

Hypostasis in St Severus of Antioch

Father Peter Farrington

Severus of Antioch reveals the Non-Chalcedonian communion as being wholeheartedly Cyrilline in Christology. His teachings make clear that there is no substantial difference between the Christology of the present day Eastern Orthodox and that of the Oriental Orthodox, even while the nature of his objections to Chalcedon are given some justification.

An understanding of the Christology of any theologian of any period requires an appreciation of the manner in which theological terms are used, and the meaning being attached to them in a variety of contexts. Nowhere is this more important than when considering the writings of the church fathers of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox communions. In the case of the Christological controversies of the 5th and 6th centuries it is especially important that the terms and phraseology be carefully described and explained. This paper considers especially the use of the term 'hypostasis' in St Severus.

The Second Agreed Statement of the Joint Dialogue between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox states that:

"We have now clearly understood that both families have always loyally maintained the same authentic Orthodox Christological faith, and the unbroken continuity of the apostolic tradition, though they have used Christological terms in different ways." ¹

Of course if such an understanding had been possible in the past then Church history may well have developed differently. But in the controversial period the working out of the Christological issues was complicated by many other political, social and theological factors. Not least that there were real Nestorians and real Eutychians active at that time.

Severus of Antioch is one of the most important fathers of the non-Chalcedonian Orthodox communion precisely because he brings the opposing view of Chalcedon and the Tome of Leo into focus. More than that, in writing against those who took a Eutychian view of the Incarnation he also clarifies the theological distance that exists between the non-Chalcedonian Orthodox and those with whom they are generally, and erroneously, identified.

For Severus the term hypostasis is key to the understanding of a properly Orthodox Christology. He uses it in his theological letters, his controversial writings and even in his hymns. Yet the other Christological terms of ousia, physis, and prosopon should also be clearly defined from the point of view of Severus himself. In Christological controversy many of the problems of broken communion and the continued preservation of entrenched positions has been due to writers on one side of controversy assuming that they knew exactly what their opponents meant, or due to assuming that terms and phrases could only ever be used in one manner.²

¹ Second Agreed Statement of the Joint Commission, para 9. 1990.

² This is clear in the Tome of Leo addressed to Flavian of Constantinople where he cannot comprehend how Flavian can have failed to object to Eutyches speaking of 'one nature after the union'.

This most important term, hypostasis, is usefully defined and explored in many of Severus' writings. It stands first and foremost for an individual. Writing to one of his correspondents he says,

"Do you call the flesh possessing an intelligent soul, which God the Word voluntarily united to himself hypostatically without any change, a specimen or a generality, that is one soul-possessing hypostasis, or the whole human generality? It is manifest that, if you wish to give a right-minded answer, you will say one soul-possessing body. Accordingly we say that from it and the hypostasis of God the Word the ineffable union was made: for the whole of the Godhead and the whole of humanity in general were not joined in a natural union, but special hypostases."³

It is clear from this question that Severus opposes the ideas of specimen and generality when he considers the term hypostasis. The soul-possessing hypostasis is a specimen, an individual, it is not the generality of humanity. Indeed this hypostasis is the soul-possessing body which is an individual instance of humanity in general.

For Severus the term hypostasis applies to the soul-possessing body of Christ, that is his complete humanity, such that he can speak of the incarnation being a union of hypostases. And indeed this concept is the centre of his Christology. This idea describes what it means for God the Word to have become flesh and dwelt among us.⁴

How can the Incarnation be considered a union of hypostases? Surely this demands a Nestorian existence of a human person before an assumption by the Word? This would of course be true if hypostasis were always taken in exactly the same manner. But Severus rejects this Nestorian perspective, referencing the writings of St Cyril. He says,

"And do not think that hypostases in all cases have a distinct person assigned to them, so that we should be thought, like the impious Nestorius, to speak of a union of persons, and to run counter to the God-inspired words of the holy Cyril, who in the second letter to the same Nestorius speaks thus: 'But that it should be so will in no way help the right principle of faith, even if some men spread about a union of persons. For the Scripture did not say that God the Word united to himself the person of a man, but that he became flesh'"⁵

Severus does not consider that it is necessary for every hypostasis to be a person, but it is necessary that even in the face of Nestorianism the hypostatic quality of the humanity united with God the Word should be insisted upon. He considers that there are two types of hypostasis. These are a self-subsisting and a non-self-subsisting hypostasis.

The self-subsisting hypostasis is illustrated by the examples of Peter and Paul. They are hypostases with an individual subsistence. They exist independently of each other, and all others, and the name of a person is given them, such that this hypostasis exists in and for itself and is called Peter, and this other independent hypostasis is called Paul. The criticism raised against the Nestorians and those of the Chalcedonians who seemed to support them was that they failed to make a distinction between self-subsistent and non-self-subsistent hypostases and therefore predicated a union of two independent individuals, God the Word, and a man.

Severus took the example of the union of soul and flesh in a man as a means of explaining his concept of a non-self-subsistent hypostasis. In a man, such as Peter, there is a

³ Brooks E. W. A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch. 1915. p16

⁴ John 1:14

⁵ Brooks E. W. A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch. 1915. p17

union of a human soul and human flesh. The flesh is hypostatic, in that it is real and a genuine individual example of the generality of human flesh. But it is not independent, it does not exist in and for itself, but exists in union with the hypostatic human soul which animates it.

Peter is a self-subsistent hypostasis, his flesh is a non-self-subsistent hypostasis. In the union of his hypostatic soul and flesh there is composed a self-subsistent hypostasis which is given the name of person and called Peter.

Thus Severus is able to describe the union of Divinity and humanity in Christ in the same sense,

“Though the hypostasis of God the Word existed before, or rather was before all ages and times, being eternally with God both the Father and the Holy Spirit, yet still the flesh possessing an intelligent soul which he united to him did not exist before the union with him, nor was a distinct person assigned to it.”⁶

The divine hypostasis of the Word is eternal and is a self-subsisting hypostasis, yet though the flesh possessing an intelligent soul is real and hypostatic, that is a complete instance and individual of the generality of humanity, nevertheless it is not a human person because it is not independent of the hypostasis of the Word. It belongs to the Word in a similar manner to the possession of the body by the soul of a man.

If the flesh or humanity which was united with God the Word had existed for even a moment before the incarnation then it would have been self-subsistent, and the doctrine propounded by the Nestorians would have been correct. Severus quotes St Gregory to refute this possibility,

“Whoever says that the man was formed, and God afterwards crept in is condemned: for this is not a birth of God, but an escape from birth.”⁷

But Severus is always careful to preserve the integrity of these various hypostases of which Christ is composed. The flesh is true flesh, it is a real and complete individual of the generality of humanity. Yet it is not a union of a human person and the divine person of the Word. As Severus explains,

“But, when hypostases do not subsist in individual subsistence, as also in the case of the man among us, I mean him who is composed of soul and body, but are without confusion recognised in union and composition, being distinguished by the intellect only and displaying one hypostasis made out of two, such a union none will be so uninstructed as to call one of persons.”⁸

Here the composition of a man is once more described as being made up of hypostatic elements, yet elements which do not self-subsist. And by analogy this is how Christ may be considered in the Incarnation. His person, his self-subsistence, is composed of his own eternal self-subsistent hypostasis, that is his individuated divinity which is a person and is named the Word, and the non-self-subsistent hypostatic humanity which he united with himself at the moment of the Incarnation, creating it entirely to be subsistent in the

⁶ Brooks E. W. A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch. 1915. p19

⁷ Brooks E. W. A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch. 1915. p18. Where he is quoting Ep. 101 (P. G., XXXVII, 177)

⁸ Brooks E. W. A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch. 1915. p18

union of divinity and humanity. This humanity does not have a human person attached to it, but it is hypostatic and is a real human individual, yet the person who owns this human hypostasis is God the Word. The humanity subsists, but it is not self-subsistent, it is dependent on the union with the self-subsistent divine hypostasis and the divine person of the Word of God.

Severus quite naturally is able to draw our attention to the hypostases of which Christ is composed. He says,

“Following these God-inspired words of the holy fathers, and confessing our Lord Jesus Christ to be of two natures, regard the distinct hypostases themselves of which Emmanuel was composed, and the natural junction of these, and do not go up to generalities and essences, of the whole of the Godhead and humanity in general: for it is manifest that the whole of the Godhead is seen in the Trinity, and humanity in general draws the mind to the whole human race.”⁹

Here it is clear that he considers the hypostases to be distinct, that is, they are not confused, they do not produce some other type of hypostasis which is neither truly divine nor truly human. But rather the union of a real and self-subsistent divine hypostasis with a real and non-self-subsistent human hypostasis mean that the person of the Word, after the Incarnation, now subsists naturally in his divine hypostasis, and in the economy of our salvation he has chosen to subsist in a human hypostasis which he has made his own. There remains only one self-subsistent hypostasis which has now become incarnate, that is, has united to itself a human non-self-subsistent hypostasis.

What is not being proposed is that the generality of humanity and the generality of the divinity has been united. The term hypostasis excludes such generality by referring always to an individual instance of such a generality. But this is not to suggest that Severus ever fails to recognise the fact the hypostasis always belongs to an ousia and shares in the membership of the human genus by being a real and complete individuation of that ousia. He states in one of his sermons,

“In the same way hypostasis does not deny genus or ousia, or abolish it, but it sets apart and limits in particular icons the one who subsists.”¹⁰

Severus also addresses the other Christological terms and phrases. He says,

“But now also we will come to what is required, and, we will again say, that 'ousia' signifies a generality, and 'hypostasis' a particularity, but 'being' and 'nature' introduce sometimes a general signification, sometimes a partial or particular one.”¹¹

Therefore, as far as Severus is concerned, ousia should be used to describe that which is general to all of a species. So all humans share in the human ousia which is individuated into human hypostases, which are unique and subsistent. He does not seem to think of ousia as some sort of philosophical model, rather it seems to be that which is really and practically shared among the members of a class or genus. Peter is a man, his ousia is that of humanity, not because there is a substance which exists somewhere out of which a man is made, or because there is a divine pattern or model, but because he manifestly belongs to that ousia.

⁹ Brooks E. W. A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch. 1915. p19

¹⁰ Chesnut Roberta C. Three Monophysite Christologies. 1976. p11. Translated by Chesnut from Hom CXXV (P. O. xxix.236)

¹¹ Brooks E. W. A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch. 1915. p23

Severus writes,

“The Word therefore who had become incarnate walked upon the sea, and after his death under the wound of the lance caused a stream of salvation to well forth from his side: again, after the Resurrection, he came in while the doors were shut, and appeared to the disciples in the house; whom he also allowed to touch him, showing that his flesh was tangible and solid, and of one ousia with us, and was also superior to corruption; and thereby he subverted the theory of phantasy.”¹²

This explicitly teaches that the humanity of Christ is of the same ousia with us. He belongs, in his humanity, to the same genus or class of being as all other humans. He could be touched, his flesh was solid. His was not a spiritual humanity, it was not a phantasy body. He was completely of the same humanity as us.

Indeed Severus quotes St Cyril to show that the term ousia defines that which characterises a class of being.

“And the wise Cyril in the second letter to Succensus calls the manhood which was hypostatically united to God the Word ousia, saying: ‘For, if after saying ‘one nature of the Word’ we had stopped and not added ‘incarnate’, but set the dispensation as it were outside, they would perhaps in a way have a plausible argument when they pretend to ask, ‘Where is the perfection in manhood? or how was the ousia after our model made up?’ But, since the perfection in manhood and the characteristic of our ousia has been introduced by the fact that we said ‘incarnate’, let them be silent, since they have leaned upon the staff of a reed’”¹³

This quotation supports the contention of Severus that the humanity of Christ is of the same ousia as us. This is to say that Christ is consubstantial with us according to his humanity. By using the word incarnate we must understand, says St Cyril, and of course Severus together with him, that Christ is no longer simply the divine hypostasis of the Word of God, but is also perfect in his manhood and in every characteristic of humanity which is summed up in the concept of ousia.

Ousia is therefore the definition and the characteristics of a genus, and according to his humanity Christ is a perfect and complete example of a hypostasis of the human ousia, and according to his divinity is a perfect and complete example of a hypostasis of the divine ousia.

Now Eutyches hesitated to say that Christ was consubstantial with us, although he did confess that Christ was human, and there were those who taught that because Christ had been conceived in a miraculous manner this set him apart from the human ousia. Severus answers them and criticises them for attacking the whole basis of our salvation. He writes,

“Therefore when you hear that the conception of Emmanuel took place in a divine way and at the same time in a human way, how do you completely remove him from human properties, which the incarnate Word receives willingly? For unless we say the flesh was capable of receiving the things which belonged to it, with the exception of sin – for this

¹² Brooks E. W. A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch. 1915. p11

¹³ Brooks E. W. A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch. 1915. p21

is not part of the ousia, but a sickness which, as I have said, occurs as a result of inattention – he was able neither to suffer the cross on our behalf nor to endure death.”¹⁴

Therefore the human ousia which the Word shares, in the Incarnation, with all humanity does not include sin. This means that sin is not an essential component of the human ousia. But in everything else the human ousia out of which the non-self-subsistent human hypostasis of Christ has been individuated is complete and lacks nothing which goes to make up a human being. If Christ had not drawn his human hypostasis from the human ousia which we share then his suffering and death and resurrection would mean nothing, and our salvation would not have been accomplished.

Indeed, as Severus states, it is important that no aspect of the human ousia be removed from the humanity of Christ. If it fails to maintain its integrity in the union with the divine hypostasis of the Word then again our salvation is rendered void. If the humanity loses some of its properties then it is no longer the human ousia which is individuated in Christ. But of course Severus rejects the possibility that the humanity of Christ is defective in any way.

What then of the miracles, the Transfiguration, the walking on Galilee? How are these to be understood if the integrity of the humanity of Christ, his consubstantiality with us, is to be preserved? Severus answers,

“For his face was radiant like the sun on the mountain, as we hear the Gospel, and his garments were white like light. But these things do not indicate a change of ousia, far from it, but the brilliance and the multitude of the glory which is proper to God.”¹⁵

Severus could not be much clearer. Even when shining with the glory of the divinity the humanity remains what it is. Yet it is glorified by being the own humanity of God the Word. Just as Moses’ face shone with the glory of God when he had been in the divine presence as far as was possible for any created being. He had not ceased to be a member of the ousia or genus of humanity. His humanity had not changed what it was, but it shone with a reflected glory, as the moon shines with the reflected light of the sun, but is not changed into a star and always remains what it is.

If we consider *prosopon* or person we may note that Severus teaches that not all hypostases bear a person and a name. He quotes St Cyril who says,

“And do not think that hypostases in all cases have a distinct person assigned to them, so that we should be thought, like the impious Nestorius, to speak of a union of persons..... For the Scripture did not say that God the Word united to himself the person of a man, but that he became flesh”¹⁶

It is already clear that Severus considers the humanity of Christ to be hypostatic, yet non-self-subsistent, and such non-self-subsistent hypostases are those which do not have a person assigned to them. If the humanity of Christ were personal in its own right then, as Severus means to indicate by this quotation, we would be forced to confess a Nestorian union of persons.

St Cyril is clear that the humanity which Christ united to himself was not personal, or rather it did not bear the imprint of a human person. Rather the person of the divine

¹⁴ Torrance Iain R. *Christology After Chalcedon*. 1988. p157. Where Torrance is translating the first letter of Severus to Sergius, a Eutychian leaning theologian.

¹⁵ Torrance Iain R. *Christology After Chalcedon*. 1988. p180.

¹⁶ Brooks E. W. *A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch*. 1915. p17

Word is the person who owns that particular human hypostasis and gives it a name. Severus considers that only a self-subsistent hypostasis can bear a person and a name. He says,

“From what has been stated the doctor teaches that the peculiarity of the natural union is that the hypostases are in composition and are perfect without diminution, but refuse to continue an individual existence so as to be numbered as two, and to have its own person impressed upon each of them, which a conjunction in honour cannot possibly do.”¹⁷

It is individual existence then which determines if a hypostasis has a person impressed upon it. In Severus’ terms this is the self-subsistent hypostasis. In the Incarnation this means that the divinity of Christ, the self-subsistent divine hypostasis of the Word, is that which bears a person, and that person is God the Word himself. The humanity cannot bear another person because it is not-self-subsistent. It does not have the necessary ‘individual existence’.

The fact that Severus is willing to speak even of a union of hypostases shows clearly that for him, and for the non-Chalcedonian communion, the integrity of the humanity and Divinity of Christ is always preserved. This is almost the opposite of the position often attributed to him by his opponents and shows the necessity for allowing historical thinkers, especially from the controversial period of the 4th to 7th centuries, to speak for themselves.

¹⁷ Brooks E. W. A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch. 1915. p39