particular type of piety that was inspired by the scriptural vision of the ontological distinction between the Creator and creation. Likewise, Cyril’s defense of the paradox of the incarnation was not philosophy-driven, but was motivated by the desire to articulate a distinctly Christian account of the divine involvement. To claim that ‘bare divinity’ suffers or that God suffers outside the framework of the incarnation (as many contemporary advocates of divine suffering tend to do) is to incur the following two major problems. First, it would mean that the anthropomorphic descriptions applied to God literally, that God had a constitution which would enable him to feel human emotions and suffering prior to the incarnation.⁵⁷ Second, the presupposition that the divine nature could suffer on its own renders the assumption of humanity superfluous. If God could suffer as humans do without assuming humanity, the incarnation would be unnecessary.⁵⁸

When Cyril said that the Word suffered impassibly, he did not mean that God remained unaffected and uninvolved in the human experiences of Christ. On the contrary, it was Cyril’s clear intention to repudiate any such a view. Rather, Cyril intended to say that it was an unmistakably divine subject who submitted himself to the limitations of the incarnation and accepted all the consequences associated with this condition. It is not accidental that the apophatic claim that the divine nature is impassible always appears in Cyril’s writings in tandem with the affirmation that God suffered in the flesh.

Cyril’s awareness of the subtlety of the theological balance that he attempted to maintain came out most clearly in the exchange of letters with the bishops of the opposition which took place after the council of Ephesus. In one such letter, written to Acacius of Beroea, who on behalf of the Oriental party demanded that Cyril retract all his writings on Christology, Cyril was determined to sustain a theological tension between the divine transcendence and the divine involvement in suffering:

I [Cyril] certainly do not say that any confusion or blending, or mixture took place, as some people maintain, because I know that the Word of God is by nature changeless and unalterable, and in his proper nature is

⁵⁷ Cyril Ep. 10.1 (ACO 1.1.1.110–112). Cyril took up the subject of anthropomorphism in his *Adversus Anthropomorphitas*. For a valuable discussion of this work see E. P. Meijering, ‘Some Reflections on Cyril of Alexandria’s Rejection of Anthropomorphism’, in *God Being History: Studies in Patristic Philosophy* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1975), pp. 297–301.

⁵⁸ *Ad Succensum* 2.2.

altogether incapable of any suffering. That which is divine is impassible and does not admit even the 'shadow of a change' (James 1:17) of suffering. On the contrary it is established with unshakeable stability in the realities of its own goodness. I maintain, however, that it was the Only Begotten Son of God, the One Christ and Lord, who suffered in the flesh for our sake, in accordance with the scriptures, particularly with that saying of the blessed Peter (1Pet 4: 1).⁵⁹

In this passage Cyril carefully distanced himself from a typically Apollinarian error of confusing and mixing the two natures. We should also note Cyril's conscious reliance upon the NT in affirming both qualified impassibility and qualified passibility. In the following passage Cyril explains his position to Succensus of Diocaesarea, who shared the reservations of the Orientals:

Your Perfection [Succensus] expounds the rationale of our Savior's passion very correctly and wisely, when you insist that the Only-begotten Son of God did not personally experience bodily sufferings in his own nature, as he is seen to be and is God, but suffered in his earthly nature. Both points, indeed, must be maintained of the one true Son: the absence of divine suffering and the attribution to him of human suffering because his flesh did suffer. These people [the Orientals], though, imagine that we are hereby introducing what they call *theopatheia*; they fail to bear in mind God's plan and make mischievous attempts to shift the suffering to the man on his own in foolish pursuit of a false piety.⁶⁰

Cyril has very skillfully carved out his vision of the incarnation between the Scylla of God's suffering in his own nature outside of the economy of the incarnation and the Charybdis of the man's suffering on his own. Cyril differentiated between unqualified and qualified divine passibility. Divine passibility without qualifications entailed that God was anthropomorphic and subject to human weaknesses. Qualified divine passibility, in contrast, allowed for the possibility of the transcendent God's suffering in and through human nature. Cyril pointed out that the charge of *theopatheia* strictly speaking applied only to the unqualified divine passibility, not to the qualified one.

In the passage quoted below Cyril spelled out most clearly that divine impassibility functioned as an indicator of the divine transcendence and

⁵⁹ *Ad Acacium* (of Beroea) 7; emphasis added.

⁶⁰ *Ad Succensum* 2.4, trans. Wickham, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 91; emphasis added.

irreducible divinity. Divine impassibility was not meant to rule out the Word's suffering in human nature:

God's Word is, of course, undoubtedly impassible in his own nature and nobody is so mad as to imagine the all-transcending (ὕπερ πάντα) nature capable of suffering (δύνασθαι πάθους); but by very reason of the fact that he has become man, making flesh from the Holy Virgin his own, we adhere to the principles of the divine plan and maintain that he who as God transcends suffering (τὸν ἐπέκεινα τοῦ παθεῖν ὡς θεόν), suffered humanly in his flesh (τῇ ἰδίᾳ παθεῖν ἀνθρωπίνως).⁶¹

The examples of such 'tandem statements' could easily be multiplied.⁶² Cyril's intention is clear: he wants to uphold both God's irreducible divinity and God's involvement in the human experiences of the incarnation. Although God did not suffer in the divine nature, he did suffer in his human nature. The flesh became an instrument which enabled the Word to suffer humanly.⁶³

Nestorius finally objected that by the time Cyril was through with the qualifications he put on *theopatheia*, there was nothing left of substance that would distinguish Cyril's position from his own.⁶⁴ Nestorius affirmed the impassibility of the divine nature, and so did Cyril. Nestorius insisted that human nature suffered, and so did Cyril. The only difference was that Cyril stated these two truths in a less coherent manner. So, Nestorius could ask, what was the point of arguing over petty differences of expression?

Cyril responded that the difference was indeed profound. While Nestorius maintained unqualified divine impassibility which undermined the union of Christ's person, Cyril held to a substantially modified view of the divine impassibility. For Cyril, divine impassibility meant that the Word remained unconquered by suffering and death and that he was unable to experience suffering in his 'naked divinity.' Yet the Word could suffer in and through the flesh. The presence of the Word transformed Christ's human sufferings, while preserving their tragic reality. The Word was in a qualified sense passible to

⁶¹ *De symbolo* 24, trans. Wickham, *Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 123; emphasis added.

⁶² *Ad Nestorium* 2.5; *Scholia* 5, 13, 26; *Explicatio duodecim capitum* 31; *Ad Acacium* (of Beroea) 7; *Ad monachos* 23–24; *Ep.* 39. 9 (*Symbolum Ephesinum*, ACO 1.1.4.17).

⁶³ *Scholia* 25.

⁶⁴ *Scholia* 35: 'But wait, he [Nestorius] says, we find that you are doing exactly the same thing as us; for you confess that he suffered, in so far as you attribute the sufferings to the flesh, even though you keep him impassible as God.' Trans. McGuckin, *Christological Controversy*, pp. 334–5.

the degree to which he made the sufferings of humanity his very own. In appropriating the experiences of humanity the Word directed them towards the salvific end and rendered them life-giving.

Ultimately, Nestorius had dissolved the paradox of the incarnation, while Cyril carefully preserved it, by keeping the tension between Christ's undiminished divinity and his suffering in the flesh at the center of his theology. Nestorius's view of the incarnation, when all was said and done, accounted only for the exaltation of man, a mere joining of a human being to God, and left no room for the self-emptying of the divine Word. Nestorius saw in Cyril's kenoticism a piece of sloppy theologizing that ultimately led to a confusion and mixture of the two subjects in Christ. Cyril objected that in order to remain faithful to the Nicene creed, one had to insist upon the centrality of the divine self-emptying in the incarnation. It was God's kenosis that secured humanity's theosis.