

The Oriental Orthodox Rejection of Chalcedon – An Introduction

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The Oriental Orthodox are routinely accused of holding an heretical and Eutychianist Christology, and on that basis rejecting the Council of Chalcedon. Yet the evidence, from the time of Chalcedon, through the following centuries, and even to the present day, shows clearly that this is not the case.

Chalcedon was rejected for wholly Orthodox concerns, and though it might be the case that the text of the Chalcedonian Definition is liable to an Orthodox interpretation, it is nevertheless also the case that these concerns were not properly addressed at the time, or at any time following the council. They remain legitimate issues which the Chalcedonian Orthodox should at least make some effort to comprehend and understand.

These concerns, couched in anathemas issued after the council had taken place, show clearly that it was not because of Eutychianism that the rejection of Chalcedon was so principled and long lasting. Rather it was because of legitimate objections to the events which took place there, and the theological documents which the council produced.

The first explicit response to Chalcedon is found in the biography of Dioscorus of Alexandria, preserved as the '*Histoire de Dioscore, patriarche d'Alexandrie*,

écrite par son disciple Théopiste'¹. This is a document, composed by an eyewitness to the events of Dioscorus' life, written in Greek, preserved in a Syriac copy, and translated into French at the beginning of the 20th century. Théopiste describes how Dioscorus had written a number of anathemas concerning the causes for which the Orthodox had separated from the Chalcedonians.

The content of these anathemas is found in another document, 'The Confession of Faith of Jacob Baradeus'², which has been preserved in two versions, an Arabic and an Ethiopian³. In both of them Jacob approves and admits the 'six anathemas which Dioscorus pronounced against the Fourth Council'. The confession of faith then proceeds to provide the substance of these six anathemas, which follow:

i. Chalcedon is anathematised because the members of the council contradicted the faith of Nicaea, introducing a different nature into the Trinity by proposing a fourth hypostasis.

ii. Chalcedon is anathematised because it has trampled under foot the canons and prescriptions of the Fathers.

iii. Chalcedon is anathematised because the teachings which were established there have overturned

¹ F.Nau, *Journal Asiatique*, X ser., t .I (1903) p 1-108

² Kley, *Jacobus Baradeus*, p121

³ Cornill, *Zeitschrift der deut. Morg Gesellschaft*, t. XXX, 1876

the teachings of the council of Ephesus, and in making a new definition of the faith the council has fallen under the anathemas issued at Ephesus.

iv. Chalcedon is anathematised because it has corrupted the patristic doctrine and has received the Tome of Leo.

v. Chalcedon is anathematised because it has accepted the communion of the partisans of Nestorius, such as Ibas.

vi. Chalcedon is anathematised because in conformity with the doctrine of Nestorius the members of the council have distinguished two natures in Christ, separated into their proprieties; and they have offered Christ two adorations, calling one God and the other man.

It is clear that these anathemas of Dioscorus had a wider authority since they appear in a document associated with the missionary bishop Jacob Baradeus, and were thus distributed throughout the anti-Chalcedonian Orthodox communion well over a century after the martyrdom of Dioscorus at the hands of the Chalcedonians.

More than that, an almost identical list appears in the writings of Philoxenus of Mabbogh⁴. A comparison of

⁴ Budge, *Addit. 14529 (f.68a) Brit. Mus* in *The Discourses*, II p. XCVIII-XCIX

these two lists shows that the same concerns prompted the ongoing rejection of Chalcedon.

The first anathema in these lists concerns the contention that Chalcedon had itself rejected the Nicene faith. This is based on the understanding of Chalcedon as teaching 'two sons', a Divine and a human. The creed of Niceae states, 'I believe in ...One Lord Jesus Christ', and this phrase was understood as safeguarding the unity of subject in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word. Jesus Christ is not God the Word, and another. But Chalcedon was interpreted by the followers of St Cyril of Alexandria, after that council, as having taught exactly that.

Indeed if it is remembered that the term 'nature' was often used in the sense of 'individual' then it is clear that the Alexandrians and other opponents of Chalcedon were at least reasonable in finding such terms as 'in two natures' difficult to reconcile with Niceae. Christ the Incarnate Word is not 'two individuals', He is One Divine Person who is incarnate, that is, who is fully man whilst remaining what He is by nature, Divine. He had become man by an act of grace and loving condescension. He is not a human person, even though He is fully and perfectly human.

Therefore, in the context of a Christological crisis that had been raging for decades before Nestorius became archbishop of Constantinople, it was, and is, reasonable that the language of duality used at Chalcedon could have been understood as 'Nestorian'. The tradition of the heretical theologians Theodore and Diodore used such terms, and therefore they were bound

to be difficult, or even impossible, for a Cyrilline Christology to interpret in any manner other than as perpetuating such an heretical Christology.

It must be said that the anathema is entirely justified against anyone who interprets Chalcedon as allowing the teaching of such a duality of subject in Christ, the Incarnate Word. This weakness in Chalcedon was dealt with comprehensively at the Fifth Council held by the Chalcedonians at Constantinople in 553 AD. This clearly shows that the Chalcedonians did indeed have a problem with Chalcedon being interpreted, among their own party, as being consistent with the heretical Christologies of Theodore and Diodore.

The Fifth Council includes in one of its canons the following passage:

If anyone understands the expression "one only Person of our Lord Jesus Christ" in this sense, that it is the union of many hypostases, and if he attempts thus to introduce into the mystery of Christ two hypostases, or two Persons, and, after having introduced two persons, speaks of one Person only out of dignity, honour or worship, as both Theodorus and Nestorius insanely have written; if anyone shall calumniate the holy Council of Chalcedon, pretending that it made use of this expression [one hypostasis] in this impious sense, and if he will not recognize rather that the Word of God is united with the flesh hypostatically, and that therefore there is but one hypostasis or one only Person, and that the holy Council of

Chalcedon has professed in this sense the one Person of our Lord Jesus Christ: let him be anathema. ⁵

Who were these Chalcedonians who were using the Council of Chalcedon as a means of supporting their heretical Christology? They must have included the large numbers of Chalcedonians who refused to accept this Fifth Council because it was seen as damaging Chalcedon which they interpreted as receiving the Christology of Theodore, Ibas and Theodoret, the authors of the so called Three Chapters.

After this Fifth Council all of the North African Church refused to communion with Rome over this issue, and the homeward bound Pope elect could only find two bishops who would consecrate him, all the rest of the West went into schism. In fact there was such a strong commitment to the idea that Chalcedon had approved the teachings of Theodore, Ibas and Theodoret that some parts of the West remained in schism from the mainstream Chalcedonians until 700 AD.

There was every reason for Chalcedonianism to wish to close the Christological loop-holes that Chalcedon had preserved for such heretical ideas to flourish, and the fact that this canon was required shows that the first anathema of Dioscorus was also entirely justified and reasonable.

The second anathema which appears in the lists of Dioscorus, Jacob and Philoxenus is due to the Council of Chalcedon because it had overturned the canons and

⁵ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol XIV

prescriptions of the Fathers even while suggesting that it was respecting them and granting them authority.

The Definitio of Chalcedon insists that it is,

...renewing the unerring faith of the Fathers, publishing to all men the Creed of the Three Hundred and Eighteen, and to their number adding, as their peers, the Fathers who have received the same summary of religion. Such are the One Hundred and Fifty holy Fathers who afterwards assembled in the great Constantinople and ratified the same faith. Moreover, observing the order and every form relating to the faith, which was observed by the holy synod formerly held in Ephesus, of which Celestine of Rome and Cyril of Alexandria, of holy memory, were the leaders, we do declare that the exposition of the right and blameless faith made by the Three Hundred and Eighteen holy and blessed Fathers, assembled at Nice in the reign of Constantine of pious memory, shall be pre-eminent: and that those things shall be of force also.⁶

Yet it seemed to those who could not accept Chalcedon that far from accepting the previous canons and councils the Chalcedonians were ignoring them. Nor was this only the opinion of the anti-Chalcedonians since after the Chalcedonians had promulgated their canons the Latin legate, Lucentius, opposed the council, saying,

The Apostolic See gave orders that all things should be done in our presence and therefore whatever yesterday was done to the prejudice of the canons during our absence, we

⁶ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol XIV

beseech your highness to command to be rescinded. But if not, let our opposition be placed in the minutes, and pray let us know clearly what we are to report to that most apostolic bishop who is the ruler of the whole church, so that he may be able to take action with regard to the indignity done to his See and to the setting at naught of the canons.

This has particular regard to Canon XXVIII of Chalcedon which established Constantinople as being next to Rome in primacy and rather than giving a merely honorary consideration gave Constantinople authority over three provinces for the first time.

Tillemont, in his commentary on the council says that,

Leo also complains that the Council of Chalcedon broke the decrees of the Council of Nice, the practice of antiquity, and the rights of Metropolitans. Certainly it was an odious innovation to see a Bishop made the chief, not of one department but of three; for which no example could be found save in the authority which the Popes took over Illyricum, where, however, they did not claim the power to ordain any Bishop.⁷

This issue shows that it was not only anti-Chalcedonians who believed that Chalcedon had acted uncanonically and contrary to the tradition and practice of the Church. It is clear that the Romans also thought this to be the case.

It might be argued that Leo of Rome, and the anti-Chalcedonians were and are wrong, but it cannot be

⁷ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol XIV

argued that the anti-Chalcedonian objection was frivolous and without cause.

The third anathema has particular relation to the Cyrilline council at Ephesus. This anathema has in mind particularly that canon of Ephesus which says,

When these things had been read, the holy Synod decreed that it is unlawful for any man to bring forward, or to write, or to compose a different Faith as a rival to that established by the holy Fathers assembled with the Holy Ghost in Nicaea.

But those who shall dare to compose a different faith, or to introduce or offer it to persons desiring to turn to the acknowledgment of the truth, whether from Heathenism or from Judaism, or from any heresy whatsoever, shall be deposed, if they be bishops or clergymen; bishops from the episcopate and clergymen from the clergy; and if they be laymen, they shall be anathematized.⁸

Of course the Chalcedonian Definitio had exactly the appearance of a 'new' Faith. It defines the content of the faith and is not content to simply refer back to the Nicean-Constantinopolitan Creed. Indeed a committee, which provokingly included the heretic Theodoret, was tasked to develop a statement of faith, and the Definitio certainly has authority within Chalcedonianism as a statement of Faith, and therefore a creed.

Where had any previous council defined Christ as being 'in two natures'? None had done so. Therefore the definition of Christ as being 'in two natures' must be considered a new statement of faith, even if it might be

⁸ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol XIV

justified by modern Chalcedonians. Yet Chalcedon itself insisted,

When these things had been read, the holy Synod decreed that it is unlawful for any man to bring forward, or to write, or to compose a different Faith as a rival to that established by the holy Fathers assembled with the Holy Ghost in Nicaea.

*But those who shall dare to compose a different faith, or to introduce or offer it to persons desiring to turn to the acknowledgment of the truth, whether from Heathenism or from Judaism, or from any heresy whatsoever, shall be deposed, if they be bishops or clergymen; bishops from the episcopate and clergymen from the clergy; and if they be laymen, they shall be anathematized.*⁹

The irony is that while the council insisted that it was doing nothing new, it condemned those who refused to accept a new definition of the faith, and a new Christological terminology.

Once again, there may be those who will justify the Chalcedonian definition and the Chalcedonian terminology, but it cannot be said that the anti-Chalcedonian objection on this point was without reason, and justification.

The fourth anathema particularly concerns the reception of the Tome of Leo, and the contention that it had corrupted Faith rather than maintained it. This is not the place to analyse the anti-Chalcedonian rejection of the

⁹ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol XIV

Tome in detail. But it is clear that the Tome was not rejected because of any Eutychianism.

Just a single illustration will show that the objections to the Tome were at least reasonable, even if Chalcedonians might consider them unjustified. One such problem passage in the Tome says,

For each "form" does the acts which belong to it, in communion with the other; the Word, that is, performing what belongs to the Word, and the flesh carrying out what belongs to the flesh; the one of these shines out in miracles, the other succumbs to injuries.¹⁰

What are these 'forms' that are acting separately? How is it that the Word performs some acts and the flesh performs some others? Do not all the acts belong to the Word whose flesh it is? It can hardly be surprising that the anti-Chalcedonians found this passage so objectionable.

Indeed Nestorius himself opposes St Cyril and writes in a similar vein to the Tome of Leo, saying,

If any one, in confessing the sufferings of the flesh, ascribes these also to the Word of God as to the flesh in which he appeared, and thus does not distinguish the dignity of the natures; let him be anathema.¹¹

Now this sounds remarkably similar to the Tome of Leo, since it proposes that the sufferings of the flesh should not be ascribed to the Word. Of course this does not mean that the Tome of Leo was Nestorian, though

¹⁰ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol XIV

¹¹ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol XIV

Nestorius is on record as saying that it was consistent with his Christology. But the important point is that it could very easily *sound* Nestorian, and it certainly did to the anti-Chalcedon followers of St Cyril.

It was St Cyril who had insisted,

*Whosoever shall not recognize that the Word of God suffered in the flesh, that he was crucified in the flesh, and that likewise in that same flesh he tasted death and that he is become the first-begotten of the dead, for, as he is God, he is the life and it is he that giveth life: let him be anathema.*¹²

Now it is not easy to take the passage from the Tome, ‘the one of these, the Word, shines in miracles, the other succumbs to injuries’, with the anathema of St Cyril which says, ‘the Word of God suffered in the flesh’.

Once again it seems entirely reasonable that the council of Chalcedon should have been rejected on this point. The council can be explained and interpreted in an Orthodox manner, but taking into account the context in which the council took place it is justified that this issue be raised as a stumbling block to agreement in the historical period.

The fifth anathema concerns the reception of those who were considered partisans of Nestorius, such as Ibas. He is an interesting case. A committed disciple of the Antiochian heretics, Theodore, Diodore and Theodoret. He had written a letter to Maris, a Persian, in which he charges St Cyril with heresy and rejects his Twelve Anathemas.

¹² Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol XIV

At the council of Chalcedon the letter of Ibas was studied and pronounced to be Orthodox. The Acts of the council state,

*At the Council of Chalcedon the Patriarch Maximus of Antioch and the Roman legates declared: "Having read his letter again, we declare that he is orthodox."*¹³

Yet at the 5th Council when the letter was read the Fathers there responded by saying,

*In the third place the letter which is said to have been written by Ibas to Maris the Persian, was brought forward for examination, and we found that it, too, should be read. When it was read immediately its impiety was manifest to all. And it was right to make the condemnation and anathematism of the aforesaid Three Chapters, as even to this time there had been some question on the subject. But because the defenders of these impious ones, Theodore and Nestorius, were scheming in some way or other to confirm these persons and their impiety, and were saving that this impious letter, which praised and defended Theodore and Nestorius and their impiety, had been received by the holy Council of Chalcedon we thought it necessary to shew that the holy synod was free of the impiety which was contained in that letter, that it might be clear that they who say such things do not do so with the favour of this holy council, but that through its name they may confirm their own impiety.*¹⁴

The council states that the impiety of the letter was immediately apparent, yet Chalcedon determined that it was orthodox. Indeed the 5th council attempts to

¹³ Catholic Encyclopaedia, Vol VII, *Ibas*. 1910

¹⁴ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol XIV

show that Chalcedon had not received the letter of Ibas. But even the Catholic Encyclopaedia repeats the passage from the Acts, that the letter was received as orthodox.

Now if the 5th council found the letter heretical how much more must the anti-Chalcedonians have found it impossible to accept Chalcedon when it approved Ibas. As described previously most of the Western Church and North African Church received Ibas, Theodore and Theodoret as entirely Orthodox, and as having been approved by Chalcedon.

These facts show that it is perfectly and completely reasonable that the council of Chalcedon should have been rejected on this basis. Explanations which seek to excuse the reception of Theodoret and Ibas are possible, but these do not detract from the justification which lies behind the objection to Chalcedon on this point.

Finally, the sixth anathema addresses explicitly the use of the 'in two natures' terminology by the council. It could hardly avoid being considered Nestorian. If the phrase 'one incarnate nature' was the watchword of St Cyril, then 'in two natures' described the tradition of Diodore and Theodore, as received by Nestorius.

Ibas had used the phrase in his letter to Maris, the letter which the 5th council found to be filled with impiety. Nestorius himself had repeatedly spoken of Christ as being two natures. He had written,

If any one says that Christ, who is also Emmanuel, is One, not [merely] in consequence of connection, but [also] in nature, and does not acknowledge the connection of the two natures, that of the Logos and of the assumed manhood, in one

*Son, as still continuing without mingling; let him be anathema.*¹⁵

And

*If any one assigns the expressions of the Gospels and Apostolic letters, which refer to the two natures of Christ, to one only of those natures, and even ascribes suffering to the divine Word, both in the flesh and in the Godhead; let him be anathema.*¹⁶

Of course the issue here is not whether the council of Chalcedon intended to be Nestorianising but whether or not the outcome of the council had the appearance of being Nestorianising.

At Chalcedon the terminology of St Cyril was abandoned, and the phrase 'one incarnate nature of the Word' was not used. Theodoret, the opponent of St Cyril, and a constant supporter of Nestorius since 431 AD, was not only received at the council but was asked to draft a statement of faith. The anti-Cyrrilline letter of Ibas was received as Orthodox. The Tome was accepted, though it seemed in direct contradiction of the Twelve Anathemas which were received at Ephesus some twenty years previous.

Subsequent history also supported the negative view of the anti-Chalcedonians. There were supporters of Ibas, Theodore and Theodoret throughout the Chalcedonian communion. They loudly complained in

¹⁵ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol XIV

¹⁶ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol XIV

553 AD that the 5th Council was abandoning the decision of Chalcedon respecting these men and their teachings.

The 5th council is also a record of the various groups sheltering within the Chalcedonian settlement who had not been extinguished. Groups who still held a fundamentally Nestorian Christology.

In conclusion, this brief introduction to the rejection of Chalcedon shows that from the earliest period after Chalcedon there was a consistent and reasoned rejection of Chalcedon, based on the anathemas of St Dioscorus, but being taken up widely throughout the anti-Chalcedonian communion.

This rejection was based on particular issues of concern which were and remain reasonable points of view. Though it may be possible for each one to be explained away by the Chalcedonians, nevertheless this does not appear to have happened in any coherent manner during the controversial period.

At no point was Chalcedon rejected because of any support for a Eutychian Christology. Neither does it seem that the ill treatment of St Dioscorus himself was a major stumbling block. The issues were always those of principle and theology, not politics and personalities.

These issues remain important, and a reconciliation of the Chalcedonian and anti-Chalcedonian communions still demands that they are treated seriously and eirenically by the Chalcedonians. They are often brushed aside as irrelevant, but a proper understanding of our own tradition requires that they answered.

