

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Aflame but not consumed: Nestorius and the person of Christ

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Abstract

Though Nestorius is often thought to have erred largely due to his christological views, this article will suggest that it was his hamartiology that led to his errant christological claims.

Keywords: Chalcedon; christology; Nestorius; sin; *Theotokos*

In this essay, I will address the question of the relation of God to the human body through the thought of Nestorius, once Patriarch of Constantinople and later condemned as a heretic at the Council of Ephesus in 431. Insofar as Nestorius' 'orthodoxy' preoccupied church historians for much of the early twentieth century, a reconsideration of what has already been reconsidered may seem redundant. This essay fortunately is not concerned with revisiting Nestorius' 'orthodoxy' as it aligns with the Chalcedonian confession.¹ Instead, I hope to identify the faulty assumptions that Nestorius began with, and that even those who sought to rehabilitate his christology often unwittingly hold. These assumptions concern whether and in what way God can be fully present to a human person.

Nestorius' instincts to cordon off the divine and the human by securing a union that is not hypostatic were conceived as a means of responding to 'Arian' christologies. However, his soteriology suggests that the problem of the divine-human relation is for him yet more entangled. By addressing Nestorius' writings on the nature of sin and Christ's response to it, it will become clear that for Nestorius it was at least in part the human body that was, in Karl Barth's words, the veil that partially obscured divine reality.²

Viewing 'the body', and particularly the sexed and gendered body, as a site of contamination that one must retreat from is not an outlier in the Christian tradition. My discussion of Nestorius' christology will argue that it was his views on the contamination

¹Among them: Henry Chadwick, 'Eucharist and Christology in the Nestorian Controversy', *Journal of Theological Studies*, ns 2 (1951), pp. 145–64; H. E. W. Turner, 'Nestorius Reconsidered', *Studia Patristica* 13 (1975), pp. 306–21; Anastos Milton, 'Nestorius was Orthodox', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 16 (1962), pp. 117–40; Robert Wilken, 'Tradition, Exegesis and the Christological Controversies', *Church History* 34/2 (1965), pp. 123–45. See also the monograph by Fredrich Loofs, *Nestorius and His Place in the History of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: CUP, 1914).

²See Paul Dafydd Jones, *The Humanity of Christ: Christology in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), pp. 16–59.

of the body that make his theology incompatible with Chalcedonian claims. If indeed in Christ there are two natures and yet one person, then Christ's body is not a screen but a window, not a reality that precludes our knowledge of God but a reality that renders this knowledge visible. What is visible is not only the particular *idiomata* of Christ's human nature, but also the shape of the God-world relation. If Jesus is the shape of the God-world relation (and this, in fact, is the takeaway of the Chalcedonian consensus), then God is truly present in a human body. But if it is the body itself that is a threat to divine revelation, then Nestorius' concerns about cordoning off the divine from the human is not (as his modern defenders often allege) an argument about terminology but reflects a more basic disagreement about the possibility of God's presence in the world.

Reexamining Nestorius' errors, therefore, provides an opportunity to reexamine errors that remain with us even as many have sought to write 'the body' back in to theological reflection. The upshot here is significant. If Chalcedonian claims are accepted in their entirety, and Christ is affirmed as 'fully human', then humanity even in its bodiliness is not essentially an impediment to divine revelation. All bodies, therefore, might be fully present to God. But if the body is understood as primarily a site of sin and contamination, then there is no real possibility of union with God in this life.

Retrieving Nestorius

Nestorius is often understood to represent the losing side of Christian doctrine, articulating a version of christology that falsely attributed two subjects to the person of Christ instead of the Chalcedonian version of one subject (person) and two natures. Nestorius' version of dyophysitism was motivated by two concerns. First, 'twoness' allowed Nestorius to retain his strict commitment to divine impassibility. Because God could not take on human flesh that was attendant to change, suffering and decay, Nestorius could not fully identify God with human flesh. Though God could be said to be united with Jesus in the person of Christ, the flesh of Jesus was not God's own.³ In his first sermon against the *Theotokos* he writes: 'That which was formed in the womb is not in itself God'.⁴ This inability came to the fore when he refused to name Mary the *Theotokos*, God-bearer, preferring instead *Christotokos*, 'Christ-bearer'. As devotion to the Virgin was flourishing during Nestorius' time, the significance of Nestorius' rejection of this Marian appellation was enhanced and inaugurated an ongoing disagreement between himself and Cyril of Alexandria.⁵

Second, twoness for Nestorius was a polemic against 'mingling' or 'mixing'. Nestorius' 'fear of mixing' that would (as in the case of Apollinaris of Laodicea) yield a *tertium quid* required a strict separation between the divine and the human.⁶ This is related to his first concern, in that impassibility, on his reading, required that the divine and human be kept separate. Though he affirmed a union between the divine and the human (even a *prosopic* union), Nestorius in fact speaks both of one and two

³He could not affirm what later came to be called the *communication idiomatum*. For more on the communication of idioms, see Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), pp. 172–213.

⁴Richard A. Norris, *The Christological Controversy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 130.

⁵See Aaron Riches, *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), pp. 21–3.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 30, n. 40; quoting John McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), p. 131.

prosopa in his writing, which contributes to the confusion and some of the disagreement over how he should be evaluated.⁷ In his influential study, F. Loofs argued that when Nestorius spoke of two *prosopa*, he did so because he understood each nature to have a *prosopon* or 'external undivided appearance' that corresponded to it.⁸ Nestorius' language of two natures, two *prosopa*, reflected the divine-human reality of the incarnation but did not carry with it modern notions of personality. Loofs' reading of Nestorius therefore does not posit two personalities in Christ, nor two internal selves. As Braaten notes, modern commentators confirm that Nestorius admitted two *prosopa* in Christ; the question is what kind of relation obtains between the two.⁹

That the language of two *prosopa* is inconsistent with later Chalcedonian orthodoxy is certain. Moreover, it is true that the Chalcedonian 'two natures in one person' view is not clearly represented in Nestorius' writing, and that Nestorius' language of 'two natures in *synapheia*' certainly seems to have more in common with the much-derided image of the incarnation as 'two planks rashed together'. What makes Nestorius heretical, from this perspective, is the existence of an internal duality in Christ, and thus of an incarnational union that is moral in nature and thus only a unity in appearance.

But even if Nestorius's errors are attributed to his continuing argument *contra* Arius, his concern regarding the ability of God to truly *become* human remains. Nestorius, of course, is not the only one who ran theologically aground while seeking to explain how it is that God became human. Though theological views on nature of the difference vary, it is unquestionably the case that God and the human are understood within Christian theology to be different kinds of things. Nestorius could not conceive of this difference as the grounds of union, but rather saw difference as of a competitive kind that precluded true relation and union.¹⁰

In his resistance to an ontological identification between the divine and the human, Nestorius therefore seized upon a basic claim of Christian doctrine. God is not, indeed, what humans are. Nestorius' insistence that this difference be retained is one thing precisely right about his thought. Unfortunately, however, Nestorius had the misfortune of finding Cyril of Alexandria as a conversation partner, whose 'one incarnate nature of God the Word' became the hammer to which all christological questions were the nail. For Cyril, the union of the two natures finds no ontological link between the divine and the human. Cyril's 'one incarnate nature', through the wringer of post-Chalcedonian revision, becomes Justinian's 'one *hypostasis*'. By the time we get to Justinian, then, the union is defined as being in the person, though it is (merely) an identification; there is no claim made that some capacity or principle intrinsic to the category of 'person' makes the union possible.

Certainly Cyril's insistence on the unity of the subject wins the day. But perhaps along the way the nature of the ontological question regarding the person of Christ, the very question that troubled Nestorius, has been misplaced. Cyril's resounding

⁷See Carl Braaten's excellent discussion of modern approaches to the question in his 'Modern Interpretations of Nestorius', *Church History* 32/3 (1963), pp. 251–67, esp. pp. 254–9. See also Riches, *Ecce Homo*, p. 31: 'Nestorius' dyophysite doctrine of Christ therefore requires two *prosopa*, which in turn confirms that some of Jesus' acts are "human", while others are "divine".'

⁸For more on Loofs and his relation to other recent literature on Nestorius, see Braaten, 'Modern Interpretations of Nestorius', p. 256.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 259.

¹⁰The most helpful treatment of the competitive and non-competitive options for the relation between God and humanity comes from Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), esp. ch. 2.

'one incarnate nature' tends to dampen curiosity about the ontological link between the divine and the human.¹¹ Is it a puzzle and a paradox that God became incarnate in a human being? Does this violate the basic character of the God-world relation? Or does this incarnation rather reveal the proper relation between God and humanity – 'the closer the better'?¹² Is it in fact the very body of Christ that renders our union with God possible – and is the body of Christ then not a screen but a window to divinity?

The question of the ontological link between God and the human in Christ is a question of how transcendence is mediated in and through matter. It is a question of what God has to do with the human body of Christ, and what kind of claims can be made regarding the way the body of Christ renders God visible.¹³ Read in this way, both ancient condemnations and modern reassessments of Nestorius tend to focus on the adequacy of his formulae without querying a deeper, problematic assumption behind his thought – is there something basic that prevents God from being truly identified with a human body?

Revisiting Nestorius

Nestorius' formula, 'two natures united in *synapheia*', attends to both the union and distinction of the God-man, and he clearly uses *prosopon* to refer to what is rendered visible when the person of Christ appeared. On this point, Nestorius can be defended as offering a perspective quite close conceptually to post-Chalcedonian refinements of *hypostasis*, although this can be overstated.

But it is the transparency of the *prosopon*, not its precise definition, that bedevils Nestorius. Nestorius' fundamental problem is his inability to understand how God could be genuinely visible in human flesh. This is because Nestorius conceives of flesh as ontologically sinful. In his sermon against the *Theotokos*, as well as his second letter to Cyril, there are two concerns that preoccupy Nestorius. The first is how the relation of the body to sin renders necessary a particular soteriology. The second is how and whether the body of a creature could communicate the Uncreated. For Nestorius concepts of 'blamelessness' and 'corruption' pair with 'immaterial' and 'of the flesh', respectively. By his argument, the human condition is one of 'corruption which arose by means of the flesh'. 'Dissolving' this corruption 'by means of the flesh', is Nestorius' operative logic of the incarnation. By putting on 'our nature ... like a garment', Christ

intervenes on our behalf, being entirely free from all sin and contending by appeal to its blameless origin, just as the Adam who was formed earlier brought punishment upon his race by reason of sin. This was the opportunity which belonged to the assumed man, as a human being to dissolve, by means of the flesh, that corruption which arose by means of the flesh.¹⁴

¹¹One of the most interesting thinkers on the question of an ontological link between the divine and the human is Sergius Bulgakov, whose opening chapter in *Lamb of God*, titled 'The Dialectic of the Idea of Divine-Humanity in the Patristic Epoch', makes for extremely compelling reading, even if his conclusions are somewhat overwrought. See Sergius Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 119–56.

¹²These are Kathryn Tanner's words in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 3.

¹³For the purposes of this article, I intend 'body of Christ' to refer to the actual, physical Jesus of Nazareth, though the temptation to speak ecclesially always lingers.

¹⁴Norris, *Christological Controversy*, p. 129.

This ability to dissolve the corruption of the flesh, by Nestorius' logic, depended on this man becoming incarnate *by means* of the flesh. Nestorius' formula is necessary for his soteriology, with flesh as both the cause of corruption and therefore its necessary solution. Nestorius clearly states the soteriological implications of his formula throughout his letter. It is only by joining himself to humanity's corruption that Christ can effect the desired transformation of humanity. But this transformation is only possible insofar as the two natures remain distinct (and therefore joined in a moral union and not a hypostatic one), because it is the (perfect) divine person that effects the change on the (corrupt) human person. Nestorius writes:

If you want to lift up someone who is lying down, do you not touch body with body and, by joining yourself to the other person, lift up the hurt one while you, joined to him in this fashion, remain what you were? This is the way to think of the mystery of the incarnation.¹⁵

Nestorius is clear: the efficacy of the work of the incarnation depends on the two natures both being present but remaining separate. The human nature is truly proximate to the divine, but they do not become one subject.

Nestorius points to several New Testament passages that he feels affirm his position. He argues that Hebrew 1:3 speaks of the one who *is* the radiance of the Father's glory – and one not who *was* – because he could not be this radiance in the present tense if he was also in human flesh. He also claims that the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2 also supports this position when it speaks of Christ Jesus who 'took the form of a slave'. This twofold name for the Son speaks to Nestorius of Christ's twofold existence: one who is God, the other who takes the form of a slave. It is in making these distinctions between the one who is God and the one who is a slave that Nestorius is able to claim that God truly redeems human corruption: Christ takes on the decay of the mortal flesh and exchanges it for immortality. And yet this soteriological implication comes at the expense of retaining a view of the created order consistent with the Hebrew scriptures: a material world that is at least potentially aflame with the divine.

There is a deeper question at play here, however, and it is not only Nestorius' but Cyril's as well. This is the question of the basic relation possible between the divine and the human. Are the divine and the human competitively related, so that the human might contaminate the divine? Or does God truly take on a body and all that it implies and become truly human?

In addressing these questions, it is important to note that it would be too simplistic to say that Nestorius has a general distaste for bodily realities. He affirms God's providential care for all human bodies. He marvels at human development:

The Creator God, after all, fashioned me in my mother's womb, and he is the first and supreme surety that in those hidden places of the interior I am kept in existence. I am born – and I discover fountains of milk. I begin to experience a need to cut my food in bits, and discover that I am equipped with knives of a sort in my teeth.¹⁶

¹⁵Ibid., p. 125.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 123.

It is God who created the body and who holds it in existence, providing for its needs in very practical ways. Nestorius even sees the decay attendant to mortality as serving a broader purpose.¹⁷ He does not deny the goodness of the material as such.

Nestorius' concern – that 'a creature did not produce him who is uncreatable' – is in fact a Nicene one insofar as it is rooted in a desire to affirm the full and unqualified divinity of the Son.¹⁸ Nestorius' concern for the eternity of the Son does not acquit him, however. The following passage from the First Sermon Against the *Theotokos* is especially telling:

A creature did not produce the Creator, rather she gave birth to the human being, the instrument of the Godhead. The Holy Spirit did not create God the Logos (for 'what is born of her is of the Holy Spirit' [Matt 1:20]). Rather, he formed out of the Virgin a temple for God the Logos, a temple in which he dwelt.

Nestorius is precisely right that 'a creature did not produce the Creator', as though the Creator had not existed before being born of Mary. He is also correct that a creature 'gave birth to the human being'. He is wrong on account of the relationship of that human being, who was born, to the Godhead. Nestorius' language of 'instrument' and 'temple' is at the heart of his error, because it seeks to drive a wedge between the incarnate Christ and the One who was with God in the beginning (John 1:2).

We are told more about Nestorius' particular concern in his Second Letter to Cyril. Nestorius sees himself carrying on the Nicene faith by affirming distinctions between eternity and time. 'The divine chorus of the Fathers', he writes, 'did not say that the coessential Godhead is passible or that the Godhead which is coeternal with the Father has only just been born, or that he who has raised up the temple which was destroyed has [himself] risen.'¹⁹ To say that it was God who was risen would, for Nestorius, trouble the distinction between Creator and created. So Nestorius attends carefully to biblical language as it is deployed in the Nicene Creed. 'Christ', for Nestorius, is the intermediary language that can speak both of the eternal Son and the passible one; 'it is the term', he writes, 'which signifies the impassible and the passible essence in one unitary person, with the result that Christ is without risk called both impassible and passible – impassible in the Godhead but passible in the nature of the body'.²⁰ Nestorius argues that Paul also uses 'Christ' when he is speaking of the subject who is both 'the impassible and the passible essence in one unitary person'.²¹ This is, again, in appearance quite close to the post-Chalcedonian treatment of *hypostasis* as the locus of union. But Nestorius uses this 'one unitary person' to draw a wedge between the transcendent one and the one who appears, between God and the human. Nestorius' stumbling block was not the lack of a refined philosophical vocabulary for the union between the divine and the human, as many of his interpreters suggest, but rather his inability to see God actually *becoming* corruptible flesh.

For Nestorius it is critical to make a distinction between 'birth' and 'coming to be in a human being' because of the corruption and change that birth implies.²² To speak of

¹⁷Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 136.

²⁰Ibid., p. 137.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

the Son being born for Nestorius necessarily implies that the Son was not eternal; Nestorius does not understand how his adversaries 'reintroduced as passible and newly created one who had first been proclaimed as impassible and incapable of a second birth – as if the qualities which attach naturally to God the Logos are corrupted by his conjunction with his temple'.²³ That truly becoming flesh would have corrupted the Son's divinity is clearly Nestorius' concern.

Nestorius is precisely right, that speaking of divine attributes such as impassibility requires making distinctions between the divine nature (which does not suffer) and the human nature (which does). His error is setting a wedge between the two. He does this, it seems, because he cannot allow for a communication of idioms that would allow the body of Jesus to render the person of the divine Son visible. He cannot allow this because he views the body as contaminating of the divine. The body of Christ thus cannot be 'truly his [namely, the Son's] own', but must only be an instrument or vessel that he inhabits. 'The body', Nestorius writes, 'is the temple of the Son's deity, and a temple united to it by a complete and divine conjunction, so that the nature of the deity associates itself with the things belonging to the body, and the body is acknowledged to be noble and worthy of the wonders related in the Gospels.'²⁴ Retaining this 'conjunction' is critical. His conclusions I will quote at length:

To attribute also to him, in the name of this association, the characteristics of the flesh that has been conjoined with him – I mean birth and suffering and death – is, my brother, either the work of a mind which truly errs in the fashion of the Greeks or that of a mind diseased with the insane heresy of Arius and Apollinarius and the others.

Those who are thus carried away with the idea of this association are bound, because of it, to make the divine Logos have a part in being fed with milk and participate to some degree in growth and stand in need of angelic assistance because of his fearfulness at the time of the passion.

I say nothing about circumcision and sacrifice and tears and hunger, which, being joined with him, belong properly to the flesh as things which happened for our sake.

These things are taken falsely when they are put off on the deity, and they become the occasion of just condemnation for us who perpetrate the falsehood.²⁵

That God could be truly said to be fed with milk, participate in growth or experience fear for Nestorius is logically impossible. It is logically impossible because it would render this God unable to effect the salvation Nestorius argues we need, which is a salvation *from* the corruption that the flesh itself has caused. To be saved from the corruption of the flesh what was needed was one who had not himself experienced this corruption. For Nestorius, Christ *used* the instrument of his body in order to render our salvation, but he was not ever fully identified *with* it, because to have been identified with the flesh would render salvation impossible.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., p. 138.

²⁵Ibid.

Can a creature contain the Uncreated?

Considering these concerns, it is no surprise that the flash point for Nestorius was the *Theotokos*. In Nestorius' view, for Mary to bear the appellation 'God-bearer' was to prescribe a beginning in time to the Son. Further, it was to claim that the Son experienced the growth and change attendant to human beings. Nestorius' sermons against the *Theotokos* had made their way to the monks of Egypt by the early years of Cyril's episcopacy, which began in 412.²⁶ Cyril quickly responded with letters of clarification that emphasised the theological necessity of affirming the *Theotokos*.²⁷

For Cyril, as for many within the Alexandrian tradition, soteriology made particular christological demands, such that calling Mary anything other than *Theotokos* would imply that Christ was someone other than God, which would render the work of salvation incoherent. The ascription of *Theotokos* therefore functioned more to secure the soteriological aspect of the incarnation than it did to make sophisticated claims about the psychosomatic composition of Christ.

Nestorius, however, understood the *Theotokos* to be making claims about the divinity of the man in the womb that cut against his own soteriological requirements, which necessitated keeping God separate from the corruption of the flesh in order to address that corruption. For Nestorius, the body itself, whether of Jesus or of Mary, could be no more than a vehicle for God's soteriological ends. This was because he lacked a fulsome enough account of God's relation to the body, an account that would allow him to say in a clear voice that the body of the God-man was 'truly his own', and thus to affirm God's ability to truly become human.

In the final analysis, Cyril's language of 'one incarnate nature' presented Nestorius with the shape of a woman's body bearing the Son of God. This problematic image required that he weigh his soteriological demands and respond accordingly. Must we call this pregnant woman, fully human in perhaps the most visible of ways, 'God-bearer'? Could this creature contain the Uncreated? For Cyril, the soteriological stakes were high enough to use this appellation. For Nestorius, the shape of a woman's body was a shape before which Nestorius could not kneel. That holiness would take these dimensions cut too closely against his circumscribed separation between God and human, and so it was imperative that he trace the moment at which God took human flesh as after the natural birth of Jesus. His *ex post facto* account of the person and work of Christ needed to have a starting point that marked the one in the womb as not-God, potentially prone, as this creature could be, to corruption or decay.

For Nestorius, maintaining the full divinity of the God-man required cordoning off the *Logos* from the one who took flesh because flesh itself was corrupting. Nestorius' concern was not sophisticated enough to be about peccability; it was the simple fact of being flesh that was problematic. Nestorius' own soteriology, which argues that the corruption of the body is what must be removed, supports this view. Of course, conceiving of sin as corruption is not unique to Nestorius, nor is it in itself problematic. There is, however, a competing strain of thought in the Christian tradition that sees the body as both a site of corruption and potential place of grace. In order to affirm

²⁶Susan Wessel notes that there were political concerns at play here due to the economic significance of the relationship between the monks in Egypt and Alexandria. See Susan Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria and the Nestorian Controversy: The Making of a Saint and a Heretic* (Oxford: OUP, 2004).

²⁷According to Chadwick, it is not the case that Nestorius denied the *Theotokos* entirely; rather he simply required that the Apollinarian implications of the term be covered up with the addition of *Anthropotokos*. See Chadwick, 'Eucharist and Christology', p. 149, n. 1.

both of these things, Christ's physicality must be seen as something that all participate in, not merely something that we see through.

In the argument between Cyril and Nestorius, there is a larger tension that has long lingered in Christian theology. Is the body something that makes possible union with God, or does it prevent such union? And does the body of Jesus present us with a screen or a window, a means whereby the divine nature is hidden or revealed?

What we can learn from Nestorius' attempt to prevent the presence of God from coming into contact with corrupt flesh is twofold. First, we can mind the biblical witness already intimated in the Old Testament, that material reality does not impede God's revelation but renders it possible. And second, we can beware lest our soteriology set up the body only as the source of the problem of sin and not also as its solution. Certainly the body can participate both in the need for redemption and the means of grace. But we need not share with Nestorius the assumption that bodies are what we must be saved from. Rather, we are saved in them. The linguistic boundaries of Chalcedon set the horizon on which the body of Jesus can be seen not as a threat but as a place of limitless possibility, as the one 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28) in the very particular bodies that we have.