

Lecture 2: Non-Chalcedonian Christianity

1. Introduction: The Legacy of Chalcedon Today (See Year 1: Lecture 9)

The Council of Chalcedon in 451 was convened to address the then critical question of how Christ could be both God and Man as one Person. As with all the Ecumenical Councils nothing new was introduced into the faith of the Church. The intention was to add public clarity to that faith already held by building upon the work of the three previous Councils. However, the kind of precision in theological terminology¹ needed to address such Christological questions depended on a lack semantic confusion and, in retrospect, this proved to be highly problematic at the 4th Council and indeed subsequently. In fact, after the Council, positions hardened in two diametrically opposed directions, one along a spectrum towards Eutyches² and his heresy (Monophysitism) which degraded the humanity of Christ and the other towards Nestorius³ whose insecure grasp of the divinity of Christ led him to suppose a very loosely joined dual personhood and a disavowal of the term “Theotokos”⁴ (God-bearer) for the Ever-Virgin Mary (Nestorianism). The Chalcedonians may, on occasion, have reacted too hastily in disenfranchising the more moderate constituency on either side. This is not a matter of this author’s private opinion but is on

¹ The key conclusion at Chalcedon concerning Christ is as follows:- *“Following the holy Fathers we teach with one voice that the Son [of God] and our Lord Jesus Christ is to be confessed as one and the same [Person], that he is perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, very God and very man, of a reasonable soul and [human] body consisting, consubstantial with the Father as touching his Godhead, and consubstantial with us as touching his manhood; made in all things like unto us, sin only excepted; begotten of his Father before the worlds according to his Godhead; but in these last days for us men and for our salvation born [into the world] of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God according to his manhood. This one and the same Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son [of God] must be confessed to be in two natures, unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, distinctly, inseparably [united], and that without the distinction of natures being taken away by such union, but rather the peculiar property of each nature being preserved and being united in one Person and subsistence, not separated or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten, God the Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, as the Prophets of old time have spoken concerning him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ hath taught us, and as the Creed of the Fathers hath delivered to us.”* [264, 265 Acts of the Council]

² For Eutyches and his Monophysite heresy see here:- <http://orthodoxwiki.org/Eutyches>

³ For Nestorius and his heresy see here:- <http://orthodoxwiki.org/Nestorius>

⁴ For the Christological background of this Marian title see here:- <http://orthodoxwiki.org/Theotokos>

record now as a result of ecumenical meetings and deliberations hosted by the two traditions since 1964⁵. Nonetheless, these meetings have only involved the Chalcedonians of the East and the so-called Oriental Orthodox (the Armenian, Coptic, Jacobite / Syrian, Ethiopian, Eritreian, India) churches. Those inclining towards a Nestorian position (if not necessarily adopting that fully) ... principally the Assyrian Church of the East⁶ ... have not been part of this dialogue. We shall consider the Nestorian churches at the end of this lecture.

Progress between the Chalcedonian Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox has been substantial, but as yet, not unequivocal and conclusive. The work of the churches' Joint Commission has not yet received a formal response from all the local churches involved, amongst these, notably the Russian Church. Some have not agreed that the historical divisions arose from semantic confusion only but also from real and enduring theological differences. The status of Patriarch Dioscorus is a case in point. Was he the villain of the Robber Council of Ephesus, a supporter of Eutyches and the denier of Christ's consubstantial manhood; in other words an irreconcilable Monophysite or simply a misunderstood defender of miaphysitism, notwithstanding his quarrel with St. Cyril? Clearly much more work needs to be done. Severus of Antioch and Dioscorus of Alexandria are too important figures to be quietly ignored in the lists of the righteous and the heresiarchs of old ... not least because both continue to be venerated in the Coptic Church in the Liturgy before all the patriarchs and the saints. This is why not all the Chalcedonian churches have signed up to the recent theological dialogues⁷ and one suspects the same can be said for elements in the Coptic church as well.

⁵ The history of this dialogue and its documentation may be found here: - <http://www.orthodoxy.org/index.php>

⁶ For more information – see here:- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian_Church_of_the_East and <http://www.nestorian.org/index.html>

⁷ A characteristic example of a more cautious approach from the Chalcedonian side may be found here:- http://www.pravmir.com/article_1052.html / http://www.pravmir.com/article_1064.html / http://www.pravmir.com/article_1076.html / http://www.pravmir.com/article_1106.html

Let us now trace the development of non-Chalcedonian Christianity in its various forms from the 5th Century to the present day starting with the schism(s) themselves. The worship and culture of these churches however lies outside our study.

2. The “Alexandrian” Schisms and their Aftermath

The schisms in and arising from Alexandria, together with the Coptic repudiation of Chalcedon, might never have happened if St. Cyril’s Christological formula of “one nature of the Incarnate Word” ... subsequently accepted by the fathers of Chalcedon ... had been explored more deeply and adhered to by all sides. Indeed this was made even easier by St. Cyril’s agreement with Patriarch John of Antioch in 433 that “two natures“ language could also conform to his own doctrine, insofar as it referred to the divine and human realities of the single personhood of Christ. Sadly, this common ground was not to hold. St. Cyril’s adoption of miaphysite “two nature language” outraged the party led by Eutyches who, as we have seen, was supported by the then Alexandrian Patriarch, Dioscorus at the subsequently repudiated “Robber” Synod of Ephesus in 449. It was, of course, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 that, inter alia, condemned Dioscorus although it is claimed by the Copts that he himself rejected Eutyches and his teaching subsequently. Certainly the Copts today reject Eutyches and his classical hard-line Monophysite position today, preferring the term “miaphysite” as reflecting St. Cyril’s original formula. Nonetheless, in the less temperate times that followed the Alexandrian schism there is clear evidence that the stronger Monophysite position was both influential and upheld, its proponents even criticising and rejecting St. Cyril for using the two nature language!⁸ What a tangled web of obfuscation! Perhaps the real driving force behind the schism was the familiar competition for pre-eminence between Alexandria and Antioch and a growing distaste for imperial politics in Egypt and further east.

⁸ For documentation and sources see:- http://orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/mono_history.aspx

3. Historical Development of the non-Chalcedonian Churches – Mia/Mono-physite

Egypt – the Copts

The two traditions that rejected Chalcedon, diaphysite in parts of Syria, Mesopotamia and Persia - more or less Nestorian – and miaphysite in parts of Syria, Egypt, the Horn of Africa – more or less Monophysite gathered and retained through their bishops large sections of their Christian populations ... in Egypt, almost entirely so. The Byzantine Emperor Justinian failed to enforce Chalcedonian Orthodoxy in Egypt, not least because he deposed Theodosius (536-567) and put him under house arrest in Constantinople for over 30 years. The Copts refused to accept his Chalcedonian replacement. The number of Monophysite bishops shrunk. Theodosius then managed to consecrate a roving bishop, Jacob Baradaeus who restored the hierarchy in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East. So influential and effective was he that Monophysite and Jacobite became synonymous. Thereafter two patriarchates existed in Egypt, Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian. The non-Chalcedonian patriarch had to retreat from Alexandria. One final attempt to impose the Chalcedonian definition through the appointment of a Melkite (Imperial) patriarch Cyrus the Caucasian failed miserably and both sides grudgingly had to tolerate each other thereafter. The majority of the population, however, remained loyal to the successors of Dioscorus.

The Arab Islamic invasion of Egypt in 641-2 put an end to Byzantine attempts to pull the Egyptian church into line, including Jacobite elements in Syria and Coptic dependencies in the Horn of Africa. By this time the Armenian church had aligned itself with the Monophysite cause and Islam eventually severed the remaining links with the Greco-Roman world here was well. Back in Egypt the invading Arabs had to rule a population that was two thirds Christian. After two generations there began a legally sanctioned repression of the Copts to second class status, forced conversions to Islam and the destruction of Christian property which waxed and waned for several centuries. Possibly the worst persecution took place under Caliph al-Hakim (996-1021) who destroyed over 3000

churches and caused many to apostasise. In the face of this relentless, centuries long war of attrition, the Copts preserved their Christian heritage not from the cities but in and out of the historic monasteries of the Wadi-al-Natrun, those by the Red Sea - notably the communities of St. Anthony and St. Paul - and in the White monastery of Sohag. There were extended periods of peace and tolerance through the Middle Ages and despite periodic persecution, the Copts maintained their position in Egyptian society. The 19th century (after the French invasion by Bonaparte) saw an improvement in the lot of the Copts, legally, culturally and spiritually; notably during the reign of Cyril IV. Toward the end of the 20th century there was a monastic revival in the Coptic Church which brought great blessings ... not only to the Copts but through ecumenical contacts to other Christian traditions, Orthodox and otherwise. Today, the so-called Arab Spring and the resurgence of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist elements in Egypt has created an unstable and uncertain future for Christians, secularists and liberals in the country. The Copts are used to such possible reversals. Greater contact with western Christians and a global diasporal presence arguably strengthens their position.

Syria / India

Monophysite churches post Chalcedon were not of course limited to Egypt. Jacobite schisms proliferated across the Middle East, not least in Syria. Once again, the Arab invasions froze these divisions in place and the various churches went their separate ways. The church communities in India, which to this day plausibly trace their origins to St. Thomas, came under the sphere of influence if these Jacobite Syrian churches, at least liturgically, but they were also more or less cut off from these roots geographically and politically in succeeding centuries. After the depredations of the colonial periods in India these churches today remain very fragmented but collectively proud of their connection with St Thomas.

[Africa – the Ethiopian and Eritreian churches](#)

In Africa, the ancient missionary connections between the churches in the Horn (Ethiopia, Eritreia) Sudan and the Church of Alexandria effectively meant that, post-Chalcedon, these became relatively autonomous dependencies of the Coptic Church. Nonetheless the Ethiopian and Eritreian churches developed their own indigenous African Christian traditions and generally withstood the incursions of Islam. This is in no small part due to a proud lineage pre-dating the coming of the Messiah and linked to an identification of the Queen of Sheba with the Ethiopian Queen Makeda as recorded in its final form in the national epic, the *Kebra Nagast*. These strong Old Testament connections make Ethiopian Christianity more observant of certain elements of the Mosaic law (circumcision, dietary rules) than is customary in the Gentile world. Ethiopian tradition maintains that monasticism was introduced by nine saints from Rum, (the Byzantine Empire), probably Syrian, in the 6th century, many of which endure to this day. The Ethiopian Church grew and consolidated its power with the monarchy during the medieval period and theological controversy and instability only arose through Protestant and Roman Catholic missionary incursions. The synergy between the monarchy and the Church collapsed with the fall of HHH Haile Selassie I in 1974 but by then the Church had become independent from Cairo in 1951 with its first enthroned patriarch, Abun Baselyos. In 1991 Eritreia gained its independence from Ethiopia and by soliciting support from Cairo, Pope Shenouda III consecrated new bishops and helped to create a new autocephalous church in the region. Both the Ethiopian and Eritreian churches have substantial presences in the diaspora.

[Armenia](#)

One major church in the non-Chalcedonian miaphysite tradition remains to be considered; that in Armenia. Christianity was introduced to Armenia from Greek Asia Minor in the west and from Syria in the south but its precise origins and history before the 4th Century are obscure. From this time we know that part of the country in the west came under

Byzantine influence with a much larger Persian influence in the east. Precisely why the Armenian church should have rejected both Chalcedon and Nestorianism is uncertain but doubtless they reflected upon these matters themselves with varying conclusions; condemning for example both Severus of Antioch (unlike the Copts) and Eutyches. In theology they adhered to a strictly miaphysite interpretation of Cyril's famous Christological formula and accepted only the first three ecumenical Councils. In 555, over 100 years after Chalcedon, communion with the Byzantines was forbidden. The Georgians, admixed with the Armenians at this time, remained loyal to Chalcedon and their rupture with Armenia became final in 608/9. 7th Century Byzantine Emperors attempted to bring the Armenian church back into the fold but with only partial success. The advent of Islam, here as elsewhere, helped to reinforce and perpetuate Armenian severance from Greco-Roman culture. During the succeeding centuries the Armenian church conversed with both Byzantine and Latin scholars and a delegation was present at the Council of Florence in 1439. Notwithstanding Protestant and Roman Catholic missionary incursions these churches to this day count only a small proportion of the indigenous Christian population as members. The final entry in this chronicle of the Armenian church is a tragic one and concerns the Turkish genocide of Armenians together with Assyrians, Pontic Greeks and others in the deportations, ethnic cleansing and slaughter of between a million and one and a half million souls from 1915 to 1922, a pogrom that the Turkish authorities over a century later still does accept or even allow to be debated.

4. Historical Development of the non-Chalcedonian Churches – Nestorian / Miaphysite

As we have seen, some Christians also rejected Chalcedon on the Nestorian side by seeing it as a continuation of the work of the Third Council of Ephesus (431) which had accepted St. Cyril's miaphysite one nature formula. Nestorians had no constituency in Egypt, subscribing essentially to an Antiochian rather than Alexandrian Christological heresy. As such they were commonly to be found in Syria and further east. In 489 the Emperor Zeno closed the Nestorian School at Edessa which then promptly relocated to Nisibis in the Persian Empire

from whence the Nestorian Church was to grow eastward in subsequent centuries beyond the reach of Greco-Roman and then later, Arab culture. The local church in Persia was centred on Seleucia-Ctesiphon, south of Baghdad and had its own Catholicos and later Patriarch. It had developed separately from the Roman world but nonetheless, albeit tardily in 410, accepted the Council of Nicaea. During the Sassanian Persian dynasty this church was alternately tolerated then persecuted until 651 after which Islam, once more, disconnected its tenuous links with the Eastern Roman Empire. The Syrian Nestorian churches lived freely within this milieu and extended their missionary endeavours much further east along the Silk Road and into China, arriving there before 635. This is recorded in a Syriac-Chinese inscription on a monumental stele from Xian dated 781. Martin Palmer's research⁹ together with that of others has revealed much of the vibrant life of these original Chinese Christian communities with their Syro-Persian origins. Whether or not they were truly Nestorian in subsequent centuries (they were visible until the end of the Yuan dynasty in 1368) and the extent of their syncretism with local religions is difficult to gauge, but their story is a fascinating one.

Back in Mesopotamia (Iraq) the 16th century saw part of the Assyrian Church of the East (Nestorian or diophysite) breaking off and entering into communion with Rome, thus becoming the Chaldean Catholic Church¹⁰. Relations between this Church and the remaining Assyrian Church of the East remained strained until modern times when Rome helped to reconcile some of these differences. However, the Rome-ward orientation of Nestorian and neo-Nestorian ecumenical encounters has meant that there has been very little dialogue with either the Chalcedonian Orthodox or the Oriental Orthodox churches. The Chaldean Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East have both severely

⁹ Martin Palmer writes from a liberal Protestant perspective and some of his assumptions and speculations may be dubious but there is much of value in his book:-

The Jesus Sutras – Rediscovering the Lost Religion of Taoist Christianity - London, Judy Piatkus Ltd. (2001)

¹⁰ For more information – see here:- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaldean_Catholic_Church

declined in numbers since the Iraq War. The churches of ancient Nestorian pedigree are now but shadows of their former historical selves.

5. Redeeming the Past and a Collection of Pearls

The churches, both Orthodox and heterodox need not be prisoners of their past but they do need to acknowledge the past in all its glory and tragedy so that with repentance and hope God may be allowed to forge a better future in common for all those who bear the name of Christ. This must not involve the unnecessary sacrifice of principle but neither must it constrict the enlargement of charity, forbearance and a heartfelt desire and work for reconciliation. This is a long and arduous task and cannot be hurried if all are to be respected. Nevertheless it might be possible to remind ourselves from time to time of that wise saying:- "Let us make haste slowly." The past can be redeemed. There is another principle at work here and that is God's call for us all to recognise, affirm and rejoice in truth and sanctity wherever it might be found. A startling example of this lies in St. Isaac of Nineveh¹¹, a Bahraini / Qatari from Magdal, who, although he belonged to the allegedly Nestorian Persian Church is a universally recognised saint amongst Nestorians and non-Nestorians alike. The reason is clear; his sanctity teaching. His words speak to us still and conclude this talk with much wisdom:-

"Be persecuted, rather than be a persecutor. Be crucified, rather than be a crucifier. Be treated unjustly, rather than treat anyone unjustly. Be oppressed, rather than zealous. Lay hold of goodness, rather than justice."

The Way of the Cross has never changed.

¹¹ Resources for St. Isaac of Nineveh:-

http://orthodoxwiki.org/Isaac_of_Syria

<http://www.isaacthesyrian.com/>