

THE ALEXANDRIAN "MIA-PHYSIS"¹

I. Some scholars, in criticizing the "*mia-physis*" formula state that the main base for the Alexandrian theological system was ascetic. Egyptian church leaders practiced severe asceticism, renouncing their own body with the aim of "*deification*" or "*divinization*." The core of the Alexandrian theology could be revealed through St. Athanasius' statement that the Word of God became man (*enêthrôpêsen*) so that we might be made gods (*theopiêthomen*). They ignored actual life on earth to participate in divine life. In other words, they abolished the boundaries between God and man, concentrating on what is divine even in their daily life. This attitude had its effect on theology in the following way:

a. The Alexandrines adored the "*mia-physis*" and the "*hypostatic union*" between the Godhead and manhood of Christ to attribute all the actions and words of Christ to His divinity, ignoring what is human in Him.

b. They accepted Christ as "God-flesh" and not as "God-man," denying the role of the human soul of Jesus Christ.

I would like to clarify these remark as follows:

1. The early Alexandrian theologians and clergymen were ascetics and asceticism still has a strong effect in our theology, but we do not despise our own bodies nor deny our Lord's manhood, but rather insist on the soteriological aspects. The early Coptic ascetics were involved not in theoretical discussions but in enjoying the redeeming deeds of the Holy Trinity, i.e., in enjoying the sanctification of the soul, mind, body, etc. through communion with the Father in His Son through His Holy Spirit. The Alexandrian theology was in fact soteriological, as it appeared in the writings of St. Athanasius in his defense against the Arians.

Sellers confirms that the teachings of Athanasius and later representatives of the School of Alexandria are striking examples of the dependence of the Christological on the soteriological. Therefore, to appreciate their doctrine on the Person of Jesus Christ, we must first consider their doctrine on his Work as Savior².

2. Asceticism was not the only base for our theology, but it was just one actor which was not separated from others, such as studying the Scripture and philosophy, practicing traditional worship, preaching etc. All these factors represented one integral "life in Christ."

3. Early Egyptian asceticism was biblical; it did not hate the body with its senses and capacities, nor deny human free-will or despised earthly life with its properties. We hear St.

¹Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty: *The Terms "Physis & Hypostasis" in the Early Church*, 1987, p. 19 ff.

²Sellers: *The Council of Chalcedon*, S.P.C.K, 1961, p. 132.

Jerome stated that manual work was obligatory in the Egyptian monasteries not for the satisfaction of these institutions but for realizing spiritual growth³. St. Clement of Alexandria wrote a book directed at the rich of Alexandria declaring that wealth was not evil in itself. It is clear that early ascetic writings recorded what was supernatural, which may be understood as if the early ascetics despised their bodies. It is noteworthy, however, that even the hermits considered extreme ascetic practices evil, in the same degree as luxury.

4. Concerning "*deification*" as a main base of our theology that gave way to the "one divine nature" of Christ as Rowan Greer and others believe⁴, I would explain that we do not believe in "one divine nature" of Christ, but rather one united nature out of two, the "incarnate nature," or the "nature of the Incarnate Logos." Moreover, "deification" according to Alexandrian theology means the return of man to his origin as an image of God, by participation in the divine nature, It is not a restoration of man's soul alone, but of his whole human nature, i.e. of his soul, mind, body, will etc. Pseudo-Macarius the Great states, "*If **human nature** had remained alone in its nakedness and had not profited by a mingling and a communion with the supra-celestial nature, it would have resulted in nothing good*"⁵."

"*Deification*" does not mean destroying human freedom to enjoy God's will as Greer suggests, but on the contrary, it means its sanctification. St. Cyril writes :"*Man, from the origin of creation, received control of his desires and could freely follow the inclinations of his choice, for the Deity, whose image he is, is free*"⁶."

In other words, we can summarize our Alexandrian theology in the following statement: "We are in need of communion with God to cure our human nature from illness of corruption and to return to our original state as an image of God. The Word of God realized this salvation taking our human nature."

St. Cyril of Alexandria writes,

Adam was created for incorruptibility and life, in paradise, he had a holy life; his intellect was wholly and always devoted to the contemplation of God, his body was in security and calm...

*As in Adam, man's nature contracted the illness of corruption through disobedience, because through disobedience passions entered man's nature, in the same way in Christ it recovered health, for it became obedient to the God and Father, and committed no sin (1 Pet. 2:22; Isa. 53:9)*⁷."

II. Scholars add another factor that had its own effect on the Alexandrians, i.e., their very close connection with the educated Greeks⁸, in contrast to the Antiochenes who were in very close connection with Judaism⁹. These different circumstances had their effect not only in

³Ep. 125 to Rusticus.

⁴Rowan Greer: *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 1961.p41.

⁵Hom. 32:6 PG 34:737B.

⁶Hom. *quod Deus et auctor malarum* 6. PG 31:344 B.

⁷In Rom. PG 74: 789 AB.

⁸Sellers, p 132f.

⁹Ibid 158f.

interpreting the holy Scripture, for while the Alexandrians adopted the allegorical mode, the others adopted the literal mode. It also had its effect on their Christological thought. For while the Antiochenes were rested in the ethical terms and in confirming the "human nature" and its sharp distinction from the deity, the Alexandrines used the ontological terms to gain their neighbors on behalf of the kingdom of God. If the philosophers sought enjoyment of "the life of gods and all godlike and blessed men" through knowledge (*gnosis*) and contemplation of the divine, the Alexandrians declared that this had to be realized not through man's efforts but through the condescension of God Himself who by His own loving act assumed the human form to "regenerate our nature" (*Deify it*) as He would bring salvation to the world¹⁰.

III. The Antiochenes never accepted St. Cyril's expression: "*God died on the Cross.*" This would have meant for them not union of the natures but a confusion of the one within the other, human nature transformed into the divine¹¹ and the divine subjected to the possibility of the human.

In the sixth century, those who defended the formula "One of the Trinity was crucified" were called "*Theopaschites*" (those who hold that God suffered). Their orthodoxy was upheld by the Emperor Justinian and Leontius of Byzantium. The formula was rejected by the Patriarch of Constantinople and with some hesitation by Hormisdas of Rome¹². Meyendorff states that the Antiochenes rejected the "theopaschism" of Cyril, for it was for them the surest sign of monophysitism and implied in Christ the absence of a genuine human nature, for only a man, never God, can die¹³.

Meyendorff elucidates this problem by stating,

As we have seen, the text of this hymn (*Trisagion*) in the form proposed by the (Monophysite) patriarch of Antioch, Peter the Fuller ("Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, crucified for us, have mercy on us") was not formally heretical, since it was addressed to Christ, not to the Trinity...

The problem was undeniably the same one that had been debated during the years preceding Ephesus and concerned the term *Theotokos*. Could the Word really "be born" of the Virgin, or was it only the man Jesus who was "son of Mary"? Consequently, Cyril of Alexandria, asserting against Nestorius the full theological validity of the term *Theotokos*, was also led to declare in his twelfth anathematism that "the Word had suffered in the flesh;" conversely the Acoemetae monks, who were the main adherents of Chalcedon in Constantinople, not only objected to the *theopaschite* formulas but interpreted the *Theotokos* as a pious periphrasis, that is, in a sense that Nestorius himself had accepted...

Not only does St. Paul himself speak of the "princes of this world" who "crucified the Lord of Glory" (1 Cor. 2, 8), but theopaschite expressions can be found in pre-Nicene theology as well¹⁴, and St. Gregory Nazianzen already makes it the essential element of

¹⁰*Ibid* 133.

¹¹*Theodoret : Ep 83 to Dioscorus of Alexandria.*

¹²*Cross : Dict. of the Christian Church, p 1363 - 4.*

¹³*Christ in the Eastern Christian Thought, p6.*

¹⁴*Ign. ad Rom 6 : 3.*

his doctrine of salvation: "*We needed a God made flesh and put to death (edeethemen theou sarkoumenou kai nekromenuou)*"¹⁵ in order that we could live again" and there is no problem for him about using such terms as "blood of God" (*haema Theou*) and "crucified God" *Theos stavroumenos*¹⁶. Does not the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed itself explicitly proclaim the faith of the Church in "the Son of God... incarnate of the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary..., crucified for us under Pontius Pilate?" St. Cyril's major preoccupation in his struggle against Nestorius consisted precisely in preserving the faith of Nicaea, which seemed to him to be endangered as one ceased to say that Mary was "Mother of God" or that the Word "suffered in the flesh"¹⁷."



¹⁵*Hom 45:28 PG 36:661 C.*

¹⁶*Hom 45:19, 22, 28. PG 36:649 C, 653a, 661 d.*

¹⁷*Christ in the Eastern p 51 - 2 .*