

# To what extent was the Council of Chalcedon a Vindication of Proclus of Constantinople?

*Emma Mavin – December 2019*

At Christmas, in the Great Church of Constantinople in 430, “an outstanding pulpit orator”<sup>1</sup> named Proclus preached a sermon that would, within a year<sup>2</sup>, result in his Archbishop being deposed, and set in motion a train of events leading to the Council of Chalcedon in 451. At stake was a Marian title – *Theotokos* – that served as a shorthand for statements made about the nature of Christ himself. This essay attempts to explore to what extent the Council of Chalcedon was a vindication of Proclus of Constantinople.

Our knowledge of the early life of Proclus is somewhat sketchy, and birth dates have been proposed for him from 375-390<sup>3</sup>. We do know that he was the personal secretary (and ghost writer) for Archbishop Atticus of Constantinople, and was made deacon and priest under him. He was a candidate for the see after Atticus’ death, but was passed over in favour of Sisinnius, who made Proclus Bishop of Cyzicus. Proclus would never take up his throne, as the people there refused to accept him as bishop<sup>4</sup>, and instead remained in Constantinople, where he gained a reputation as a preacher. After the death of Sisinnius, Proclus was once again passed over for the archiepiscopacy, which this time went to a Syrian priest called Nestorius. It was under Nestorius that Proclus would preach his famous homily, becoming embroiled in the *Theotokos* controversy that dominated the rest of his life. After Nestorius was deposed and exiled, a new archbishop was installed, Maximian, and after his death, in 434, Proclus was made Archbishop of Constantinople. He died on 12 July 446.

Debates about the nature of Christ had dominated theological thought for centuries, as first Gnostics, and then Arians and Apollinarians had forced the Church to state what it did (and did not) believe about Christ. These “agonized and complex”<sup>5</sup> debates over Christ’s deity and his humanity had led to a statement that he was “true God...become man” at the Council of Nicaea in 325. The argument over the title *Theotokos* “signalled that new and more dangerous divisions over the very nature of Christ and the incarnation”<sup>6</sup> had arisen, questioning how Christ’s divine and human

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<sup>1</sup> Constan, Nicholas P. *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity : Homilies 1-5, Texts and Translations*. Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae ; v. 66. Leiden: Brill, 2003 p1

<sup>2</sup> Nestorius was deposed at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

<sup>3</sup> See discussion in Constan, Nicholas P (2003) p11-12

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp43-4

<sup>5</sup> Warner, Marina. *Alone of All Her Sex : The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. Second ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013 p65

<sup>6</sup> Gaddis, Michael, and Richard Price. *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*. Translated Texts for Historians ; 45. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007, p18

natures fit together, and how to resolve the paradox of how the unchangeable God could become a man who was born, grew, suffered, and died.

Two theological schools<sup>7</sup> had emerged in response to Arianism<sup>8</sup>, each with different theological and exegetical emphases. In general, “Antiochene theologians emphasise[d] the *boundaries* between God and creation; between God’s sphere of being and activity and that of the concrete, historical world we inhabit”<sup>9</sup>, a focus perhaps oversimplified to say that the followers of the school of Antioch stressed the humanity of Christ, while followers of Alexandria stressed his divinity<sup>10</sup>.

These theological emphases came into conflict in the persons of Nestorius and Proclus, for Proclus asserted that God was born of Mary, while Nestorius made a distinction between Christ, who could be born of Mary, and the Word of God, which had existed from the beginning.

Nestorius was enthroned as Archbishop of Constantinople in 428. He came from Antioch with a retinue provided by the Emperor, and with a reputation for learning and a “celebrated rhetorical virtuosity”<sup>11</sup>. He was soon to reveal that he also possessed “utter political ineptitude”<sup>12</sup>. Five days after his consecration he launched a purge of heretical elements in the city, resulting in riots<sup>13</sup>, and proceeded to ban circuses and mimes, angering ordinary people<sup>14</sup>. After alienating the people of Constantinople, Nestorius then began an ill-advised squabble with the Empress Pulcheria, sister of Theodosius II, where he both insulted her<sup>15</sup> and cast her out from the sanctuary of the Great Church. Nestorius was perturbed by the existence of Arians and other heretical groups in the city, and also by the popular veneration of Mary as *Theotokos* (Mother of God, “the one who gave birth to the one who is God”<sup>16</sup>). The term was not new<sup>17</sup> and his 4<sup>th</sup> century predecessor as Archbishop, Gregory of Nazianzus, had even declared that “if anyone does not accept the holy Mary as *Theotokos*, he is without the Godhead”<sup>18</sup>. While *Theotokos* was an accepted term in Alexandria, part of the “language of Christian devotion”<sup>19</sup>, it shocked Nestorius, who wrote “We have found a great

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<sup>7</sup> Price & Whitby suggest they were not of equal status, but that Antioch was “an eccentric, and rather scholarly approach to Christology” while opposition to them was “the broad consensus of Christian confession” (Price, Richard, and Mary Whitby. *Chalcedon in Context : Church Councils 400-700*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015, p111)

<sup>8</sup> Wessel, Susan. *Cyril of Alexandria and the Nestorian Controversy: the Making of a Saint and of a Heretic*. Oxford Early Christian Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p268

<sup>9</sup> Stefano, Troy A, and Murphy, Francesca Aran. *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*. First ed. Oxford Handbooks. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. p123

<sup>10</sup> Graef, Hilda. *Mary : A History of Doctrine and Devotion*. Combined ed. London: Sheed & Ward, 1985 p74.

<sup>11</sup> Constan, Nicholas P (2003) p47

<sup>12</sup> Gaddis, Michael, and Richard Price, p18

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p48

<sup>14</sup> Constan, Nicholas P (2003) p49

<sup>15</sup> Accusing her of sexual immorality (Limberis, Vasiliki. *Divine Heiress : The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople*. London: Routledge, 1994. p54)

<sup>16</sup> Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Mary through the Centuries : Her Place in the History of Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996., p55

<sup>17</sup> Graef suggests it may have originated with Origen, p46

<sup>18</sup> Graef, Hilda, p46

<sup>19</sup> Pelikan, Jaroslav, p58

corruption of orthodoxy among some here...they even dare to include the Christ-bearing Virgin in the topic of theology, for they do not scruple to call her Theotokos"<sup>20</sup>. He began to preach against the title, which further offended the people of Constantinople<sup>21</sup>.

Nestorius, apparently without realising Proclus' theological views, invited him to preach in the Great Church at around Christmas 430<sup>22</sup>. Proclus preached what we know by the title "Homily I", a panegyric in praise of Mary, which firmly declares her to be the *Theotokos* in "a veritable masterpiece of patristic literature and theology"<sup>23</sup>. The congregation responded with applause<sup>24</sup> and Nestorius was obliged to make an ex tempore response, after which there is no record of any further contact between the two men<sup>25</sup>. Nestorius was deposed from office at the Council of Ephesus<sup>26</sup>, which was reiterated at Ephesus II and at Chalcedon. He was exiled to his old monastery at Antioch, then to Petra, and then to the Great Oasis in the Libyan desert. He died in 451.<sup>27</sup>

Proclus' theology, as recorded in Homily I and in later works like his *Tome to the Armenians* (435)<sup>28</sup>, is centred upon the unity of the divine and human natures in Christ, expressed in the Marian title *Theotokos*. He begins his most famous Homily by praising Mary in similes: she is "the untarnished vessel of virginity"; "paradise"; "the workshop for the union of natures"; the bush burning but unconsumed; "the only bridge for God to mankind"; a cloud; a fleece; a loom and a bridal chamber, among others<sup>29</sup>. He then goes on to talk about the great paradox of the Incarnation: God whom the heavens could not contain was within a woman's womb; "he was born from a woman, God but not solely God, and man but not merely man" in a "miracle transcend[ing] reason"<sup>30</sup>. He acknowledges the theological problem of the impassible God becoming a passible man, but stresses its necessity: "He came to save, but he also had to suffer. How were both possible? Mere man had no power to save. One who was solely God could not suffer. What happened then? He who was God became man. By what he was, he saved; and by what he became, he suffered"<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Nestorius to Pope Celestine, quoted in Conostas, Nicholas P. "Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos, and the Loom of the Flesh." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3, no. 2 (1995): 169-94 p174 n.16

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p174

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p175

<sup>23</sup> Conostas, Nicholas P (2003) p3

<sup>24</sup> Conostas, Nicholas P (1995) p175

<sup>25</sup> Conostas, Nicholas P (2003) p71

<sup>26</sup> Gaddis, Michael, and Richard Price, p115

<sup>27</sup> Conostas, Nicholas P (2003) p90

<sup>28</sup> Proclus was asked to judge the Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia by an Armenian delegation. He responded with his *Tome*, setting out his theology, and including a florilegium of unattributed heretical quotes from Theodore. (Price, Richard, and Whitby, Mary, p125)

<sup>29</sup> Proclus, *Homily I*, in Conostas, Nicholas P (2003) p137

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p139

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p145

In his *Tome*, Proclus states his beliefs with theological precision: "I confess only one hypostasis of God the Word made flesh, the same one who in truth both endured the passion and worked miracles"<sup>32</sup>.

The term "hypostasis" is a technical one, used "primarily to designate individual or real existence", in opposition to *ousia* (substance or nature) and "equated with the concept of person at Chalcedon"<sup>33</sup>. While Apollinarius of Laodiceia<sup>34</sup> argued there was one hypostasis in Christ, and believed that in consequence Christ could not have a human soul or mind, the Antiochene Theodore of Mopsuestia argued that hypostasis is "an irreducible natural quality", and as Christ had two natures, he must therefore have two hypostases<sup>35</sup>. In contrast, Proclus argues for a middle way, arguing that there is one hypostasis in two natures, saying "his two natures are not divided into two hypostases...but (his) awesome dispensation has united the two natures in a single hypostasis"<sup>36</sup>. After the union of natures in Christ, Proclus wrote that "we therefore understand one Christ confessing him to be in two natures after the union, divinity and humanity"<sup>37</sup>.

Proclus' solution to the problem of divine impassibility and the passibility of Jesus is to argue for "a single impassible divine subject who personally assumed visible human nature subject to suffering and change"<sup>38</sup>, and his use of the title *Theotokos* was a "confess[ion] that Christ is a single divine hypostasis in two natures"<sup>39</sup>.

Nestorius taught a "dual-nature Christology"<sup>40</sup> where, post-Incarnation, the experiences of the incarnate Christ could be assigned to either his divine or human natures, which were conjoined by a *prosopon* ("person" or, literally, "face"<sup>41</sup>). The two natures were "ontologically incompatible [so] no relationship was postulated between them that would lead to an exchange of their properties. Hence God could not be said to be born, or suffer, or die; and the *theotokos* title was unfounded"<sup>42</sup>. His fear was that in arguing for a single christic nature, the boundaries between God and humanity would be blurred, resulting in a hybrid Christ with neither a fully human nor a fully divine nature.

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Constan, Nicholas P (2003) p111

<sup>33</sup> Uthemann, Karl-Heinz. "Hypostasis." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*. : Oxford University Press., 1991. <http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780195046526.001.0001/acref-9780195046526-e-2394>

<sup>34</sup> Condemned in the late 370s for teaching that Christ did not have a rational human soul ("Apollinarius of Laodicea." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity*)

<sup>35</sup> Constan, Nicholas P (2003) p362

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Constan, Nicholas P (2003) p363

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp371-2

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p368

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Parry, Kenneth. *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics*. Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Religion. Hoboken: Wiley, 2015, p129

<sup>41</sup> Uthemann, Karl-Heinz. "Person." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*.

<sup>42</sup> Atanassova, Antonia, and Anatolios, Khaled. "*Container of the Uncontainable God*": *Mary the Theotokos in the Nestorian Controversy*, 2003, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses., p139

Instead, “Christ is a ‘conjunction’ of an ‘already generated’ humanity linked somewhat externally to God”<sup>43</sup>.

Proclus gained the support of the influential Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria, who would thereafter dominate the opposition to Nestorius. Cyril’s Christological language varied somewhat throughout his career, teaching at one time that there was but one nature in Christ after the incarnation<sup>44</sup>, and at another adopting “language that was much more amenable to the dual-nature solution that was to be accepted at Chalcedon”<sup>45</sup>.

In 431, Cyril was the dominant force behind Council of Ephesus. The Council deposed Nestorius and condemned his teachings, but the dubious legal standing of the council<sup>46</sup> combined with bad feeling left after the Second Council of Ephesus (449<sup>47</sup>) had left the Church split. Although a Formula of Reunion (433) had been signed by Cyril of Alexandria and John of Antioch, theological debates continued. In an attempt to resolve the issues, the Council of Chalcedon was convened in 451<sup>48</sup>. At its second session, “the bishops learnt, to their shock and displeasure, that the emperor wanted them to produce a new definition of the faith”<sup>49</sup>, now known as the Chalcedonian Definition. The Definition was published on 22 October 451<sup>50</sup>, not entirely free from imperial interference<sup>51</sup>.

The Chalcedonian Definition reads:

*“Following, therefore, the holy fathers, we all in harmony teach confession of one and the same Son our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and the same truly man, of a rational soul and body, consubstantial with the Father in respect of the Godhead, and the same consubstantial with us in respect of the manhood, like us in all things apart from sin, begotten from the Father before the ages in respect of the Godhead, and the same in the last days for us and for our salvation from the Virgin Mary the Theotokos in respect of the manhood, one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division, or separation (the difference of the natures being in no way destroyed by the union, but rather the distinctive character of each nature being preserved and coming together into*

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<sup>43</sup> Conostas, Nicholas P (2003) p66

<sup>44</sup> Gaddis, Michael, and Richard Price, p60

<sup>45</sup> Wessel, Susan p277

<sup>46</sup> Cyril of Alexandria began the Council without the presence of the Antiochene bishops, “a procedural anomaly of such striking proportions that the very status and legitimacy of the conciliar proceedings were ultimately called into question” (Wessel, Susan p149)

<sup>47</sup> Called the “robber synod” (*Latrocinium*) by Leo I as it ignored his legates, and was beset with allegations of coercion (Gaddis, Michael, and Richard Price, p37-9)

<sup>48</sup> Gaddis, Michael, and Richard Price p118

<sup>49</sup> Gaddis, Michael, and Richard Price, p92

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p183

<sup>51</sup> The bishops had not wanted or expected to create a new definition of faith, and the emperor insisted on submission to the Roman delegation (*Ibid.*, p190).

*one person and one hypostasis), not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, Only-begotten, God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ, even as the prophets from of old and Jesus Christ himself taught us about him and the symbol of the fathers has handed down to us.”*<sup>52</sup>

Chalcedon was intended to be a middle way between an extreme one-nature Christology which denied Christ’s humanity and a “Nestorian” two-nature Christology which resulted in two sons. In the event, Chalcedon was controversial, “a tragedy for Christian unity, leading as it did to the schism between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian churches that has continued to this day”<sup>53</sup>. The Definition’s espousal of two-nature language was seen by those who rejected the Council as Nestorian<sup>54</sup> and “led to deeply-felt opposition on the part of those committed to a one-nature Christology”<sup>55</sup>.

The Council of Chalcedon was dominated by the now-deceased Cyril, using his teachings as the standard of orthodoxy<sup>56</sup>. Unfortunately, “Cyril’s christological language was often ambiguous, susceptible of different interpretations, and resisted reduction to a closed system”<sup>57</sup>, and his imprecision meant that both pro- and anti-Chalcedonians could claim to be following him. While his name carried immense weight at the Council, the writings of Proclus may have been more influential in the wording of the Definition.

Proclus wrote with greater precision, never mixing the terms “hypostasis” and “nature” as Cyril did, and “successfully distinguishes between person and nature, a distinction that Cyril had not articulated with any clarity or precision...which had greatly confused the christology of the period”<sup>58</sup>. Proclus was the first to articulate the “two natures in one hypostasis” formula as a way of “maintaining the fullness and integrity of the two natures”<sup>59</sup> and his *Tome* was widely read, and, as Constan writes, both “a major step in the direction of church unity and toward the christology of Chalcedon”<sup>60</sup>.

Proclus’ Christology was vindicated 21 years after his Homily in front of Nestorius. Chalcedon affirmed both his teaching of Christ’s two natures united in one hypostasis, and that those natures continued after the Incarnation, without confusion or division. It also affirmed, as had Ephesus before it, the Marian title *Theotokos*, as expressive of his Christology. Although Proclus’ teachings were vindicated, he did not receive the same adulation as Cyril. While Cyril was “the orthodox

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p204

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p191

<sup>54</sup> Price, Richard, and Whitby, Mary, p20

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p64

<sup>56</sup> Gaddis, Michael, and Richard Price, p20

<sup>57</sup> Constan, Nicholas P, (2003) p364

<sup>58</sup> Constan, Nicholas P (2003) p364

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p376

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p376

father *par excellence* who deserved to be interpreted and reinterpreted for more than two hundred and fifty years”<sup>61</sup>, we do not even have a biography of Proclus on which to draw<sup>62</sup> and while the Byzantine Church venerates him as a saint<sup>63</sup>, it acclaims Cyril as one who, “destroyed the web of heresies—by your divine words, [which have] the power of Christ [in them],—you enriched the church—you dealt a blow to the evil of Nestorius, and for that reason you are with the chorus of angels”<sup>64</sup>. Proclus won the theological battle, even though Cyril was given the credit.

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<sup>61</sup> Wessel, Susan p296

<sup>62</sup> Constan, Nicholas P (2003) p7

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Wesel, Susan p301 n.13

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