

Christological Contention and Tolerance in the Syriac Church Traditions: A Case for Ecumenism

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Introduction

The discussion concerning Christology has been one of the most crucial and sensitive subjects among churches. While diversity in Christology existed right from the dawn of Christianity, after the fifth century this subject increasingly became politicized and negatively damaged Christ's message. Christ himself, according to Matthew (7:21), taught with respect to Christology: "Not everyone who says to me, '**Lord Lord**' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father."

In this article, we will survey the biblical background for the diversity among Christological doctrines. Then we will review the Christological approach of the Syriac churches as opposed to the Greek churches. We will also demonstrate the diversity of Christologies within the Syriac churches after the 4th century when the Syriac churches (both in the East and the West) adopted the Greek Christologies at the expense of their own. Following our review of their diversity, and after we demonstrate both the contention and tolerance the churches had towards each other, we will address the following question: Given the spirit of both contention and tolerance which has existed within each church throughout history, what can we learn about becoming a truly ecumenical church?"

Biblical background for the diverse Christologies

In the Bible itself, there are at least four different Christological approaches. Mathematically speaking, one can generate and validate some 24 ($4!=4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1$) literal, biblical Christologies. The main biblical Christologies, however, are that of Adoption, of Identity, of Distinction and of Derivation.

The Christology of Adoption conveys that at a certain time, at baptism or resurrection, God conferred on the man Jesus the status of God.¹ Its biblical

¹ Among the early sources of the Christology of Adoption are: *The Shepherd of Hermans* (2nd century), see Aolf Harnack, *History of Dogma* (tr. N. Buchanan; New York: 1931) 1:211; the alleged doctrines of Paul of Samosata, the deposed Patriarch of Antioch (3rd century), had been credited (or accused) of being adoptionist, see Eusebius, *The History of the Church From Christ to Constantine* (tr. G. Williamson; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965) 313-4; additionally, the Ebionites, according to Hippolytus (3rd century), believed

support, as some scholars argue, according to its adherents, is grounded on biblical passages such as: "You are my Son, today I have begotten you" (Ps. 2:7), and "God had made Jesus.. Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:32-36)..etc.The Christology of Identity speaks of Christ as God, Yahweh.² Its biblical support comes from Isaiah 63:9 (LXX) which reads: "Not an intercessor, nor an angel, but the Lord himself;" Psalm 96:10 "the Lord reigns from the tree;" Isa. 44:6 "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts; "I am the first and I am the last, besides me there is no God;" Romans 9:5 "...who is God, blessed forever."

The Christology of Distinction speaks of One Lord and another Lord.³ The biblical support comes from Gen. 19:24 "and the Lord rained...from before the Lord from heaven," Psalm 110:1 "The Lord said to my Lord."

The Christology of Derivation refers to the Father as "the greater" or "the generator", or concerning the use of Christ's titles such as angel, Spirit, Logos, and Son.⁴ The biblical support comes from John 1:1-14; Proverbs 8:22-31 (LXX).

The diversity within the Greek Churches

that Jesus was a man endowed with special powers of the Spirit" See Hippolytus of Rome, *On Heresies*; and Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971) esp. 175-6. However, among the adoptionists, there was a range of differences about the nature of the Adoption which extends from ontological union unto analogical one.

² There were many churches in the first four centuries whose Christology was that of Identity with its various approaches, such as the Monarchians, Modalists..etc., and among its prominent figures are Ignatius of Antioch (d. 107), Melito of Sardis (d. 190), and Tertullian (d. 225). Tertullian, for example, called for protecting the 'monarchy' of the Godhead by stressing the identity of the Son with the Father without specifying the distinction between them with equal precision. See J. Pelikan, 176-180.

³ Among the earlier figures who stressed the Christology of Distinction were Justin Martyr (d. 165), and Irenaeus (d. 200). Justin explains Gen. 19:24, saying that there had to be some distinction between "the Father and Lord of all" and "the Lord." Cf. J. van Winden, *An early Christian Philosopher: Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho* (Leiden: Brill, 1971) 127.5. See a similar argument of John of Sedreh (d. 648), by the present author, "The Letter of John of Sedreh: A New Perspective on Nascent Islam," *JAAS* 11.1 (1997) 68-84.

⁴ While there is no specific churches whose Christology is that of Derivation, many of the earlier Christian authors explained certain Christological notions as Derivation. Among these, we refer to the *Shepherd of Herm* (Herm. Sim 8.3.3), Justin Martyr (Dial. 56.4), Clement of Alexandria, who writes: "the Lord Jesus, that is, the Word of God, the Spirit incarnate, the heavenly flesh sanctified;" Wood, S. P., *Clement of Alexandria: Christ the Educator* (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1954) 16.43.3.

Among many other challenges, the churches in the Roman world faced the challenge of the Greek (pagan) philosophers who accused nascent Christianity of inferior knowledge.⁵ In reaction, the early Christian apologists responded to these philosophers in their own terms and language, proving the vitality of Christian knowledge. Among various Greek philosophical approaches, most of the Christian apologists adopted platonism, with its contemplating focus, in Alexandria, or Aristotelianism, with its focus on matter, history and grammar, in the region of Antioch.

As time went on, the Christians developed various explanations of the doctrine of Christology based on the various schools of thought. The Platonic philosophy, accordingly, concluded that Christ must have One Nature. The Aristotelean philosophy, on the other hand, concluded that Christ must have Two Natures. As mentioned above, although conflicts and disputations concerning this subject emerged right from the time of the Apostles, it was well within its accepted limits.⁶ However, after the 4th century, certain Christological statements were politicized and weakened Christendom.

The diversity within the Syriac Churches

Prior to the 4th century, the Syriac churches found themselves at home with regard to the biblical proclamation. Far from Greek culture, early Syriac Christianity integrated the Christian message in its Semitic understanding to which the Old and most of the New Testament belong. It is widely recognized by modern scholars that unlike Greek Christianity, which developed an ontological interpretation of God and Christ, Syriac Christianity was uninterested in dogmatic strife. Syriac Christianity conceived its faith rather as a Way, a way of daily life and continual mission.⁷

By way of example, let us refer to the creed of faith of Aphrahat (4th century) and the creed in the Acts of Judas Thomas (2nd or 3rd century), which represent Syriac Christology before adopting (or being imposed upon by) the

⁵ Celsus (d. 178) is one of several Greek philosophers who describes Christianity as “hodgepodge of superstition and fanaticism,” see Quasten, J., *Pathology* (Vol. 1; Westminster: Newman, 1950)86; Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) 78, 85, 133-139.

⁶ David Roahd, *The Challenge of Diversity: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) esp. the Introduction.

⁷ G. Quispel, "The Discussion on Judaic Christianity," *Vigiliae Christianae* 22 (1968) 81-93, esp. 81-2; J. Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971) esp. 6-7.

Greek Christology.⁸ In fact, the Syriac creeds have no equivalent to any of those Greek Christological terms, such as hypostasis, physis, ousia, and the like, which later caused all the misunderstanding within each church, and between the churches.

However, Greek Christology began to permeate the Syriac churches through the late writings of St. Ephrem. Although most of Ephrem's writings are genuinely Semitic, several passages speak about the way of union between the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ in terms of mixture. Ephrem says: "In a new way, his body has been mixed in our bodies. And his pure blood has been poured into our veins. ... The whole of him with the whole of us is mixed by his mercy."⁹

Ephrem was so fortunate that he escaped the harsher criteria set by later generations who determined who were the faithful and who were the heretical. Ultimately, neither of the Syriac church traditions accepted the concept of mixture; on the contrary, both of them vehemently opposed it.

The Syriac Christologies in the West Syriac tradition

By the turn of the fifth century, most of the West Syriac churches adopted the Alexandrian Christology. However, because of the loose definition of Greek Christological terms, such as hypostasis (person, or QENUMA), ousia (essence), and physis (nature), even within the Greek schools of thought, the Syriac theologians faced difficulties in expressing their Christological understandings. The translation of these Greek terms into Syriac added further difficulties. But the Greek terms, concepts and formulas posed a greater obstacle in developing and studying their own Syriac Christology.

To illustrate Christological diversity, we have selected three prominent figures in the West Syriac church in the sixth century. The first one is Severus of Antioch (d. 539), who is Greek in origin, thought and language. The other two are native to the Syriac culture and language, but inheritors of the Greek Christology of the Alexandrian school, the are Philoxenus of Mabugh (d. 523), and Jacob of Sarugh (d. 521). In order to make it succinct and clear, we will introduce the basic components of their Christology and compare and contrast their understanding.

Severus of Antioch

Hypostasis and Nature

⁸ *Patrologia Syriaca* (ed. D. I. Parisot; Vol. 1; Paris: Institutum Francicum Typographi, 1894) 44-45, 788; Judas Thomas, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (ed. W. Wright; London: 1871); *Doctrine of Addai* (ed. G. Howard; Chico: Scholarios, 1981).

⁹ *Des Heiligen Ephrem des Syres: Hymnen de Virginitate* (ed. E. Beck; CSCO, Vol. 133/94; Louvain: Secretariat du CorpusSCO, 1962) 133.

In a clear and consistent way, Severus discusses his Christology based on the theology of the school of Alexandria. For Severus, the concepts of Hypostasis (Qenuma), and Nature (Keyana), are synonyms, except that the term Nature could refer either to the specific (individual) or to the generic (non-individual), while the term Hypostasis always refers to an individual.¹⁰

Severus argues for two kinds of hypostases: the self-existent (complete hyp.), and the non-self-existent (incomplete hyp.) hypostasis. To use a man as an example, Shabo, is a combination of two non-self-existents, i.e., the body and the soul.¹¹ The combination or union of these two makes one complete hypostasis. A simple self-existent hypostasis is one that exists in its own right and is not composite: the Father or the Holy Spirit is a simple self-existent hypostasis.¹² Christ, on the other hand, is one self-existent composite hypostasis, the product of a union of a simple self-existent with a non-self-existent hypostasis. The simple self-existent hypostasis is the divinity of Christ, and the simple non-self-existent hypostasis is the humanity of Christ.

Prosopon

The term Prosopon, according to Severus is equivalent to self-existent hypostasis, and implies existing in an individual being.¹³ Accordingly, the Prosopon is a concrete reality, and bears a proper name, such as Shabo, Gallo, or Christ. The non-self-existent is not a Prosopon: this is why Severus never called humanity in the Incarnation "the man." Thus Severus speaks of One Nature, One Hypostasis, and One Prosopon of God, the Word Incarnated.

Operation

According to Severus, there is only one operation arising from self-existent hypostasis. Ephrem, for example, may eat (body) or think (soul). In both cases, we say Ephrem does it, not Ephrem's body or Ephrem's soul.

In the case of Christ, we should not speak of two operations: We should not say that "the man wept," and "God raised Lazarus," but "the Incarnated Word did it."¹⁴

Prosoponic Union

¹⁰ E. W. Brooks, "A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch, from Numerous Syriac Manuscripts (Letters I to LXI)," *Patrologia Orientalis* 12 (1919) , Letter VII, 200; Letters XV, 210-11.

¹¹ Brooks, Letter II, 190; Letter XXV, 230ff.

¹² Severi Antiocheni, *Liber Contra Impium Grammaticum: Oratio et Secunda* (ed. Iosephus Lebon; CSCO, Vol. 111/58; Louvain: Secretariat du CorpusSCO, 1965) 76.

¹³ Brooks, Letter XVI, 211.

¹⁴ Brooks, Letter I, 180-2;

Prosoponic union is a union of two prosopa, two self-existent hypostases. For example, the union of Ephrem and Warda in friendship, partnership, etc., is a prosopic union. In prosopic union, the two partners can exist apart from each other. Thus the members of a prosopic union are not in an iconic relationship to each other. Severus describes the prosopic union in various phrases such as, "partnership", "union of brotherhood", "conjunction in honor", "union by assumption", and "presence".¹⁵

Hypostatic Union

Hypostatic union is a "natural" union, where although the two hypostases remain, they have no individual, separate existence of their own. The union of the body and the soul is a clear example.

The actual union of the divinity and humanity in Christ, according to Severus, was not Prosoponic but hypostatic union, the union of self-existent (Divine Hypostasis) with non-self-existent (human) hypostasis. The members of hypostatic union are in an iconic relationship to each other.

In hypostatic union, the hypostases (non + self-), are in composition (brukobo), and perfect, they do not continue as an individual existence so as to number them two.¹⁶

Philoxenus of Mabugh

Unlike Severus, whose thoughts, vocabulary and language are those of the Alexandrian school, Philoxenus expresses his Christology in more Syriac (=Semitic) thought and language. Although Philoxenus remains loyal to the One Nature formula, his explanation is drastically different than that of Severus. Far from technical Greek vocabulary and philosophical explanations, Philoxenus states that Christ, the Word of God, simultaneously exists in two modes of being, as God by nature, and as a man by a miracle. In a similar way, the baptized believers also exist in two modes of beings, as human by nature, and as sons of God by a miracle.

Nature and Hypostasis

Philoxenus uses the term Nature and Hypostasis interchangeably. He defines nature as the basic unchangeable characteristics that belong to a certain species (being). For example, in the incarnation, God remains God by Nature, immortal, invisible, intangible, in spite of undergoing birth, death and tangibility. At the same time, God, the divine hypostasis of the Word, becomes man by

¹⁵ Brooks, Letters II, 189-90; Letter X, 20; Letter XVI, 211; Letter XXV, 244; Homily. LVII (P.O. viii 221-2).

¹⁶ Brooks, Letter XV, 210; Letter XVI, 211; Letter XXV, 232; Lebon, 78.

miracle, which takes place in accordance with God's will within the hypostasis of the Word himself.¹⁷

Philoxenus does not regard the existence by miracle as a change (*shuhlapha*), but as additional. He states that "We became sons of God, although our nature was not changed, and Christ became a man by his mercy, although his essence was not changed."¹⁸

Ultimately, Philoxenus chooses to reject the expression of Two-Natures without sufficient reasoning, since his logical argument, based on the power of miracle, does not conclude in either of the two "standard" Christological formulas, namely, the One Nature, or the Two Natures. However, he chooses to reaffirm the formula of the Alexandrian school, i.e. One Nature, One Hypostasis, One Prosopon, One Ousia.

Jacob of Sarugh

We have already found significant differences in the explanation of the Christological doctrine between Severus and Philoxenus. Jacob of Sarugh, on the other hand, is very different from either of them. Far from Greek philosophy and theology, Jacob's theology is more mythological and symbolic.¹⁹

After introducing the history of the world in a mythological way, Jacob speaks about the appointed time when the Word of God, the "Hidden One", made himself visible to men. From his birth, Jacob maintains, the Word remains disguised for many, "in appearance he was a man, though by nature he was God."²⁰

Nature and Hypostasis

¹⁷ *Philoxène de Mabbog: Lettre aux Moines de Senoun* (ed. A. Halleus; *CSCO*, Vol. 231/98; Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1963) 57.

¹⁸ *Three Letters of Philoxenus, Bishop of Mabbogh* (ed. And tr. A. Vaschalde.; CUA, Dissertation for PhD; Rome: 1902) 164-5. The Philoxenus statement contradicts Alexandrian and Cappadosian Writers who said, "God became man in order for a man to become god."

¹⁹ Sebastian Brock, "From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning," *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London: Variorum, 1984) V-17. Elsewhere, Brock considers Jacob of Sarugh has a significant impact on the Hudra, the standard prayer book in the Church of East; see S. Brock, *OCA*, 55 (1989) 339-343. Furthermore, according to Brock, Jacob's writings reflect the Edessan School, and thus he comes closer to Theodore than Ephrem or Narsai; see S. Brock, "Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Sarugh," *OCA*, 205 (1976)325-326.

²⁰ Letter 13, 53.

Confirming the Alexandrian Christological formula, Jacob states that Jesus is "one Son, one Nature, one Hypostasis, one in number."²¹ Distancing himself from Severus, Jacob uses the term Nature to refer to a concrete being, an entity which can be counted. Equally, he equates the term Nature with Hypostasis. Therefore, one Nature and one Hypostasis means one being, one actual identity. It was for this reason that Jacob rejected the doctrine of Two Natures because, according to him, that means two beings and two entities.²²

In opposition to Severus but in agreement with Philoxenus, Jacob speaks of two births as an alternative to the hypostatic union of Severus.²³

In another instance, Jacob refers to the human nature of Christ as Schema. Commenting on the term Schema found in Philippians, 2, Jacob argues that Jesus is God by nature, but in the image and Schema of man. While "nature", Jacob explains, is a concrete being, Schema, is something that can be chosen or rejected or changed. For example, Ephrem's human nature did not change when he was a child, young, or old; however, his Schema changed according to his growth and career. Jesus, on the other hand, is God in nature, but he has come into being in the Schema of man.

By comparing these three theologians, one can easily recognize the drastic differences in their understanding of the adopted Alexandrian Christological formula. We can easily notice that the only common idea among these three Christologies was the repeated formula of "One Nature, One hypostasis, One Prosopon, One Ousia,"..etc.

Christologies from the Church of the East

After the fourth century, and as in the West Syriac churches, the Syriac churches of the East offered various explanations for the Christological formulas which originated in the Greek school of Antioch. Unlike the formula of Alexandrian Christology, the Antiochene Christology accepts the duality of some Christological terms, such as Nature and hypostasis. Because of such duality, and their inaccurate definition, in addition to their treatment in the Syriac language, its Christological statements vary. In the following section I will briefly review five Christological statements dating to the 5th - 7th century, beginning with Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), who was of Greek origin, both in thought and language.

Theodore of Mopsuestia

²¹ Letter 3, 19.

²² Letter 14, 61; Letter 27, 137 and 139; Letter 33, 249.

²³ Letter 2, 3; 3, 18; 6, 32-33; 13, 53; 14, 60; 29, 233..etc.

Like Severus in the West Syriac church, Theodore was of Greek origin and wrote only in Greek. Theodore's writings were soon translated into Syriac and propagated in the School of Edessa. This very translation posed further difficulties and confusion. These Christological terms were not well defined even in the Greek language, and were explained variously by the Greek scholars, and their translation into Syriac carried the confusion a step further. Theodore's Christological position, based on Aristotelian philosophy, is as follows:²⁴

Two Persons, by which he meant hypostases,
Two Natures (physes), in voluntary union.

Babai (d. 628), the Catholicos of the Church of the East, clarifies that Theodore spoke of "One Parsupa" of Christ.²⁵ Additionally, the Syriac translators rendered Qenuma for persons sometimes, and/or hypostases. For the word Nature, *physis*, the Syriac translators render Keyane²⁶

Synod of Aqaq (486) and Synod of Yeshu`Yab (585)

Unlike Theodore of Mopsuestia, both Synods, of the Catholicos Aqaq and of Yeshu`Yab stated the following Christology:

One person (*parsopa*),
Two natures (*keyane: physes*),
in voluntary union

As stated, both Synods distinguished, in their Syriac expression, between the Greek term of *Prosopon* to which they rendered the Syriac word *Parupha* i.e. person, and the Greek term for Hypostasis to which they rendered the Syriac word *Qenuma*. In so doing, the church of the East presented the closest Christological formula to the Christology of Chalcedon.²⁷

Narsai (d. 503)

Narsai, the former instructor of the school of Edessa and later the leading scholar in the school of Nisibis, maintained Theodore's formulae but clarified it. Narsai stated that in Christ:

Two persons (i.e. hypostases/ Qenuma),
Two nature (keyane: physes), and

²⁴ Unlike the Platonic philosophy, the Stoic (materialistic) philosophy teaches that in the union of soul and body, they both preserve their own hypostasis (IDIA UPOSTASIS). See Alexander of Aphrodisias, *de Mixtione* 3 (Suppl. Aristot. ii 2, 217.33 Bruns); Henry Chadwick, *History and Thought of Early Church* (London: Variorum, 1982) XVI, 160-1.

²⁵ Babai, *Histoire de Mar-Jabalaha* (ed. P. Bedjan; Paris: np, 1895) 499.

²⁶ Arthur Voobus, *History of the School of Nisibis* (CSCO, Vol. 266, Subsidia 26; Louvain: 1965) 253, 255.

²⁷ *Synodicon Orientale* (ed. J. B. Chabot; Paris: 1902) 302, 397, 455.

One prosopon (parsopa).²⁸

Henana (d. 609)

Henana's Christology, according to the writing of Babai (628) was expressed as follows:

One person (qenuma: hypostases),
Two natures (keyane: physis).²⁹

Synod of Bishops (612)

The Synod of Bishops at the turn of the seventh century reformulated the Christological doctrine as follows:

two persons (qenuma: hypostasis),
two nature (keyene: physis),
one union or one lordship.³⁰

As stated above, the diversity in Christologies in the Church of the East is also obvious. While all statements agree on the Two Natures, they vary on defining the hypostasis and/or prosopon.

Agreement and Disagreement

The diversity of Christologies within each church is well recognized through the above statements. Ultimately, none of the above Christologies have continuity with the earlier Syriac (Semitic) Christologies. But in spite of the diversity within each church tradition, each church lived in harmony with its diverse Christologies. The fact that each church accepted its diversity or harmonized it, or at least turned a blind eye to it is commendable. But the question today is: Since each church lived in harmony with its Christological diversity, is it not possible today to live in harmony with the Christological diversity among the churches?

According to a number of medieval, Syriac scholars, such as Arfadi (9th century),³¹ Patriarch Keryakus (9th century),³² Moshe bar Kepha (9th cent.),³³

²⁸ F. McLeod, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies on the Nativity, Epiphany, Passion, Resurrection and Ascension: Critical Edition of the Syriac Text* (Patrologia Orientalis, Vol. 40.1.182; Turnhout: np, 1979) I, 274.

²⁹ Baba Magni, *Liber de Unione* (ed. A. Vaschalde; CSCO, Vol. 79.34; Louvain: Secretariat du CorpusSCO, 1915) 209.

³⁰ *Synodicon Orientale*, 575

³¹ Gerard Troupeau, "Le Livre de L'unaminite de la foi de 'Ali Ibn Dawud al-Arfadi" *Pareole de L'Orient* (1969) 197-219.

³² W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired Since the Year 1838* (Vol. 1; London: 1878) Add. 17145.

`Ammar al-Basri (9th cent.),³⁴ Bar Hebraeus (13th cent.),³⁵ and many others, the answer would have been yes! But what is the answer of the contemporaries?

³³ Abdul Massih Saadi, *The Commentary of Moshe Bar Kepha on Luke: A Christian Apology Responding to Muslims* (Dissertation; Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1998).

³⁴ S. Griffith, "Ammar al-Basri's *Kitab al-Burhan*: Christian *Kalam* in the First Abbasid Century," *Le Museon* 96 (1983) 145-181.

³⁵ Bar Hebraeus, *Kethobo de-Yauno* (ed. G. Gardahi; Rome: 1898) 75. In this book, Bar Hebraeus, who might have been responding to a similar question responded: "But when I studied and meditated in this field, I realized that the quarrel among the Christians is baseless. For all confess Christ, our Lord, to be wholly God and wholly man, without blending, mixture, and confusion in natures. This bilateral likeness is called by some nature (Keyana), by others hypostasis (Qenuma), by others person (Prosopon). Therefore, notwithstanding their diversity, I consider all Christians to be of equal, comparable value."