

Chapters on the Trinity and the Union

Al-Safī ibn al-^cAssāl

Chapters 7–11

Part Two: On the (Hypostatic) Union

Chapter Seven: The Nature of the (Hypostatic) Union

(1) The Incarnation of the Son (*ta'annus al-ibn*),¹⁴⁷ is his union (*ittiḥād*) with a human being, complete in his humanity (2) from the beginning of his existence, conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary at the moment of the annunciation and her reception (of the Spirit).¹⁴⁸ (3) It is like the union of the soul of a human being with its

¹⁴⁸ Lit. at the moment it was announced and she received.

¹⁴⁴ Nicene Creed.

¹⁴⁵ 1 Corinthians 15: 50.

¹⁴⁶ John 11: 25–6.

¹⁴⁷ Lit. the Son's act of becoming human. The term *al-ta'annus* often served as a synonym for *al-tajassud* (incarnation) among medieval Arabic Christian writers. Samir Khalil Samir notes two other words that were also used to convey the same meaning: *al-ittiḥād* and (less frequently) *al-tajassum*.

body (*bi-badanihi*);¹⁴⁹ (4) however, the union of his divinity with his humanity does not come to an end—(5) not at the moment of contact (*al-ittiṣāl*) between his body and the soul of his humanity, both before death and after the resurrection, (6) and not even at the moment of his death, the separation of the soul of his humanity from his body. (7) Indeed, his divinity remained united with his soul when it passed into paradise, just as the thief said,¹⁵⁰ and (it remained united) with his body when it was in the grave. (8) For this reason, ‘he did not see corruption’, just as the prophet David said.¹⁵¹

Chapter Eight: The Difference of Opinion among Christians in the Understanding of the (Hypostatic) Union Is Only With Regard to Philosophical Expressions

(1) Know that the Christians are in agreement regarding everything that is contained in the Gospels, Epistles, and the universal Creed; (2) regarding the fact that Christ is God incarnate (*ilāh muta’annis*); (3) regarding the description of him in terms of divinity and humanity, and the characteristics of both of these terms, just as is mentioned in the Gospel, and the Epistles, and the Creed; (4) and regarding the fact that he is one Lord, just as is contained in the Creed. (5) Beyond that, they (the Christians) have differed in (only their use of) philosophical terms.

(6) The Jacobites (i.e. non-Chalcedonians) have said that he is one in every aspect—in his substantiality (*al-jawhariyah*), in his hypostatic nature (*al-qunūmiyah*), and in his will—(7) because the Gospel, the Epistles, and the Creed have attributed to him the term of ‘unity’, not of duality, (8) and because the meaning of the union of the two is that the two become one. (9) It is for this reason that we have said, ‘He is one substance (*jawhar wāḥid*) from two substances, one hypostasis (*qunūm wāḥid*) from two hypostases. He possesses one will and one activity.’ (10) By ‘hypostasis’ we mean here his distinctive substance. (11) If he were not one substance constituted from two substances that both remain present in him, then it would not be correct to describe him by each one of the two substances, along with their characteristics. (12) Indeed, with regard to God and humankind, it is not correct to describe them (by saying) that they are both God, or that they are both human beings. (13) However, with regard to the incarnate God (*al-ilāh al-muta’annis*), it is correct to describe him (by saying) that he is God and that he is a human being. (14) Just as is the case in our (holy) books, it is correct to describe the whole in terms of its parts.

(15) The Melkites (i.e. Chalcedonians) have said, ‘He is two substances (*jawharān*)—God and human being. And he possesses two actions and two wills—divine and human. (16) He is one hypostasis (*qunūm wāḥid*), and that is the divine hypostasis, to the exclusion of the human.’ (17) Their ancients have said, ‘The union has taken place in the human being in a complete sense, and that complete sense is not a hypostasis.’ (18) Their moderns have said, ‘The hypostasis is that which exists in its

¹⁴⁹ Throughout these chapters, the author prefers to use the word *badan* when speaking about the human body.

¹⁵⁰ Here the author seems to be reading the thief’s request for Christ to be with him when he comes into his kingdom (along with Christ’s affirmative response) in Luke 23: 42–3 as evidence for the fact that his divinity remained united with his soul in paradise.

¹⁵¹ Psalm 15: 10.

own essence (*bi-dhātihi*), and the humanity was not present except in so far as it was united with the divinity.’ (19) These two statements are weak.

(20) The Nestorians have said, ‘He is one in Christhood and Sonship, in knowledge and in will, (21) but yet he is two substances (*jawharān*), two hypostases (*qunū-mān*)—God and human being. (22) Whoever has been a proponent of the (hypostatic) union, in its totality or in part, (23) has relied on the fact that it was reported thus in the Gospel, the Epistles, and the Creed, (24) and has based himself on the preservation of the union, since it is a fact that the many can become one. (25) Whoever has been a proponent of the duality in a partial sense only (26) has had the goal of preserving the natures in their (individual) realities, and has moved away from the accusation that a change took place between the two natures.

(27) The simplest and clearest means to proceed with regard to these two (latter) parties is to say the following. (28) The holy fathers and learned scholars agreed in comparing the union of the divinity of Christ with his humanity to the union of the soul of the human being with his body. (29) Indeed, this analogy is the closest and most easily understood example that they found. (30) The humanity of Christ, which is the sum of his soul and his body (which themselves are two substances) (31) is not devoid of existence, whether it is one substance, or two. (32) However, if his humanity were two substances, Christ would be three substances—the substance of his divinity, and the two substances of his humanity—(33) and no one says that he is three substances. (34) But, if (his humanity) were one substance (and this is the true and widely-accepted fact), (35) then it is possible that two substances should become one without change, and that one substance should be constituted from the two. (36) This is our statement about Christ.

Chapter Nine: Proof of the Truth of the Union of the Divinity with the Humanity of Christ

(1) The ways of demonstrating God’s Incarnation (*ta’annus al-ilāh*)—i.e. the union of the divinity with Christ’s humanity—are three in number.

(2) The first of them is that which was mentioned in the prophecies, in (their) message that God will appear to the people in the form of a human being (*muta’annisan*), and will do that to which the Gospel has borne witness, (3) just as it says: ‘Behold,¹⁵² a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and his name will be called Emmanuel, which means, ‘God with us.’¹⁵³ (4) Regarding every detail, the provision of prophecies continued until the completion of his economy (*ila kamāl tadbirihi*). (5) It says, ‘Now, when he saw that he had fulfilled (*akmala*) everything, just as it is written in the prophets, he inclined his head and gave up the spirit.’¹⁵⁴ (6) The Gospel and the Epistles contain most of the prophecies that demonstrate this. (7) For this reason, Christ said: ‘Search the scriptures, and they will bear witness on my account.’¹⁵⁵

(8) The second is the way by which the philosophers have demonstrated the existence of the Creator, and the union of the soul with the body. (9) It is their means of

¹⁵² Lit. this one (*hadhihi*).

¹⁵³ Matthew 1: 23; cf. Isaiah 7: 14; 8: 8, 10.

¹⁵⁴ John 19: 28, 30

¹⁵⁵ Cf. John 5: 39.

demonstrating through the existence of special traces (*āthār*) the existence of their proper Cause (i.e. the proper Cause of those traces). (10) For this reason, Christ said, ‘Since you do not believe me, believe my works.’¹⁵⁶ (11) He performed wonders proper to God alone, by his will and by his authority, (12) and he linked them to his (goal of) attracting people to believe in his name. (13) This is the difference between him and the prophets, and it is like the difference between the apostles (*al-rusul*) and the friends of God (*al-awliyā*). (14) Indeed, the apostles lay claim to their message (*al-risālah*), but the friends of God refrain from having it attributed to them.

(15) The third is the fact that he sent his disciples to the entire world, that they might enjoin people to believe in his divinity. (16) He empowered them to work dazzling wonders. (17) They went to all kinds of people, and performed dazzling wonders among them. (18) They guided them to belief in his divinity. (19) The people believed, just as is testified by their presence and by the Gospel, the truthfulness of which is well established.

(20) There is yet another way (of demonstrating the Incarnation), which is not theoretical in nature: namely, the certainty that results from (spiritual) exercise and inner purification.¹⁵⁷ (21) The fathers, who along this path have arrived at the utmost end, have testified that the Christian faith alone is true. (22) The proof of this is their attainment of contact (*ittiṣāl*) with God to the extent that traces of him became manifest in them, (23) as well as their constancy in that faith and their devotion to it until they offered themselves up (in martyrdom) without separation from it and in obedience to it.

Chapter Ten: The Truth of Ascribing to Christ the Properties of Divinity and Humanity

(1) You should know that it is possible to describe anything by what exists in it. (2) Now since the divinity and humanity of Christ exist in him, it is possible to describe him by both of these aspects, and by their characteristics. (3) It is possible to describe him as God and as a human being—(4) (to describe him) both by the characteristics of divinity, with respect to the miraculous deeds that were particular to him, (5) and by characteristics of humanity, with respect to his actions and the passions that were attached to him.

(6) For this reason, we have said, ‘Christ is the Creator (*al-Khāliq*) and Provider (*al-Rāziq*),’¹⁵⁸ and ‘he is the one begotten from the Virgin Mary, the crucified one, the one who died.’ (7) However, the former attributes pertain to him in his divinity, while the latter attributes pertain to him in his humanity, (8) just as the apostles said, ‘He was born in the body,’¹⁵⁹ and ‘he was crucified in the weakness of his humanity,’¹⁶⁰ and ‘he died in the body.’¹⁶¹ (9) This is the case just as when we say about a human being, ‘He thinks, and he is tall.’ Now indeed, ‘he thinks’ by means of his soul, not by means of his body; and ‘he is tall’ in body, not in soul.

¹⁵⁶ John 10: 38. ¹⁵⁷ Lit. purification of the inner person.

¹⁵⁸ In underscoring Christ’s divinity, the author describes him by two of the ninety-nine names of God celebrated in Islam.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Galatians 4: 4; 1 Timothy 3: 16; 1 John 4: 2; 2 John 1: 7.

¹⁶⁰ 2 Corinthians 13: 4.

¹⁶¹ Colossians 1: 22.

Chapter Eleven: The Reasons for the Union

(1) The learned scholars have mentioned many reasons for the union, and they fall into two categories.

(2) The first category concerns the Creator. (3) The property on account of which he brought us into existence (namely, his generosity) (4) was also that property on account of which he established contact (*ittaṣala*) with our nature, in order to perfect us—that is to say, (to bring us to) the perfection of his generosity. (5) The (first) proof regarding the necessity of the union is the fact that the Creator (may he be exalted!) is the most excellent of benefactors. (6) Now the most excellent of benefactors is the benefactor who bestows the most excellent of essences, (7) and the most excellent of essences is the essence of the Creator. (8) It necessarily follows then that the Creator has generously bestowed his essence upon us, and this took place in his contact (*ittiṣāl*) with us. (9) A second proof is the fact that his contact with us is possible, for the main objection to that contact is (the supposed) incompatibility (of the two uniting elements). (11) But the Creator is not in fact opposed to his creature, since one opposing party would destroy its opposite, not bring it into existence. (12) In the Torah, God said that he created humankind in his likeness (*bi-shibhihi*), and this likeness is close to the (idea of) contact (*al-ittiṣāl*). (13) If his contact with us is possible, and if we have the goal of honour(ing him), and if he possesses the perfection of generosity, (14) then there can be no objection to it, apart from (claims that God is guilty of) impotence or greed. (15) These two things are attributes of imperfection, and God is exalted above both of them. (16) Therefore, his contact with us is necessary.

(17) The second category pertains to us. (18) That is, when we fell short of attaining our human perfection, (19) and when the prophets fell short in helping even the smallest number of people attain the first principles of the aforementioned perfection, (20) God became incarnate¹⁶² so that he might cause the greatest number of people to attain the goal of human perfection and (true) existence. (21) The Scriptures give witness to the condition of Christians as compared to the condition of those who came before them, (22) as well to their movement away from the worship of false deities¹⁶³ to the worship of God, (23) and away from great licence to the goal of ascetic piety (*ghāyat al-tanassuk*).