

The Orthodox Christology of St Severus of Antioch

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St Severus of Antioch is one of the great Fathers of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. In the decades after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD it was he, more than any other theologian, who expressed most forcefully and clearly the Orthodox Christology of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. He grew up in the confused environment of the Church produced by Chalcedon and intermittently exacerbated by imperial persecution of those who rejected the decisions of that council. Yet despite his opposition to Chalcedon he always remained as tolerant and irenic as possible, being willing even to accept the phrase 'in two natures' as long as the union of Divinity and humanity in Christ was confessed. Yet the Eastern Orthodox have accused St Severus of being both a Nestorian and a Eutychian and the latter Eastern Orthodox councils have anathematised him together with St Dioscorus.

The actual teachings of St Severus have become unjustly obscure, both among the Eastern Orthodox and even the Oriental Orthodox, who should value him more. Yet his manifest reliance and dependence on the teaching of St Cyril of Alexandria, and the clarity of his thought, should make him a useful exemplar of the Christology of the Oriental Orthodox. The Christological teachings of the Eastern Orthodox are widely known and published, but in this time of ecumenical dialogue it seems that most of the Oriental Orthodox Christology that Eastern Orthodox learn is derived from second-hand and erroneous accounts that twist and distort what Oriental Orthodox have always believed. The teachings of St Severus, answering many of the same objections as are heard today, are an antidote to such misinformation and promote the dialogue between the Churches.

St Severus was born in Sozopolis in Pisidia in 465 AD. He came from a wealthy family and was sent to Alexandria to study. He continued his studies in Beirut where he came under the influence of a group of Christian students. He began to study the writings of Sts Gregory of Nazianzen and Basil and at some time in this period he was baptised.

After his baptism his outlook became increasingly ascetical and he spent much of his time in Church. Finally, after he had qualified as a lawyer, he decided to become a monk in Jerusalem. Travelling into the desert of Eleutheropolis he sought a more ascetic way of life, but illness and the persuasion of his friends led him to enter the monastery of Romanus. He shared out his property among his brothers, gave his share to the poor and devoted himself to the monastic life near the town of Maiuma.

Severus was already committed to opposing the council of Chalcedon. Maiuma had been the episcopal seat of Peter the Iberian, one of the bishops who had consecrated Timothy Aelurus, and Severus was part of this tradition of opposition. He rejected the Henoticon of Zeno, which was an imperial attempt at conciliation between the pro and anti-Chalcedonian parties, because it dealt with the stumbling block of Chalcedon by ignoring it.

His criticism of Chalcedon was never based on the acceptance in any form of the heresy of Eutyches. Indeed in his work, *Philalathes*, or the *Lover of Truth*, he explained that,

*Had it confessed hypostatic union, the Council would have confessed also 'one incarnate nature of God the Word', and would not have defined that the one Christ is 'in two natures' thereby dissolving the union.*¹

¹ Philalathes, p187 quoted in Handbook of Source Materials, p214, W.G. Young

Severus was sent to Constantinople and wrote his first major work there in 508 AD. While in the capital he became known to the Emperor Anastasius who had greater sympathy with the anti-Chalcedonians than with the pro-Chalcedonians led by Patriarch Macedonius. In 511 Patriarch Macedonius was replaced by Timothy, and then in 512, after a synod assembled by the Emperor in Sidon, the Patriarch Flavian was ejected because he would not anathematise Chalcedon and Severus was consecrated Patriarch in his place.

In his enthronement address Severus affirmed Nicaea, Constantinople and Ephesus. He also affirmed the Henoticon of Zeno as an Orthodox document, but he also explicitly anathematised Chalcedon, the Tome of Leo, Nestorius and Eutyches, Diodore and Theodore of Tarsus. In 514 his Synod anathematised Chalcedon and the Tome while explaining the Henoticon as annulling Chalcedon.

All of this activity gives the lie to the prevalent opinion that in 451 AD the Oriental Orthodox went quietly into exile and schism. Here we see that the Church was alive with those who opposed Chalcedon, and it was those who supported it who found themselves on the defensive.

Severus continued his ascetic manner of life even as Patriarch. He sent away the many cooks from the episcopal residence and demolished the baths that previous bishops had built. In his homilies in the cathedral he constantly warned his people against attending the races and theatres.

But in 518 AD Emperor Anastasius died and the new emperor Justin immediately ordered the arrest and punishment of Patriarch Severus. He managed to escape to Egypt with some of his bishops while other anti-Chalcedonians were sent into a difficult exile. While in Egypt, moving from monastery to monastery, avoiding his enemies, he wrote some of his most important works and corresponded widely and continuously.

In 530 AD the emperor Justinian eased the persecution which the anti-Chalcedonians had been suffering. In 532 AD he even attempted to reconcile the two parties in the Church by calling a conference in Constantinople. Finally, in 534 AD Anthimus, an anti-Chalcedonian, became Patriarch of Constantinople and Theodosius, another anti-Chalcedonian and friend of Severus, became Patriarch of Alexandria. Once more it seemed that the anti-Chalcedonian movement might gain the ascendancy in the Church. This so alarmed the pro-Chalcedonians that they exercised all of their diplomatic skills to bring the opinion of Agapetus of Rome to bear on the emperor. The Emperor Justinian was engaged in efforts to recapture Rome and the West and sacrificed Anthimus for the pro-Chalcedonian Menas. In a synod held in Constantinople in 536 AD Severus and his colleagues were condemned. He was accused of being both a Nestorian and a Eutychian, his books were ordered to be burned and he was sentenced to be banished. He managed to escape from Constantinople with the help of the Empress Theodora and he returned to Egypt. There after a light illness he fell asleep. He was 73 years old.

In the period 518-520 AD Severus engaged in a correspondence with a certain Sergius. This Sergius had been attempting to expound the Orthodox teaching about the Incarnation of Christ, but had been criticised by his local synod because he had spoken without discretion. In three letters that were sent by Severus to Sergius we can find much of the Christology of Severus presented in just such an explanatory manner as may be useful today. These letters have been recently translated and published by Dr Iain Torrance, and are well worth study. Since they are so easily obtained they will now be used as the basis for this examination of the teaching of St Severus. This essay is only an introduction to the Christology of St Severus and deliberately restricts itself to this one work, published as *Christology After Chalcedon* (Iain Torrance, The Canterbury Press, Norwich, 1988). It is not too

difficult to acquire and in a small space describes much of the teaching of St Severus, both against the Nestorians and the Eutychians.

Sergius' problem was that in opposing the Nestorian position that in Christ the Divinity and humanity were naturally separate and united only in a personal manner, he strayed too far from the truth and failed to expound the Orthodox teaching. This Sergius taught that the opposite of a natural disunity was a simple unity in which there could only be one nature, which Sergius took in the sense of *ousia* or essence, and therefore created a new Christ nature which was neither essentially human or Divine. In most modern Christian's eyes this is the teaching of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. We are assumed to confess in one nature a simple and confused unity which destroys the distinction between humanity and Divinity. Severus' opposition of Sergius will clearly illustrate the fundamental difference between the 'one nature' of Sergius and the 'one incarnate nature' of Cyril and Severus.

Even a cursory glance at Severus' letters makes it abundantly clear that Severus was dependent on the thoughts and teachings of Cyril of Alexandria. In the three relatively short letters to Sergius we find more than 60 quotations from St Cyril. Many more than any other Father. Whenever Severus wants to make a point he will quote from Cyril. What does this tell us? Firstly, that Severus considered himself to be a disciple of Cyril of Alexandria. Thus we should not read into any of his teachings an anti-Cyrrilline meaning which is not justified by his complete commitment to a Cyrrilline Christology. Secondly, that the writings of Severus should be read in continuity with those of Cyril and not as though they taught something different. Any obscure points in the teaching of Severus should be explained by the teaching of Cyril and not assumed to be at odds with it.

There are a number of Christological points which need to be examined in the writings of Severus. It is important to consider the accusation that he taught both Nestorianism and Eutychianism. How could this be so? If Nestorianism teaches the separation of the natures in Christ and Eutychianism the confusion, then how could Severus possibly be guilty of teaching both heresies? Such an understanding, though unjustified, may have arisen among his opponents because of the phrase 'of two natures' which is key to the Oriental Orthodox Christology. Among the Oriental Orthodox it describes both the continuing distinction between the Divinity and humanity of Christ, whilst confessing the real and perfect union between them. In the hands of those who sought Severus punishment and exile it was twisted to stand for a pre-existent humanity and Divinity coming together in a confused unity, therefore a perceived Nestorianism and Eutychianism. Thus we need to examine carefully the teaching of Severus about the humanity and Divinity of Christ, as well as the union between them.

Let us first consider the accusation of Eutychianism. What can be found in these letters of Severus to refute such a charge? Almost immediately as the first letter begins, Severus writes to Sergius:

Know, therefore, that professing the natural particularity of the natures from which there is the One Christ is not just recently determined by us.²

Here Severus indicates that Sergius' error lay in supposing that union must mean the extinction of each nature's particular existence. More than that, Severus places himself within the Orthodox tradition which had confessed the continuity of the natures in Christ. He continues this passage immediately with a substantial and important quotation from Cyril:

21. Torrance, **Christology After Chalcedon**, Canterbury Press, 1988, p147

For even if the Only-Begotten Son of God, incarnate and inhominate, is said by us to be one, he is not confused because of this, as he seems to those people, nor has the nature of the Word passed over into the nature of the flesh, nor indeed has the nature of the flesh passed into that which is his, but while each one of them continues together in the particularity that belongs to the nature, and is thought of in accordance with the account which has just been given by us, the inexpressible and ineffable union shows us one nature of the son, but as I have said, incarnate.³

The quotation from Cyril explains the meaning of the sentence from Severus. This passage shows us that Severus is dependent on Cyril for his Christology and that when he speaks of the particularity of the natures in Christ he is summarising the quotation which he then provides from Cyril. This in turn teaches that the humanity of Christ continues to be humanity and the Divinity of Christ continues to be Divinity. Therefore the concept of 'one incarnate nature' cannot and should not, in Cyril or in Severus, be taken to stand for the extinction or confusion of either the humanity or Divinity.

Severus makes this absolutely explicit by stating:

When the Doctor has confessed one nature of God the Word, who is incarnate, he says that each of them continues together and is understood in the particularity that belongs to the nature.⁴

This makes clear that Severus teaches that the one nature of God the Word incarnate should be understood as allowing the two natures to continue to exist in the union of natures and to continue to preserve their distinctions and characteristics. There is no sense in which he teaches a Eutychian confusion of the humanity and Divinity.

Another quotation from Cyril is provided to illustrate what Severus means by the continuing distinctions of the humanity and Divinity of Christ:

Therefore let us recognise that even if the body which was born at Bethlehem is not the same, that is, as far as natural quality is concerned, as the Word which is from God and the Father, yet nevertheless it became his, and did not belong to another man beside the Son. But the Word incarnate is to be considered one Son and Christ and Lord.⁵

This is a key quotation because it expresses both Severus' confession of the continuing distinction and difference between the humanity born at Bethlehem and the eternal and divine Word, as well as his commitment to a union which makes one Christ without a confusion of these natures. The body born at Bethlehem was never the body of a man beside the Word or with the Word. From the moment of conception this humanity was the humanity of the Word, distinct from the divinity but never separated or divided, therefore, without suffering any change the humanity and the divinity are made one in the incarnation.

Severus, in his own words, writes to Sergius that:

..particularity implies the otherness of natures of those things which have come together in union, and the difference lies in natural quality. For the one is uncreated, but the other created....Nevertheless, while this difference and the particularity of the natures, from which comes the one Christ, still remains without confusion, it is said that the Word of Life was both seen and touched.⁶

³ *ibid*, p148

⁴ *ibid*, p148

⁵ *ibid*, p148

⁶ *ibid*, p148

How could it be expressed any clearer that Severus did not even conceive of the humanity and Divinity of Christ being confused in any way. The 'difference...remains without confusion', he confesses. Exactly the same teaching as steadfastly maintained by Cyril before him, and not at all to be compared with the teaching of Eutyches, however that is described. The union is confessed with the teaching that the Divine Word was seen and touched by the Apostles, but it is clear that this union does not confuse the continuing distinction between the humanity and Divinity.

Indeed Severus is well aware of the heresy of those who confused the natures in Christ. He writes to Sergius of their madness and he refutes any sense in which his teaching of the union of the humanity and Divinity in Christ could be compared with the confusion of natures of the 'synousiasts'. Nor does he feel the need, as they have, to 'cure evil with evil', that is the evil of Nestorianism with the evil of Eutychianism.

To make this absolutely clear Severus quotes again from Cyril, who writes in his reply to a critic:

There is no share in any blame that one should recognise, for example, that the flesh is one thing in its own nature, apart from the Word which sprang from God and the Father, and that the Only-Begotten is another again, with respect to his own nature. Nevertheless to recognise these things is not to divide the natures after the union.⁷

These words should be taken as though written by Severus himself. He is quoting them with complete agreement. There is no blame, he says in Cyril's words, there is no blame associated with recognising that in Christ the humanity and Divinity are different things. The flesh is one thing, according to nature, the Divinity another, according to nature. Here is a clear expression of the Christology of the Oriental Orthodox. The recognition of the difference between the humanity and Divinity of Christ in no wise detracts from the confession of the true and perfect union of these natures. Both of these Christological facts are true. The humanity and Divinity retain their integrity, their distinctions, but the union of them drives out division. There is no room for Nestorianism or Eutychianism.

Severus proceeds to explain rather more about how he conceives of the union taking place:

Let us make an enquiry of the divinity and humanity. They are not only different in everything but they are removed from each other and distinct as well. But when the union is professed from the two of them, the difference, again, in the quality of the natures from which there is the One Christ is not suppressed, but in conjunction by hypostasis division is driven out.⁸

Here is the key to understanding Oriental Orthodox Christology: the difference remains, division is driven out and the union takes place hypostatically. No-one should allow any interpretation of the Christology of the Oriental Orthodox which mutilates this clear and straight-forward definition. If someone suggests that a confusion of natures is taught, then they are mistaken. It is clear that Severus, and all of us with him, confess the continuing difference of these natures. If someone suggests that we teach that these natures have their own independent existence then they are mistaken. It is clear that Severus, and all of us with him, confess a real and perfect union in which there is no division. And if others should suggest that we teach a mixture or confusion of essences or ousia then they are again mistaken, because Severus, and all of us with him confess a hypostatic union.

⁷ *ibid*, p149

⁸ *ibid*, p149

But this teaching should not be understood as something new, or something that originated after Chalcedon had confused the unity of the Church. Severus indicates his continuity and agreement with Cyril by quoting immediately from him:

*I too allow that there is a great difference or distinction between humanity and Divinity. For these things which were named are seen to be other, according to the mode of how they are, and they are not like each other in anything. But when the mystery which is in Christ has come for us into the middle, the principle of union does not ignore the difference but it removes the division; not because it confuses with each other or mixes the natures, but because the Word of God has shared in flesh and blood, thus again the Son too is understood and named as One.*⁹

Oriental Orthodox should not be afraid to admit the real and absolute difference between humanity and Divinity. Not only is this the teaching of Severus, but it is the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria. The mystery of the incarnation is that in the union of humanity and Divinity the difference between these natures remains while division is driven out. Here in this quotation it is also clear that Severus and Cyril allow no confusion of these natures, or a mixture. The union is not like that. It is a real and perfect union that preserves the real difference between the humanity and Divinity.

So where does Severus dispute with Nestorius and those who divide Christ? It is certainly not in the recognition of the continuing difference between the humanity and Divinity. Rather, as Severus explains:

*We confess the difference and the particularity and the otherness of the natures from which Christ is, for we do not quarrel about names, but we confess the particularity which lies in natural quality, and not that which will be set in parts, each one existing independently.*¹⁰

So Severus makes clear that the argument with the supporters of Nestorius lies not in naming the natures of humanity and Divinity, nor in confessing their continuing difference and otherness. The argument lies in whether or not the union which is taught allows each nature to have its own separate and independent existence, or whether, as Cyril of Alexandria teaches, we confess a union in which these real and different natures are united such that Christ is One, even as the Nicene Creed professes.

It should be clear by now that the Oriental Orthodox, through the teaching of Severus and Cyril before him, and indeed through many other Fathers, teach as a fundamental Christological fact that the natures are different and retain this difference even in their perfect union.

Once again Severus is echoing Cyril's own words, since he had written years before:

*It is not right that we should make a division into an independent diversity, so that they should become separate and apart from each other; rather we ought to bring them together to undivided union. For the Word became flesh, according to the words of John.*¹¹

This independent diversity is what we should reject. Not the fact of the diversity of the natures, the humanity and Divinity, which are completely other and different from each other. The heart of our Christology, indeed of our Orthodox Christology, is that these two distinct and different natures have been united in a union that has no division even whilst there is no confusion.

We do not refuse to confess the difference, God forbid! But we flee from this, that we should divide the one Christ in a duality of natures after the union. For if he is divided, the properties of each

⁹ *ibid*, p150

¹⁰ *ibid*, p150

¹¹ *ibid*, p150

*one of the natures are divided at the same time with him, and what is its own will cling to each one of them. But when a hypostatic union is professed, of which the fulfilment is that from two there is one Christ without confusion, one person, one hypostasis, one nature belonging to the Word incarnate.*¹²

What Severus, and Cyril, strive so hard to prevent is a division of Christ such that there is a human and a God. This is the essence of Nestorianism. In this passage Severus shows the strength of his feeling that we must absolutely confess that the humanity and Divinity of Christ are different things. There is no room for a Eutychian confusion of humanity and Divinity. This recognition of the difference of the nature is not what we object to. What we object to is creating a duality of natures, which does not mean the destruction of the difference between them, rather it means setting up two independent centres of existence, the humanity and the Divinity, and these independent centres of existence destroy the union. It is a hypostatic union that ensures the real union of these different natures. This passage makes clear that firstly, a hypostatic union does not introduce confusion between the humanity and the Divinity; secondly, that 'one nature belonging to the Word incarnate' does not mean either a confused divine/human nature nor does it mean that the humanity is swallowed up by the Divinity; thirdly, the passage makes plain that the union is one in which the different natures have their differences preserved but within one concrete existence, that of the Incarnate Christ, and not preserved independently as the Son of God and a man united in some external manner. The 'duality of natures' which is rejected is not the reality of the humanity and Divinity, but a division between them which destroys the union and which makes One Christ of the two without confusion.

It was Cyril, as Severus quotes, who had said that:

*The properties of the Word became properties of manhood, and those of manhood, properties of the Word. For thus one Christ and Son and Lord is understood.*¹³

This is Cyril speaking, Cyril the great Orthodox christologian. He can hardly be accused of confusing the natures of humanity and Divinity, nor of failing to confess the continuing distinction between them. Yet he describes here how in the union of natures in Christ there is a communication of properties, without confusion, so that we may truly say that God was seen and heard and touched, that God suffered and died. Thus when Christ walked on the water this was neither a human action, since it is not human to walk on water, nor was it divine, since it is not of God to walk, but it is an evidence of the union of humanity and Divinity, without confusion such that we see always One Christ and not God and a man with him.

What could Severus object to in the teaching of those who supported Chalcedon? It was not that they confessed the reality and difference between the humanity and divinity. It was not that they refused to confuse the natures in Christ. But Severus did impress upon both Sergius in his letters to him, and to his own followers that:

*When we anathematise those who say Emmanuel has two natures after the union, and speak of the activities and properties of these, we are not saying this as subjecting to anathema the fact of, or naming, natures, or activities, or properties, but speaking of two natures after the union, and because consequently those natures...are divided completely and in everything.*¹⁴

We should object, then, with Severus, to those who divide Christ and not those who name the natures of which Christ is. There is no error in stating that Christ is of humanity and divinity, and that in union these differences persist. But there is error in setting up a

¹² *ibid*, p151

¹³ *ibid*, p151

¹⁴ *ibid*, p151

humanity and a divinity with their own separate activities as though there were Christ the man and the Word of God, each perfect in a simple humanity or divinity and only united in some external manner. Following Severus' argument we see that it is not the saying that Emmanuel has two natures which is condemned, but saying that he has these two natures and then describing their activities separately, as though there was God the Word acting as God in heaven and Christ the man acting as man on earth. Severus allows the naming of the natures. We can and must confess that Christ is human and divine, but we must not allow this Orthodox confession to be perverted such that we describe a man and the Word of God separately. It is God the Word who is this man Jesus.

*We also recognise a variety of utterances: for some are proper to God, while others are human, but one Word incarnate spoke both the former and the latter.*¹⁵

This is a further explication of the Orthodox Christology of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. This simple sentence describes the continuing difference of the natures of which Christ is, whilst confessing that the union is such that the human and Divine utterances alike belong to God the Word. Not that the human utterances become mixed or confused, but they belong to God and are of God the Word even though they are uttered by His humanity. The divinity belongs to God the Word from eternity because it is his own nature. The humanity has become truly and completely his own in the incarnation and because of His love for us, and therefore we may truly say that God the Word was seen, and heard and touched. Yet without the confusion or mixture of the divinity which was his from eternity and the humanity which he united to himself in time.

This is what Severus means when he says:

*For how will anyone divide walking upon the water? For to run upon the sea is foreign to the human nature, but it is not proper to the divine nature to use bodily feet. Therefore that action is of the incarnate Word, to whom belongs at the same time divine character and human, indivisibly.*¹⁶

This is why Severus criticises those who try to divide up the activities of Christ as though they belonged to the different natures separately and not to the incarnate Word, who is of humanity and divinity unconfusedly. There is no error in understanding that in his humanity Christ acts humanly, that speaking and eating and all such things are of humanity, and are not divine. But in the union of humanity and divinity in Christ, all of these things belong to God the Word who acts divinely in union with his humanity. The error that Severus opposes is the setting up of two separate centres of activity such that there is a man with God rather than God incarnate.

*He who confesses one nature incarnate of God the Word, and teaches an unconfused union, does not deny awareness of the difference and particularity which lies in natural quality of the the natures from which there is the one Christ.*¹⁷

Surely Severus has shown clearly enough that there is not one iota of sympathy in his teaching for those who either deny the reality of the humanity and divinity in Christ. Nor is there any sense in which he allows these perfect, real and complete natures to suffer diminution, confusion or mixture. Surely it is clear that it is the firm and decided teaching of the Oriental Orthodox Churches that the natures of humanity and divinity have a real, perfect, unconfused and continuing existence in union in the one hypostasis of the Word of God. That these natures in union mean that God the Word is truly incarnate, that he is really fully God and fully man.

¹⁵ *ibid*, p153

¹⁶ *ibid*, p154

¹⁷ *ibid*, p155

It has often been presented as though opposition to the council of Chalcedon, and to the Tome of Leo, must of necessity be caused by some heretical impulse that confuses the natures of which Christ is, or dissolves the humanity in the Divinity, or teaches a heavenly humanity that is fundamentally not consubstantial with us. But the Fathers of the Oriental Orthodox Churches have never wandered from the faith of St Cyril or St Athanasius, and have always understood that if Christ were not fully God He would have no power to save us, and if He were not fully man then it would not be man who was saved. When Severus opposed Chalcedon and Leo it was because he believed them to have failed to adequately safeguard the Orthodox Christology of St Cyril and St Athanasius, not at all because he wished to introduce some christological novelty.

For instance, Severus criticises the Tome of Leo, not because Leo of Rome had sought to counter the errors of Eutyches, but because he believed that it contained itself some christological defects. After discussing the union of Divinity and humanity in Christ he speaks thus:

It is possible to see that those things which are contained in the Tome of Leo go clearly against these things, and I quote them:

*'For each one of the forms does what belongs to it. The Word doing what belongs to the Word, and the body fulfilling those things which belong to the body, and the one of them is radiant with wonders, but the other falls under insults.'*¹⁸

Now it cannot be said that Severus failed to discern and distinguish the real difference between the humanity and Divinity of Christ. Neither did he ever fail to confess the reality and perfection of these natures in Christ. Therefore if he condemns this passage in the Tome it is not because he himself teaches heresy. In the eyes of Severus, his colleagues, his followers, and those before and after him this passage seemed to teach that the reality of the humanity and Divinity of Christ had their own centres of existence. The Word is set in parallel with the flesh, as though the Word was one centre and the flesh another. This passage seemed to be presenting a doctrine too much like the Nestorian Word and a man with Him.

Whether or not Leo meant to teach this is another question. But it is a fact that the Oriental Orthodox of the 5th and 6th centuries certainly believed that Leo was teaching exactly such a thing. Indeed the position was made more complicated by the agreement of Nestorius with the teaching of the Tome, and later by the celebration of a feast of Nestorius by some of those bishops who had welcomed the Tome at Chalcedon. It looked to many people as though all of this was of a piece and was nothing more than the propagation of Nestorianism by other means, and under the pretence of a respect for St Cyril.

Severus described his opinion of this passage from Leo in the following words,

*For if each form or nature does those things which are its own, those things are of a bastard partnership and of a relationship of friendship, such as a master's taking on himself the things which are performed by a servant, or vice-versa, a servant's being glorified with the outstanding possessions of a master, while those things which are not properties of human nature are ascribed to him out of a loving friendship. For he is a man clad with God, who in this way makes use of a power which is not his own.*¹⁹

The question in Severus' mind is not so much how may we divide the activities into human ones, Divine ones, and others which are of a mixed quality, since although he recognises the natural quality of humanity and Divinity he also confesses that all of the

¹⁸ *ibid*, p154

¹⁹ *ibid*, p154

activities of Christ are always in reality both human and Divine. Not a mixture at all but the activities, whether human or Divine, belong always to the incarnate Word. He asks 'who' is doing these things?, 'who' do they belong to? and finds the categorisation of activities by Leo, and then even more the owning of each activity being described in the two centres of humanity and Divinity, to tend dangerously towards the division of Christ. The scriptures, and the Orthodox Fathers, taught that Christ, the Divine Word, *participated* in humanity. His humanity belongs to Him through His incarnation. The activities of His humanity, while being perfectly human, nevertheless belong to the Divine Word who has become incarnate. This sense of ownership, of participation, is missing in Leo's rather clinical and abstract division of activities, honour and insult. If the humanity in isolation suffers the insult then it becomes harder to understand how, in Leo's thought, we may say that God suffers.

This is not a criticism of Leo's Tome, which has had many defenders over the last 1400 years, but in relation to the Orthodox Christology of Severus it is merely an attempt to show that in this point, as in many others that Severus made against Leo's Tome and Chalcedon, the desire was not to promote any Eutychian heresy, but rather to counter a perceived Nestorianism.

Severus not only taught against the Synousiast or Eutychian heresy and the perceived Nestorianism of Leo and the Chalcedonians. He taught positively about the union of natures in Christ, and this element of his Christology should also be briefly examined. Severus' teaching about the union of natures in Christ remains as firmly based on the Christology of St Cyril as the rest of his teaching. Thus he quotes Cyril,

*'When the mystery of Christ is brought into the middle for us, the principle of the union on the one hand recognises difference, but on the other hand rejects division, while neither confusing nor mixing the natures with each other. But with the Word of God becoming a partaker of flesh and blood, one Son is understood and named in this way as well.'*²⁰

Once more we must understand that the union is of a type that recognises the difference between those elements of which it is constituted. But it is also a union that prohibits division. This rejection of division is not caused by a confusion or mixture of the natures, since this would be a failure to recognise the continuing difference. There is a continuing and dynamic interplay between these two features of the union. Continuing difference on the one hand and a rejection of division on the other. For many of the opponents of Severus and the Oriental Orthodox this first aspect was as far as they read in St Cyril's own words. And in failing to read carefully they understood only that St Cyril taught a continuing difference, and thus claimed him as a champion of their own position. But they also exposed their teaching, as far as Severus was concerned, to the criticism that they fundamentally failed to understand the union and merely expressed the continuing perfection of humanity and Divinity without really teaching the union at all as St Cyril understood it. From Severus' point of view there was little difference between the avowed Nestorianism of Theodore, Diodore, Theodoret and Nestorius, and the neo-Nestorianism of those who rejected the Cyrilline theology of 'one incarnate nature of the Word'.

St Cyril continues, and Severus is also most insistent, that it is through the Word of God becoming a partaker of flesh and blood that we see the one Son. The humanity of Christ is thus shown to be not merely something that he has acquired or which he owns, but something in and through which the Divine Son of God participates in human existence. He has become man without change or diminution of his Divinity, not merely associated himself with humanity in some way.

²⁰ *ibid*, p171

The means by which this real, complete and perfect union of humanity and Divinity has taken place, without change, confusion, separation or division, is, in the words of St Cyril, quoted once more by Severus:

'..completely inexpressible and not known by any man who lives, but to God who alone knows everything'.²¹

Nevertheless, Severus agrees with St Cyril that:

'The fact of union is accomplished in many ways. For example, when men are divided in affection and opinion and are thinking at variance with each other, they are said to be united through reconciliation of affection as they remove their differences out of the centre. Again for example, we say that those things which cleave to each other or come together in different ways, whether by juxtaposition or mingling or mixture, are united. Therefore when we say that the Word of God was united to our nature, the mode of union is recognised to be above human comprehension for it is not like one of those ways which were mentioned.'²²

So we learn that Severus, and the Oriental Orthodox, do not teach that the union of humanity and Divinity in Christ are united in any of these ways. We find an explicit rejection of juxtaposition, mingling or mixture, but a confession of an incomprehensible to man union which removes division while preserving distinctions, such that the one Christ is both truly and perfectly man, truly and perfectly God, without confusion or change damaging either.

Severus writes thus against John the Grammarian,

Christ is known to be one from both, which came together into a natural union. He is one prosopon, one hypostasis and one nature (physis) of the Word incarnate, in the same way as man is one, who is made up of body and soul. He is one not by a harmonious association of two persons. That which operates is one, namely God the Word incarnate: He performs the things that befit God as well as the things that befit man, the flesh not being alien to the God-befitting operation. The Word did not work the Divine miracles without being incarnate, neither was the Word external to bodily and human operations and sufferings. For he was incarnate. He who in His nature was without body, became in the dispensation with body, having united to Himself in His Person flesh possessing a rational soul. Therefore in His flesh, which is subject to suffering, He is said to have suffered, ascribing to Himself the passions of the flesh which He united to Himself naturally.²³

Severus is clear that the union is of two different elements, the pre-existent divinity and the humanity, and Christ is one reality from two real elements, neither of which is lost or confused in the union. But his stress is always that we see Christ as one incarnate Person, so that even though he suffers in His flesh, nevertheless it is God who suffers because it is the flesh of God. For Severus the reality of the incarnation is completely lost if the humanity and Divinity are not real, and are not really united. And if this quotation sound as though Severus might be allowing that the divinity suffers in some sense, then we should heed his message to Julian, who taught that the humanity of Christ was always impassible,

God the Word became incarnate and was made man by uniting to Himself in His Person flesh possessing a rational soul. Therefore, when He endured in reality undeserved suffering of body and soul in the body which was prone to suffer, He continued to be without suffering in the Godhead. So it was not like us who, without wanting to, suffer as men, that He endured passions, but of His own free

²¹ *ibid*, p173

²² *ibid*, p172

²³ Against John the Grammarian, p286 quoted in H.S.M. p216

choice. And again, it is not that He did not suffer, but that He accepted in a real way, without sin, the suffering of humanity.²⁴

Severus is therefore absolutely committed to the reality of the humanity in Christ, united without division or confusion to the divinity, such that there is One Christ. Indeed Severus criticises the Eutychian Sergius, with whom he corresponded, for suggesting that allowing the reality of the humanity and Divinity is necessarily the same as confessing a Nestorian juxtaposition.

*'How can you charge this inexpressible and truly divine union which the Word of God has miraculously accomplished, with being that union taught by Nestorius which is a conjunction by relationship, and believe that we are required to speak of two natures unless we confess, as you say, that at one time Christ had one ousia? But this is nothing other than a real confusion of ousia....For you think it is impossible to say that he is one unless he changes into one ousia, even when he is made up from two things of a different kind.'*²⁵

Yet we find that Oriental Orthodox are continually being accused of reducing Christ to one ousia, either the Divine or some mixture of humanity and Divinity. But here Severus refuses to accept that his teaching requires or contains any such reduction. This is due, primarily to the failure of the Eastern Orthodox, and Western Christianity generally, to appreciate that oneness, or union, comes about in different ways, and that to speak of 'one incarnate nature' is not at all to confess one simple nature which must be either human, Divine, or a confusion. St Cyril is quoted by Severus, from his second letter to Succensus,

*'For it is not the case that "one" is truly predicated only of things which are simple in nature, but it may also be predicated of those which have come together in composition, an example being the situation of man, composed from soul and body...Therefore those who say that, if the Word incarnate is one nature it follows in everything and in every respect that there will be confusion and mixture, as if the nature of man were decreased and stolen away, speak needlessly, for it is not decreased, nor as they say, stolen away. For it suffices for the complete demonstration of the fact that the Word became man to say that he was incarnate.'*²⁶

It is something of a mystery that were many Eastern Orthodox to be presented with the preceding paragraph, describing the union of natures in Christ as a 'composition', without attribution to St Cyril, it would be rejected as heretical and Eutychian. Indeed it has been the case that ordinary Eastern Orthodox, when presented by such texts, have declared St Cyril to be merely one father among many whose teachings have no particular weight. Yet this passage completely describes Oriental Orthodox Christology. The union is not a mixture, nor is it simply an external personal union, but it is a composition such that the concrete reality of the incarnate Christ is human and Divine, even while the constituents of that reality remain perfect and different.

But it is not the Divine nature of the Word which is composite. The Divinity remains divinity and the Godhead has not become a quarternity with four hypostases. It is the hypostasis of the Word which is composite, composed in the incarnation of perfect and unconfused human and Divine reality and being. Thus we speak, with St Cyril and St Severus, not of 'one nature or hypostasis of the Word', as though it was made up of simple humanity, Divinity or a mixture, but of 'one incarnate hypostasis of the Word' since it is because of and in the incarnation that the one Christ is both human and Divine.

Thus St Cyril is quoted again and again from a variety of sources,

²⁴ Against Julian, p34, quoted in H.S.M. p215

²⁵ *ibid*, p173

²⁶ *ibid*, p174

'It is not the case that in everything and from every respect only what is simple and of one type is called "one", but also those compounded from two or from many things of different types.'

*'In his own will he became man, and without damage in any way he preserved the glory of his nature unchanged in himself, but took up manhood according to the economy. And he is understood one Son from two, a divine and human nature, which have run and come together to one, inexpressibly and in explicably composed to union, and in such a way that cannot be understood.'*²⁷

It is clear that when St Cyril speaks of one nature he is not speaking of one essence or ousia. Indeed in later times the Oriental Orthodox always used St Cyril's phrase 'one incarnate nature of the Word' with the addition 'or hypostasis' so that it was clear that they were describing one concrete reality, Christ who is both human and Divine by composition, rather than describing the underlying substance of humanity or divinity which remain what they always have been. 'One incarnate nature' says that this Christ is both human and Divine, it does not say that humanity and Divinity have been confused so as to become some third 'Christ nature'.

Therefore St Severus rejects the teaching that Christ is two natures, not because he does not believe that Christ is perfectly human and perfectly Divine, indeed it must be clear that he believes in these perfections completely. But for him, and for the Oriental Orthodox, nature means, in many contexts, more than 'underlying substance or essence' and means a concrete and independent example of such an underlying essence. Indeed Oriental Orthodox are not happy with the idea that an ousia or essence can ever exist except as a nature, or concrete reality. It is not humanity that is harmed if I fall over, but this human, this concrete example of the human ousia. Thus Christ is 'one incarnate nature', one reality, but composite. He is 'of' or 'from' both humanity and Divinity, in the sense that these are the underlying substances of which the one reality is unconfusedly composed, but in the ears of St Cyril and St Severus, 'in two natures', without further explanation, sounds dangerously as though it confesses two independent realities, each existing separately, and is thus a variety of Nestorianism.

He explains,

*'For the Word himself, who had existence before the ages and is forever together with the Father, and is seen in his own hypostasis and is simple in ousia, became composite in the economy, and that word "incarnate" ensures that it is understood that the flesh endowed with a reasonable soul existed in relationship to the Word himself, and was not independently completed in its own hypostasis.'*²⁸

Thus, 'one incarnate nature' stands for the Divine Word with complete and perfect humanity united to him as his own humanity, and not for a new type of substance that is neither human nor Divine.

Since the Christology of the Oriental Orthodox is so manifestly Cyrilline and in accordance with the Fathers one wonders why there is such a failure to understand these things on the part of those who have separated themselves from us. Yet the Oriental Orthodox Churches have suffered centuries of misunderstanding and abuse. Even today there are many Christians whose aim is to highlight as widely as possible our supposed heresies. Publications have been produced with titles such as 'The Errors of the Monophysite Heretics', and websites exist to promote a false explanation of our Christology. Almost every encyclopaedia propogates such errors and includes throw away lines which suggest that we teach the humanity of Christ was dissolved or swallowed up in his divinity.

²⁷ *ibid*, p174

²⁸ *ibid*, p176

His Holiness Pope Shenouda III has been criticised by some Eastern Orthodox, who feel they have made some great discovery by reporting him as stating that the body of Christ is a Divine body. They fail completely to understand, firstly that His Holiness is not at all ignorant of theology, and does not speak what he does not mean. Secondly, and even more importantly, they show how far from the teaching and witness of St Cyril some have strayed, because St Cyril himself is quoted by St Severus as teaching,

*'Therefore we say that the body of Christ is divine because it is the body of God, and is brilliant with inexpressible glory, incorruptible, holy and life-giving. But that it was changed into the nature of divinity, no-one of the holy Fathers thought or said, nor do we affirm this.'*²⁹

This failure illustrates the historic weakness of some Christologies, which fail to answer satisfactorily the question, 'whose is this flesh?', and satisfy themselves with a cataloguing and division of human and divine elements and behaviours. Yet the question is key to the Christology of St Cyril, St Severus, and the Oriental Orthodox.

St Cyril writes,

*'Therefore let us acknowledge that the body which was born at Bethlehem, even if it is not the same - I mean in natural quality - with the Word which is from the Father, yet it became his, and not of some other son beside him. But one Son and Christ and Lord is understood even when the Word became incarnate.'*³⁰

This is the heart of Oriental Orthodox Christology. The humanity of Christ is not the same as his divinity, nor does it ever cease to be completely other than his divinity. But in the incarnation, and because of his love and the exercise of his will it has become truly his own humanity.

Again, in his writings against John the Grammarian, St Severus takes plain to make clear that while the humanity is not at any time apart from the divinity, nevertheless it is a real flesh, with the properties of humanity, and Christ is called Emmanuel because of the reality of His humanity, and because He is truly God with us, unchangeably, unconfusedly.

Before the union and the incarnation, the Word was simple, not incarnate, nor composite. But when he mercifully willed in the dispensation to become man unchangeably along with being what He was, then He was called Christ and Emmanuel - the name being taken from the act - and He became one with us, by reason of the fact that He united to Himself in His Person (hypostasis) flesh which was of the same substance with us and which was animated with a rational and intelligent soul.

*The flesh did not come into being before, nor had it been formed already; but in the union with Him, it came into being inexplicably, so that conception, growth, gradual development and birth might be of the incarnate Word. On account of the essential union of the flesh, for which it is natural to be conceived and formed, to grow and be born, though He showed it to be beyond the laws of nature because it happened from the Virgin...and from the Holy Spirit...he who calls Him Christ after the union most certainly signifies Him.*³¹

In conclusion, the Christology of St Severus is in every respect in accord with that of St Cyril. It is truly, deeply and completely Orthodox in the sense that it expresses perfectly the Christology of the Fathers of the Holy Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople and Ephesus. There is not one iota of justification for the anathemas historically raised against him by the Byzantine Orthodox, and these anathemas can only have been issued by those who had hardly read anything of his teachings. The Christology of the Oriental Orthodox Churches

²⁹ *ibid*, p180

³⁰ *ibid*, p214

³¹ Against John the Grammarian, p236, quoted in H.S.M p215

stands with St Severus and St Cyril in utterly repudiating any teaching in which the distinctions of the natures of divinity and humanity cease to exist in the incarnation, or any teaching which damages the complete and perfect reality of the humanity and divinity of which Christ is. But neither should we cease to steadfastly confess that in the incarnation, and for our salvation, the Word of God has deigned to unite, in a manner past understanding, humanity with his divinity such that even as there is no confusion or mixture, equally there is no division or separation, but we see 'One Christ' and 'One Lord' as the creed confesses. This is the meaning of 'one incarnate nature of the Word', and this must continue to be the heart of our Orthodox Christology.