

The Lamp of Understanding

Sāwīrus ibn al-Muqaffa‘

chapters. 4–7

Chapter Four

(1) Our statement on Christ:

We believe Christ (*al-Masīḥ*) is the Word of God (John 1: 14), and God’s Wisdom and Power, as Scripture has said,⁹¹ and indeed we called him Christ, following what God says in his Scriptures. Our friends have differed concerning the meaning of naming the Word of God, Christ. We will clarify this when we have described what the parties differ on and what they agree about. This name was translated into the language of the Greeks, and they designated it by the name, ‘the Anointed One’. Because he also called himself Christ in his conversation with the Samaritan woman,⁹² we call him by that name. (We do so) in order that there may be unanimity that ‘Christ is coming’⁹³ in addition to the messengers (*al-rusul*) and prophets.

What I myself believe concerning the fact that we name the Word of God, Christ, is what some of the fathers believed—that the Word united with the body and that the union (itself) was the anointment. Indeed, he was anointed because he became incarnate (*tajassada*), and the Incarnation (*al-tajassud*) is the name of his anointment. In any case, just as the one who brings his body (*jism*) to the anointment with oil is called the anointed (*al-masīḥ*)—and the oil itself is also a material body (*jism min al-ajsām*)—so too the Word of God was called Christ (*al-masīḥ*) because Scripture has taught us that he became incarnate (*tajassada*). From this point of view, this Word was called Christ because he was specially chosen to become incarnate, just as the Son of God, when he was begotten the second time (*lammā wulida al-mīlād al-thānī*), was called Son, even though before that he was (also) called Son.

Indeed, I have said this to refute whoever has opposed us from among our friends, whoever does not call Christ, ‘the Anointed One’, except for at the union—(that is, whoever) says that it was necessary to call Christ by this name (only) when the Word was united with the human being. (14) I have clarified everything that has been introduced to this faction in my books on them.

⁹¹ 1 Corinthians 1: 24.

⁹² See John 4: 25–6.

⁹³ John 4: 25.

Chapter Five

(1) Our statement on the Incarnation:

We say that God (blessed be he!) has already come forth and established among us the fact that he possesses far-reaching power and an effective will, and that he appears to his servants and is revealed to his prophets and messengers so that he may make it possible for them to see him. As Scripture has described and has told us, he was the one who spoke to Moses and Jacob.⁹⁴ Jacob said, 'I have seen the Lord face-to-face, and my life was preserved.'⁹⁵ He was revealed to Abraham.⁹⁶ Job said, 'I used to hear with the hearing of my ear, but now I have seen you with the sight of my eye.'⁹⁷ Isaiah said that he saw him sitting on the throne with cherubim and seraphim around him.⁹⁸ In the same way, Daniel, Amos, and Ezekiel (have also spoken). The people of the King have agreed that he is the one who is on the throne, that he is the one sitting on the throne (may He be exalted and glorified!). About his word we are sure; we believe his prophets and we abide in what his Scriptures have described. We do not disavow any word, nor do we reject good fortune (given by God).

We believe that the prophets saw him (may he be blessed and exalted!) and described him in so far as he was able to be seen, but not because he was perceptible, nor because their vision was an actual vision of his essence, nor because his essential substance was (able to be) seen. To our wonderment, in interpreting what the prophets described—concerning the revelatory vision, his enthronement, and his throne—one discovers the finest interpretation, the most easily understood commentary. We will discuss this in the appropriate place. Indeed, God revealed himself to us and appeared to us in the last days in the body belonging to his creation, from the body of the Virgin Mary. We heard his discourse from the body with which he was united. And he caused us to hear his speech, just as he caused Moses to hear his speech and presence from the bush⁹⁹ Just as he revealed to the people of Israel and spoke to them on the mountain and caused them to hear his word,¹⁰⁰ so too he has given us a share in the hearing of his word and his discourse. He has spoken to us from his earth, just as he spoke to those people from heaven.¹⁰¹ He has commanded us from close by, just as he commanded his angels from close by. Our closeness to him is like the closeness of the cherubim and seraphim, and they are also some of his creatures.

God has acted before (may his name be blessed!) and has notified us that he was going to do this for us. Jeremiah the prophet said, 'Truly God will appear on the earth and will suffer among the people.'¹⁰² David the prophet said, 'He bowed the heavens and came down.'¹⁰³ Heaven is his creation and he has spoken to humankind from it. The earth is his creation and he has spoken to his servants from it. The body is his workmanship and he has spoken to his creatures from it. This is our statement concerning the Incarnation.

⁹⁴ Exodus 3; Genesis 32: 23–33.

⁹⁵ Genesis 32: 31.

⁹⁶ Genesis 18.

⁹⁷ Job 42: 5

⁹⁸ Isaiah 6: 1–2.

⁹⁹ Exodus 3: 2–4: 17

¹⁰⁰ Exodus 19.

¹⁰¹ Lit. his heaven.

¹⁰² Baruch 3: 38.

¹⁰³ 2 Samuel 22: 10.

But, (as for the questions,) ‘Did he not become incarnate?’ and ‘How did the Ancient of Days become incarnate by means of an unprecedented event?’ I have already explained them clearly, and I have clarified the matter in a (more) penetrating way in my book, *On the Elucidation of the Union*. (26) I have not given any defamer from all the sectarian parties an opportunity to defame, but I have invalidated him and exposed his error. Indeed, if you want, I will seek it out from there.

Now, the one who speaks to us from the visible and perceptible body is the one who spoke to Moses in the cloud, and to Isaiah and Jeremiah and the rest of the prophets. He is the one who was revealed to Abraham and Isaac and Noah, the chosen ones. He is the one we believe in.

Chapter Six

(1) **Our statement on the prophets and the messengers:**

(2) We affirm and believe all the prophets whom the books of old describe. (3) We confess that what they set forth is from God (blessed and exalted be He!), that they are his messengers (*rusul*) sent to his creatures and his servants, (4) and that all the laws of Torah and whatever is in it are the means by which creatures worship God century after century, and generation after generation, to the extent that all of it is good and beautiful. There is nothing in it that we disavow or deny. (5) (And we confess) that he spoke to Moses and the prophets. He is the good Creator (*al-Bāri*), the Munificent (*al-Jawād*), the Merciful (*al-Raḥīm*), the Beneficent (*al-Karīm*).¹⁰⁴ (6) It is not as the accursed Mani says, ‘The one who established the laws of Torah and the one who spoke to Moses and the prophets of Israel is Satan.’ May our Lord be greatly and highly exalted above Mani’s blasphemy. (7) Rather, we resolve, confess, and believe that everything the prophets of Israel set forth is the truth from God and that everything apart from him is vanity, falsehood, deceit, and slander. (8) (And we confess) that the Torah and the rest of the Scriptures that our teachers prescribed are the writings and speech of God, his laws and established traditions, his divine precepts and judgements.

(9) People did not cease devoting themselves to the service of these laws until the coming of Christ. (10) And indeed he renewed the laws and raised up what the people used to find shameful as (an expression of) his benevolence and generosity, and as a way of calling forth the significance and sublime character of these matters.¹⁰⁵ (11) He set forth divine precepts and traditions, in accordance with what was required of him (to fulfil) the conditions of those who are perfect and discerning. (12) I will continue to attack Mani, the accursed one, as well as Marcion, and Elian and Ibn Dayṣān (Bardesanes), and others of that ilk.

¹⁰⁴ Here Sāwīrus invokes three of the ninety-nine names or attributes of God celebrated by Muslims: *al-Bāri*, *al-Raḥīm*, *al-Karīm*. Only *al-Jawād* is not included in traditional lists of the divine names.

¹⁰⁵ Lit. the significance of the matters (*al-umūr*) and the sublime character of the conditions (*al-aḥwāl*).

Chapter Seven

(1) Our statement on the eating and drinking of Christ, his fatigue and his crucifixion, and his death:

We say that when he became incarnate, he became incarnate in a complete body possessing a soul and rational faculties—a complete and perfect incarnation. In other words, he created the body, renewed the image, and became a complete human being, without a change of essence. He made it into a temple, a place of residence, and a veil (*ḥijāb*) for himself, even as he united with it in a composite union (*ittiḥādān tarkībīyan*), just as I made clear in my book *On the Elucidation of the Union*.

Since the condition (of the body) is what we described, we apply to it everything that we apply to all material bodies (*al-aḡsām*) in their natural conditions. Indeed, I mean by my statement, ‘their natural conditions’, eating and drinking, as well as fatigue and suffering. For every material body (*jism*) needs food and drink in order to replace whatever it is discharged from it. For the material body (*jism*), there is no dishonour or deficiency in this, and neither is there any for the One who took on a material body (*al-mutaḡassim*). For he indeed took on both its process and its requirements, including weakness and susceptibility to influence. The evidence for this is the word of the apostle, ‘He received what he received not from the angels, but from the seed of David.’¹⁰⁶ Basil himself pointed to this idea in some of his books.

The one who is in the habit of denying cannot deny that the material body (*al-jism*) is fed, that it grows tired and exhausted, and that it is susceptible to influence as long as it is a body similar to all other bodies that are in the world of existence and corruption. Indeed, I have said, ‘the material bodies that are in the world of existence and corruption’, because we say that bodies, after they have been resurrected from their graves, are without need and compulsion, and are not susceptible to any influence. For what has been built up is a physique that does not change and is not transformed, just as the apostle said, ‘This changeable thing will put on what does not change, and this mortal body will put on what does not perish.’¹⁰⁷ Bodies after the resurrection are not susceptible to influence. They do not need food or drink. They do not become sick. They do not become decrepit. They do not decay, nor do they undergo change. The same applies to our statement about the body of Christ after his resurrection: indeed, he does not have any need of food or drink. As for the Gospel story about the fish and the honey,¹⁰⁸ Christ has already interpreted that and explained its purpose in the Gospel. Now, with regards to his crucifixion and death, we have said already that the body that he took on was susceptible to everything to which changeable bodies in the world of existence and corruption are susceptible.

However, his simple, eternal essence in itself is not affected by any influence or suffering, since it does not derive from what is characterized by susceptibility to

¹⁰⁶ Hebrews 2: 16.

¹⁰⁷ 1 Corinthians 15: 53.

¹⁰⁸ Luke 24: 42–3. Some manuscripts of the Gospel contain an expanded reading of v. 42, which describes how the resurrected Christ not only ate fish but also honey from a honeycomb when he met with the gathered disciples in Jerusalem: for a discussion, see G. D. Kilpatrick, ‘Luke 24: 42–43’, *Novum Testamentum* 28/4 (1986), 306–8.

sufferings nor from what is brought about by change, and since it is not affected by corruption. There is no possibility that suffering or imperfection could affect anything simple beyond the physical structure, since its nature and essence were intangible and imperceptible through the senses. However, such influence applies (only) to what is tangible and perceptible through the senses, like composite bodies and things like them.

Error befalls those who contradict us because they have thought that we associate with the eternal, creative essence what we associate with corrupt and changeable bodies. This is a corrupt opinion. It is not correct, nor is it admissible.

Christ is susceptible to suffering, contingency, influence, and death with respect to his humanity and his act of becoming human (*ta'annus*), but with respect to his eternity and divinity, he is intangible and imperceptible. He does not suffer, nor does he die, just like the material body to which all existence (i.e. the universe) is united, like the soul that is united to the body, or like the fire that is united to firewood. The body is characterized by death, corruption, change, susceptibility to influence, division, separation, and the occupation of space; true being is not characterized by any of these things. Thus, the soul may not be described as having been killed or as having died, nor does it hunger or thirst. Indeed, it has been united with the corruptible, mortal body, the body that hungers and thirsts. (It is) like the fire which, even if the wood has turned to ashes and crumbles, is not characterized by death and dissolution.

(31) The analogies to this are many.

Whoever has slandered us (by claiming) that we say, 'God was killed and was crucified and died,' is ignorant of our words and unknowledgeable concerning our aim(s). If only the people would consider prudence in their expression when an error falls upon the ear of the listener. Nevertheless, metaphors and figurative expressions lead many of the people astray. Now, Scripture has described and clarified this matter—I am referring to what the Jews did to Christ—and it is a matter that you (pl.) have already learned from the books of your forefathers. If that were not the case, then we would (need to) clarify and explain it.

You are one of the people who say, 'The herbs have been planted, the date palm has grown tall, and the tree has borne fruit.' But in reality, the herbs have not been planted, the date palm has not grown tall, and the tree has not borne fruit. Rather, God, the Exalted One, is the planter of the herbs, and he is the one who causes the date palms to grow tall and the tree to bear fruit. Despite this, the figurative expressions in people's speech are many in number. As they say, 'The sword has killed him.' The intended meaning of that statement is 'God killed him and put him to death.' And they say, 'The food and drink is good.' By that they mean to say, 'God made its form and colour good.'

Thus, whoever says, 'Christ ate and drank and died,' believes that the body that was united to him truly ate and truly drank and truly was killed. That body is Christ's body. The attributes apply to the one who has taken on a material body (*al-mutajassim*) (in so far as he is) in the body. I say, 'Socrates has become ill.' What I mean by this is that his body was changed as a result of his natural actions. However, the soul of Socrates did not become ill, nor did it change. The attributes always apply to the

bodily state of being (*al-dhāt al-mutajassim*). In the same way, the attributes apply to every composite, union, or society of different things. Indeed, all states of being come to be characterized by the states of being with which they have become united, com-posed, or combined. As we say, ‘Plato has come to know and to understand.’ We mean by this that it was through his soul that he came to know, and that it was his soul that possessed the knowledge, because the body, on account of the fact that it is a body, is not capable of knowledge or understanding, nor is it (self-)animated. It is just like stone, wood, iron, and all other material bodies. This is just like our statement, ‘Plato ate.’ When we say this we mean that his body received some food in place of what was discharged from it. Indeed, the soul does not eat, nor is it characterized by the act of eating. However, the attributes always apply to the totality of Plato’s person in so far as they may be clarified¹⁰⁹ and explained.

Thus, we say that Christ is the Creator (*al-Khāliq*), the Provider (*al-Rāziq*), the All-Living (*al-Hayy*), and the All-Knowing (*al-‘Ālim*), because he is God.¹¹⁰ And we say that Christ ate and drank, was killed and died, because he is human. (These) two attributes together apply to Christ just as they applied to Plato and Socrates.