

The Christology of Philoxenos of Mabbug

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Introduction

This paper tries only to select some aspects of the Christology of Philoxenos of Mabbug who was a Bishop of the city of Mabbug (*Hierapolis*) in the early sixth century. These aspects are chosen with reference to the ongoing discussion among theologians of the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Orthodox traditions regarding the Person, Nature, and Will of Christ.

This learned Syrian theologian (*c 440-500*) and his works have been studied in more detail in the massive work of Fr. Andre De Halleux of Louvain¹. His importance in the post-Chalcedonian Christological controversy is second only to that of Severius of Antioch, though he is definitely much less known in the West.

For Philoxenos, theology has to transcend sense-experience. It is not simply reflection on the doctrine of Revelation, but is an aspect of radical, ontological transfiguration of man himself by the contemplation of Divine mystery of the incarnation into which he is incorporated by baptism. Theological reflection is thus growth in faith, and growth in Holiness is an indispensable condition for a profound apprehension of the divine mystery.

He starts from the biblical axiom, *The Word became flesh*, and the Divine Logos is the subject of the incarnation for him throughout. But how to understand this process?

1. Who became?
2. From where?
3. What did he become?
4. Why?

These are the four questions to which he applies himself. The question of *how* he regards as beyond rational comprehension. The wrong ways of understanding he regards as basically *adoptionism, Docetism and synousiasm*.

Becoming and Assumption

Philoxenos' problem was this: Did Christ ever exist as only a man? He saw the attempt to speak about two natures as presupposing the existence of a hypostasis of man with human nature; to him it was impossible to conceive of a nature without a hypostasis². And so he looked with some suspicion on the Christology of his opponents as stating that what God the Word assumed was a full human being with a hypostasis and nature. This meant to him that man became God in Christ. He wanted to affirm the opposite-- God became man in Christ.

He preferred therefore the theology of *becoming* to that of *assumption* because assumption meant to him the assuming of "a man other than God". One can assume only that which existed, but one can become something through a certain event – namely the Word became flesh, remaining Word.

The theophanies of the Old Testament were assumption by God. He assumed the burning bush or the form of the three angels that appeared to Abraham. The difference between the anthropomorphous God in the Old Testament and these in the New Testament is that the former are metaphors, while the latter are mysterious realities. In the bosom of the Virgin, God is contained completely, as man finite and limited. This is the great mystery of the incarnation.

Philoxenos admits that the idea of assumption can also be supported by scripture. Hebrews 2:17 says clearly *ov gar depov aggeton epilambanetai, alla spermatos Abraam epilambanetai*. But the word assumed the seed of Abraham without change in his own hypostasis, according to Philoxenos.

Becoming: Human and Divine

There is a difference between Divine becoming, and other spatio-temporal becomings we know of. The latter always implies change. But God cannot change. Thus Philoxenos seeks to affirm becoming without change-- passion (suffering) of the unsufferable, death of the immortal. He thus avoids *theopaschiansim* and *Docetism*. He affirms Christ's *consubstantiality* with us as well as his *consubstantiality* with God, but the two cannot be confused.

Here, of course, is the perpetual illogicality of the great mystery of the Incarnation, which different formulas can witness to, but no formula can resolve finally.

The immutability of God consists in three fundamental characteristics of God-- His eternity, His perfection, and His freedom.

Eternity

God can "become" without change because he "existed" without "becoming". This is the position of Athanasius, Cyril, and Philoxenos. Change belongs to those who exist in time and space, not to the self-existent in eternity.

Perfection

He is perfect. He did not become man because He needed something. He did not cease to be God when He became man. The becoming of God does not belong to a class with other becomings. It is something we know from Revelation. He becomes man, not because He needed something,

but for us, for our sake, not for Himself. He became, in other words, out of love and not out of necessity. His becoming is a new creative act, of freedom and love.

Freedom

In other words, He became because He willed so in freedom and love, even as He did in the case of the first creation. The incarnation does not originate in the nature of God, but is His will. It is an aspect of His omnipotence, which is His basic freedom. It is thus not in contradiction with His nature, but neither is it a necessity of His nature. To the possible argument that “God is unchanging, so He cannot become,” Philoxenos replies, “It is God who becomes, so He becomes unchangingly”.

Becoming and the Holy Trinity

The Logos is one of the three hypostases of the Holy Trinity. What happens to all three hypostases, of the same nature³ when one of them becomes? When we say “God the Word” we are not uttering a tautology. God signifies the common nature or *ousia*, and Word signifies the person or the *hypostasis*. The first distinguishes God from his creature; the second distinguishes among the persons of the Trinity.

Philoxenos affirms the perfect unity of the Divine *ousia* in all acts *ad extra*.

Notes

1. Philoxene de Malbog, *sa vie, ses ecrits sa theologie Louvain imprimerie orientaliste* 1963, 571 pages. His discoveries were edited and published with an English translation by E. A. Wallis Budge, London, 1894

2. See especially the letter to the monks of Senoun 9-10 ”Two natures.....are evidently also hypostases for nature considered apart or enumerated cannot but be also hypostasis. If there

are two hypostases, as there are two natures, then the conclusion is inescapable that there are also two sons, and therefore also two Gods, “Quoted by Hallen P. 331.

3. Here we notice the confusion in the terms hypostasis, ousia and phusis current in the whole Christological debate. Did Athanasius himself make a clear distinction between the three? Qnumo, the Syriac word for person does not necessarily mean, even in Ephrem, the Syrian hypostasis in the Greek philosophical sense.