From Chalcedon back to the Gospels: on the *Prosopon* of the *Hypostasis* of Christ

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The doctrine of Chalcedon is sometimes criticized for being “static” and “ahistorical”. This article discusses the stimulus that an interesting expression found in the writings of the 6th century author Leontius of Byzantium – “the prosopon of the hypostasis of Christ” – can give to re-narrativising Christology. However important it is to identify the hypostasis in Christ, and explore how this hypostasis can also be human, it is also important to draw attention back to the historical role that this hypostasis plays at the centre of the narrative of salvation found in the gospels. Chalcedonian Christology learned to identify Jesus as the Eternal Son, “one of the Trinity”, but needs also to insist that he has taken on not just a human nature but also the specific prosopon of the Christ within human history.

Keywords: *Leontius of Byzantium, Cyril of Alexandria, Council of Chalcedon, Second Council of Constantinople, hypostasis, prosopon, physis, Incarnation, Christ*

Introduction

Compared with the rich gospel accounts of Jesus of Nazareth travelling to Jerusalem, his crucifixion as Messianic pretender, and his being raised from the dead and installed as king at the right hand of the Father, the Chalcedonian doctrine can appear lacking in narrative dynamism. The thrust of Christological development in the early centuries of the church appears to move from the vividly human Jesus of the synoptic gospels *via* a divine pre-existent Logos who becomes Incarnate and returns to the Father in the Fourth Gospel towards the what some see as the “static” and “ahistorical” doctrine of the hypostatic union at Chalcedon. Seen in these terms, the development seems to represent a progressive distancing from the concrete story of Jesus.¹ The

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¹ Monica Hellwig, for example, writes of classical Christology: “the discussion moved from a highly abstract formulation to selective consideration of the historical events on which it was based. More specifically, it is problematic that we inherited a Christology separated from soteriology – a discussion of who Christ is prior to any discussion of how he has made and is making a difference. This order of discussion in effect rendered irrelevant to Christology the way Jesus lived his life, the context in which he lived it, the manner and content of his preaching with all their nuances, his attitudes to people and events, and even the specific causes of his trial and execution. The desirable timelessness and universality that lifted classi-

standard popular summary of the Chalcedonian Definition – “Jesus is one person in two natures” – appears to distil from the New Testament proclamation a Jesus stripped of historical dynamism and soteriological urgency. Such an impression, of course, can be shown to be unjustified by drawing attention to the fact that the Fathers of Chalcedon had no intention of producing a distilled formula that would replace the gospels. The framers of the Definition merely wished to rule out some errors that had arisen in relation to the doctrine of Christ, so that Christians could read the gospels correctly (i.e. in the tradition of the church). Nevertheless, the correct pathway from the Chalcedonian Christ and the Christ of the gospels is sometimes difficult to identify. This is evident wherever textbook introductions to Christology have a first section dedicated to a reconstruction of the Jesus of history, another section dedicated to the dogmatic developments, and a further section dedicated to contemporary theology’s attempts to deal with selected questions. In such treatments, much of what the first section had introduced in such detail seems to be left behind, and more abstract questions such as oneness and distinction in Christ take centre stage. The specific claim that Jesus is the Christ who announced the kingdom of God, who died and is raised to the right hand of the Father are often ignored as if later developments made the primitive proclamation irrelevant.

This article suggests that the notion of *prosopon* can be taken as a useful term for expressing the move from abstract considerations about the “one person in two natures” back to the concrete narrative of Jesus in the gospels. It is true, of course, that in the Nestorian controversy, the inadequacy of this term as a way of expressing the unity of Christ came to light. Nevertheless, in the Chalcedonian Definition, it appears to be little more than a weaker synonym for *hypostasis*,² preserved as traditional language, but without any specific function. In the wake of Chalcedon, instead, Leontius of Byzantium appears to recognize a nuance of difference in a curious expression found in *Contra Nestorianos et Eutychianos*³: “the *prosopon* of the *hypostasis* of Christ”

cal Christology out of its particular cultural setting to be adaptable to all times and societies was had at too steep a price – a certain sterile irrelevance to the burning issues that people of our time face day by day.” Monica Hellwig, “Re-Emergence of the Human, Critical Public Jesus”, in: *Theological Studies* 50 (3/1989), p. 467.

² It is often assumed that the term *prosopon* here is “weaker” than the term *hypostasis*. John Meyendorff, for example, writes: “In the definition [of Chalcedon], *hypostasis* could be interpreted as synonymous with the weaker term *prosopon*, designating a «combination» of two natures «concurring» in one. Herein lies the main reason why the Council of Chalcedon was so violently rejected by the Monophysite Cyrillians.” John Meyendorff, “Christ’s Humanity: The Paschal Mystery in Christology”, in: *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 31 (1/1987), p. 12.

³ Leontius of Byzantium, *Contra Nestorianos et Eutychianos (CNE)* 4. The translation is from Brian Daley (ed.), *Leontius of Byzantium: Complete Works*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2017, p. 151.

(τοῦ προσώπου τῆς κατὰ Χριστὸν ὑποστάσεως). The suggestion is that a renewed Chalcedonian appropriation of the function of the term *prosopon*, building on what appears to be little more than a passing reference in Leon-tius, can be taken to stand for a necessary narrativization of Chalcedonian christology, and can therefore be useful in structuring a move from the apparently “static” and “ahistorical” quality of Chalcedonian christology back to the historical function of the Eternal Son made human as the Christ of Israel.

Chalcedon’s Concern: The Lord’s Economy on Our Behalf

I take it that the purpose of the Council of Chalcedon was not primarily to offer an account of the inner constitution of Christ, but rather to defend the economy of salvation which the Council Fathers saw as threatened by the doctrines of both Nestorius and Eutyches. Chalcedon itself states quite clearly in the preamble to the Definition that the basic concern that gave rise to the Council was the defence of the Lord’s economy on our behalf and a preference for avoiding “novel formulas”:

there are those who are trying to ruin the proclamation of the truth, and through their private heresies they have spawned novel formulas: some by daring to corrupt the mystery of the Lord’s economy on our behalf, and to apply the word “God-bearer” to the Virgin; and others by introducing a confusion and mixture, and mindlessly imagining that there is a single nature of the flesh and the divinity, and fantastically supposing that in the confusion the divine nature of the Only-begotten is possible.⁴

The primary question, accordingly, is not what we can say about the inner constitution of Christ, but whether what we say about the inner constitution of Christ corrupts the mystery of the economy. Some had used certain formulas in ways that rendered talk of this economy impossible. Nestorius, by insisting on a certain use of the language of “two natures” makes it possible to attribute the human experience of Jesus to the human nature of Jesus, and thus to avoid saying that the Logos is himself born of Mary or that the Logos himself dies on the cross. Eutyches, on the other hand, by insisting on “one nature” of Jesus after the incarnation made it impossible to say that Jesus is a human being like us. The formula that the Council agrees, and the relative vocabulary, is designed to avoid these pitfalls in defence of the Lord’s economy. Chalcedon is willing to introduce a “formula” of its own, “one *hypostasis*” and “two natures”, but this is only because it sees this formula as necessary to defend the economy.

⁴ Norman Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Georgetown, University Press 1990, p. 85.

What the Council of Chalcedon calls the “Lord’s economy on our behalf” is expressed primarily in the bible (both the New Testament and the Old Testament interpreted in the light of Christ), and the Fathers of Chalcedon wish to point to the bible as read in the church as the ultimate criterion of faith. Some basic features of this economy can be abstracted from the richer biblical tapestry, since the questions at stake in the “Christological” controversy become immediately evident if we concentrate on these. These basic features are drawn especially from the Christ hymn in Philippians 2:5–11 and the Gospel of John and are brought together in a kind of basic outline narrative without which the church’s reading of the whole of the biblical witness is compromised. Reading these texts together the tradition assumes at a three-stage narrative in which (1) The Word who is with God in the beginning (John) or the Son who is “in the form of God” (Paul) “prior” to the Incarnation (so to speak) is the protagonist; (2) this subject is made flesh and dwells among us (John) or, in the Pauline version, takes on “the form of a slave” and lives a life of obedience culminating on the cross; (3) this same subject is raised in his humanity and returns to the Father (John) and is given “the name that is above all other names” (Paul). This basic narrative, around which the other biblical elements coalesce, is given authoritative expression in the Nicene Creed. Although the whole of the second article of the Creed regards faith in one Lord Jesus Christ, there is a kind of movement from first part of the article of the Nicene Creed regarding the Son, which speaks of the Eternal Son in relation to the Father, to a second part, which regards the Incarnation of the Eternal Son, “for us and for our salvation” and a third part related to the proclamation that his human life culminates in his being raised to the right hand of the Father. This basic outline is then taken as a criterion for the interpretation of the whole biblical narrative, such that if some part of this narrative is imperfectly expressed, the whole of the “Lord’s economy on our behalf” is threatened. The Council sees in the positions of both Nestorius and Eutyches such a threat: the “novel formulas” that they propose are condemned not primarily because they give a false picture of the inner constitution of Christ, but because they are understood to threaten the whole of the church’s interpretation of the narrative of salvation as expressed in the bible. Unless the subject of the action is the Eternal Son, and unless this Son becomes human like us, we are not saved.

From the doctrinal point of view, then, the criterion of truth lies not primarily in the correct understanding of the technical vocabulary but continues, even after Chalcedon, to be the defence of the “Lord’s economy on our behalf”. The Council of 553 seems to presuppose this primacy of the economy, especially in canons 7 and 8, where the council states that one can

use two natures language and fail to hold the church's belief, just as one can use one nature language in ways faithful to the church's teaching.⁵ While it is certainly true that conceptual clarity on the meaning of terms is most useful in grasping the rational coherence of the faith, this does not displace the centrality of the economy. In brief, orthodoxy is guaranteed not by a correct understanding of terms, but by the faithfulness to the basic narrative of salvation.

Identifying the *Who* and the *What*

One of the crucial developments in early 6th century theology was the growth of consensus around the canonical status of Cyril of Alexandria's "Third Letter to Nestorius" and especially the 12 Chapters which Cyril proposes in that letter as a test of orthodoxy⁶. This letter had been read at the Council of Ephesus (431) but had not been explicitly approved there. The Council of Chalcedon had also failed to approve the count the letter among its canonical texts.⁷ From about the time of the Zeno's *Henotikon* (482)⁸ on-

⁵ See: G.L.C. Frank, "The Council of Constantinople II as a Model Reconciliation Council", in: *Theological Studies* 52 (1991), p. 636-650. On the importance of recent ecumenical agreements on the interpretation of the dogmatic value of Chalcedon's formula see: Dorothea Wendebourg, "Chalcedon in Ecumenical Discourse", in: *Pro Ecclesia* 7 (3/1998), p. 307-332.

⁶ The quotations from Cyril's Third Letter to Nestorius come from McGuckin's translation: John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts*, New York, St Vladimir's Seminary Press 2004, p. 266-275.

⁷ At Chalcedon, the letters of Cyril that were explicitly invoked were his Second Letter to Nestorius and *Laetur caeli* (which includes the 433 Formula of Union, the two-natures language, and the important use of the term *homoousios* in relation to Christ's humanity). According to Daley, Chalcedon had chosen to ignore this Letter, and the revival of this Letter and abandonment of Chalcedon led to the Acacian Schism.

⁸ The *Henotikon* of Zeno (482) – preserved by Evagrius Scholasticus – represents a change of imperial tactic, the renunciation of Chalcedon as the path to reconciliation, and a return to something closer to the settlement of 433. Therein we find the following: "This Nestorius, together with Eutyches, men whose opinions are the opposite to the aforesaid, we too anathematize, accepting also the Twelve Chapters which were pronounced by Cyril of pious memory, Archbishop of the holy and universal church of the Alexandrians. And we confess as one and not two the only-begotten Son of God, even God, our Lord Jesus Christ who in truth was made man, consubstantial with the Father in divinity and the same consubstantial with us in humanity, Who came down and was made flesh from the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin and Mother of God. For we declare to be of one being both the miracles and the sufferings which He endured voluntarily in the flesh. For those who divide or confound or introduce an illusion we utterly refuse to receive, since indeed the sinless incarnation, that was in truth from the Mother of God, did not create an additional entity of the Son. For the Trinity has remained a Trinity even after one of the Trinity, God the Word, was made flesh." The translation is found in Michael Whitby, *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press 2000, p. 148-149.

wards, however, the Third Letter, with its (in)famous Twelve Chapters began to be listed as a criterion of orthodox belief. Richard Price even defines neo-Chalcedonianism as the “development of an interpretation of Chalcedon that brought it into line with Cyril’s Twelve Chapters”.⁹

The recognition of the canonical status of the Twelve Chapters drew attention to the first of the three moments in the narrative of the “Lord’s economy on our behalf”, namely the identification of the subject of the narrative as the Second Divine Person, the Son. Against Nestorianising interpretations of Chalcedon, Cyril’s teaching seemed to Chalcedonians of the 6th century to get to the heart of what needed to be defended. Thus, the 1st of Cyril’s chapters clearly stated who the subject of the human life of Jesus is, emphasizing the paradoxes of the Incarnation with reference to Mary as Mother of God:

If anyone does not confess the Emmanuel to be truly God, and hence the holy virgin to be Mother of God (for she gave birth in the flesh to the Word of God made flesh), let him be anathema.¹⁰

Similarly, the 12th Anathema, which was to be basis for the 10th canon of the Council of 553,¹¹ does the same, clearly stating who the protagonist of the narrative is, and emphasizing the paradoxes of the Incarnation with reference to the death of Jesus on the cross:

If anyone does not confess that the Word of God suffered in the flesh, was crucified in the flesh, and tasted death in the flesh, becoming the first-born from the dead, although as God he is life and life-giving, let him be anathema.¹²

In both these cases, there is no room for the kind of ambiguity that the Chalcedonian Definition allowed regarding *who* the subject is, and during the controversies following Chalcedon increased attention was paid to the need to affirm what Cyril had affirmed.

From these anathemas of Cyril, so-called neo-Chalcedonianism learned to identify the *hypostasis* of Christ: the *who* of the hypostatic union.

⁹ Richard Price (ed.), *The Acts of the Council of Constantinople of 553: With Related Texts on the Three Chapters Controversy*, vol. 1, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press 2009, p. 71.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, vol. 2, p. 46.

¹¹ Realization of the strategic importance of theopaschite formulas as a criterion of correct interpretation of Chalcedon was brought to the fore by the Scythian monks and accepted by Justinian. On this matter see J. A. McGuckin, “The «Theopaschite Confession» (Text and Historical Context): A Study in the Cyrilline Re-Interpretation of Chalcedon”, in: *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 35 (2/1984), p. 239-255. Justinian incorporates a variant of this anathema in his “On the Orthodox Faith” and that version is taken into official church teaching as canon 10 of the Fifth Ecumenical Council.

¹² R. Price, *The Acts*, vol. 2, p. 47.

But Cyril was also attentive to the other requirement of a narrative approach to the Incarnation: *what* the subject identified as the Son of God does. Canon 12 listed above tells us that he “suffered in the flesh, was crucified in the flesh, and tasted death in the flesh, becoming the first-born from the dead”. This brings us to the heart of the biblical account of Jesus. The divine Son becomes the Christ, through his death and resurrection: he takes on not just the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth, but also the specific role of Israel’s Messiah. The 2nd of Cyril’s 12 Chapters, speaks of this new human identity:

If anyone does not confess that the Word of God the Father was hypostatically united to the flesh so as to be One Christ with his own flesh, that is the same one at once God and man, let him be anathema.¹³

This Christ is not a second person, another *hypostasis*, since he is the “same one”, “at once God and man.” Nevertheless, something has happened: the protagonist of this narrative has taken on not just a human nature, but also a specific function: the Christ.¹⁴ The following chapters of Cyril’s letter continue to speak of Christ as the one who, on the one hand, is the Word of God, but who is “at once” God and man. Thus, chapters 3¹⁵, 4, 5, 6¹⁶, 9 and 10 all speak of Christ with an implicit distinction between Word of God and Christ. The 10th chapter regards the fact that Christ becomes the “high priest”:

The divine scripture says that Christ became ‘the high priest and apostle of our confession’ (Heb. 3.1) and ‘offered himself for our sake as a fragrant sacrifice to God the Father’ (Eph. 5.2). So if anyone says that it was not the very Word of God who became

¹³ *Ibidem*, vol. 2, p. 47.

¹⁴ For Cyril, as stated above, stating this narrative is more important than adopting the right formulae of words. McGuckin writes: “Cyril’s construct had not depended on its formulas, rather on the clear passion of its narrative of the descent of the divine person, to save.” J. A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria*, p. 227. For this reason, he was willing to be flexible on vocabulary. McGuckin again, *Ibidem*, p. 227: “As a result of the conflict over terminology from 431 to 433, even Cyril had come to admit that if his opponents agreed the central principle of single subjectivity, he would admit a flexibility in the terms he used to describe that event.” The problem of Eutyches and Dioscorus is that they see such flexibility as surrender on Cyril’s part.

¹⁵ Note that the 3rd chapter speaks of the “hypostases” of Christ, further confirming the fluidity of Cyril’s language.

¹⁶ Cyril denies that the Word is the God of Christ. Does he thereby imply that the Father is the God of Christ? This would make sense if we take it that Christ is also man. “If anyone says that the Word of God the Father is the God or Lord of Christ, and does not rather confess the same one is at once God and man, since according to the scriptures the Word has become flesh, let him be anathema.” Certainly, this would fit with the gospel portrait of Jesus who addresses the Father as “God”.

our high priest and apostle when he became flesh and man as we are, but it was someone different to him, a separate man born of a woman; or if anyone says that he made the offering also for himself and not rather for us alone (for he who knew no sin had no need of offerings), let him be anathema.¹⁷

Clearly, the Eternal Son cannot be high priest as a divine person apart from the incarnation; he becomes high priest as man. In these canons, the word “Christ” is used not just to say *who* the subject is, but also *what* he has become: Christ and high priest.

“*Hypostasis*” and “*Prosopon*”

Much attention is given in Chalcedonian and so-called neo-Chalcedonian thought to the question of the *hypostasis* and its relation to the human *physis* in the hypostatic union. The importance of this work has been highlighted by modern scholarship. Johannes Zachhuber, for example, argues for the importance of the revision of the received Cappadocian understanding of the term *hypostasis* in this context, and the emergence of an idea of “individual nature”.¹⁸ This development was found to be necessary, he argues, in order – among other things – to avoid a merely essentialist understanding of the natures in Christ which would have left no clear defence against the idea that the common nature of the three divine persons became incarnate in the common nature of humanity. From the doctrinal point of view, this attention to the *hypostasis* was a response to the ambiguity around the identification of the one person in Christ: was the person the subject who takes on a human nature, or the result of the coming together of the two natures? The point is clarified, though without specific reference to the term *hypostasis*, in various ways, but most directly in the adoption of the proposal of the Scythian monks in Canon 10 of the council of 553: it is “one of the members of the holy Trinity” who was crucified, and not simply his human nature, a rendering of the 12th of Cyril’s 12 chapters.¹⁹

What of the term *prosopon*? In the Chalcedonian Definition, this term seems to be taken as equivalent to *hypostasis*, since we read that the two natures come together in in “a one person (*prosopon*) and one *hypostasis*”. Leontius of Byzantium, however, uses a curious expression that I think calls for some consideration. The expression is “the *prosopon* of the *hypostasis* of

¹⁷ R. Price, *The Acts*, vol. 2, p. 48.

¹⁸ See, for example: Johannes Zachhuber, “Individuality and the Theological Debate About «Hypostasis»”, in: Alexis Torrance, Johannes Zachhuber (eds.), *Individuality in Late Antiquity*, Farnham–Surrey, Ashgate 2014, p. 91–109.

¹⁹ N. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, p. 118.

Christ” (τοῦ προσώπου τῆς κατὰ Χριστὸν ὑποστάσεως).²⁰ While the Chalcedonian Definition appears to treat the two terms as equivalent, Leontius, in speaking of the *prosopon* of the *hypostasis* appears, instead, to assume some kind of difference between the two.

Patrick Gray's Criticism of Leontius

Before coming to Leontius' use of the word *prosopon*, however, it might be worth looking at a strongly worded criticism that Patrick T.R. Gray directs at Leontius,²¹ following in the tradition of Evans.²² I offer a comment on Gray's reading of Leontius as an example of a certain, not uncommon, inability to recognize the narrative criterion in Christological discourse. In Gray, this takes the form of a reluctance to distinguish talk of the Logos and talk of the Christ.

The object of Gray's concern is what he takes as Leontius' position that Christ is a reality that comes to be when the Eternal Son becomes Incarnate. He focuses on what he takes to be Leontius' revealing use of the soul and body analogy in Chapter 4 of *Contra Nestorianos et Eutychianos*. There Leontius notes that when we speak soul and body, we relate both of them to the human being in whom the two come together. Quoting Leontius, Gray writes:

“Man is related to body by itself, and to soul by itself, as the whole entirely distinguished from them, because of the first relation towards its parts, but in the second it makes community with them”. This twofold relation can be none other than the simultaneous dual mode of relation under discussion: soul and body are related to “man” in a hypostatic union, the “first relation”, since they maintain the distinction of their individual essences; at the same time, “man” is related to soul and body in a union by essence, because “man” as a whole contains the essences of body and soul. Moreover, it is abundantly clear that “man” here is a *tertium quid*, since it is spoken of as “the whole entirely distinguished” from body and soul.²³

Gray's concern, at least in his 1979 book,²⁴ is with this *tertium quid* as understood in Leontius' application of the analogy to Christ. In the anthropologi-

²⁰ The translation is from B. Daley, (ed.), *Leontius of Byzantium*, p. 151.

²¹ Patrick T.R. Gray, *The Defense of Chalcedon in the East (451-553)*, Leiden, Brill 1979, p. 90-103.

²² David Beecher Evans, *Leontius of Byzantium: An Origenist Christology*, Washington, Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies 1970, p. 206.

²³ P. Gray, *The Defense*, p. 100. Gray's first quotation is from PG 86, 1288D12-13, and his second is from PG 86, 1288D14-1289A2.

²⁴ Grillmeier states that Gray subsequently altered his position on this matter. See n. 18 in: Aloys Grillmeier, Theresia Hainthaler, *Christ in the Christian Tradition, Volume 2: From the*

cal paradigm, “man” is the *tertium quid* in which body and soul are united by essence and by hypostasis at the same time. In the Christological context, instead, “Christ” is the *tertium quid*, at once οὐσία and ὑπόστασις, in which Word and man are united in a union which is simultaneously a ἔνωσις κατ’ οὐσίαν and a ἔνωσις καθ’ ὑπόστασιν (or ὑποστατική).²⁵ Gray is shocked at the idea of a *tertium quid* in which the two natures come together as Christ because he assumes that Leontius must mean that this *tertium quid* is an independent “essence and hypostasis”:

It is, of course, shocking to discover Leontius teaching that Word and flesh are united in a *tertium quid*, an independent essence and hypostasis called “Christ”. Nonetheless, that is what he teaches.²⁶

He further marvels that Leontius speaks of the Christ to refer to the union, and not the Word as the “hypostasis in which Word and flesh are united”²⁷. Gray’s explanation of what he sees as Leontius’ bizarre idea that it is in Christ that we find the union of the Word and his humanity is that he gets it from the Origenist tradition, and specifically from Evagrius’ idea that it is the pre-existent *nous* of Christ, rather than the Son, that is incarnate in Jesus.

I am less interested in the accuracy of this reading of Leontius²⁸, than I am in the instinct that leads Gray to draw this implication from the distinction of Logos and Christ. I take this reading of Leontius’ intention as evidence that Gray is more attentive here to the issue of the identification of *hypostasis* of Christ as the Word of God, than he is to the need to affirm that something new – by which I do not mean a new *hypostasis*, but a new state of affairs in history – comes about through the Incarnation, namely the human being, the Word made flesh, who becomes Israel’s Messiah.²⁹ From the point

Council of Chalcedon (451) to Gregory the Great (590-604), London, Westminster John Knox Press 1995.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 100-101.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 101.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ Grillmeier already refutes this interpretation of Leontius in: *Ibidem*, p.187-189.

²⁹ His choice of the expression *tertium quid* to express the Christ may also betray a certain literalism in his interpretation of Leontius’ theological language. When one speaks of body as one thing, and soul as another, there is generally no implicit claim that the two exist independently of one another. We can speak of body and soul as though they were independently existing things, but that does not mean that we affirm them as two really existing ingredients that come together in a third thing called the human being. So too, the fact that we can speak of the divinity and the humanity of Christ does not mean that we are affirming that these truly exist independently as two things that are brought together in the Incarnation. What Leontius and others are trying to describe is nothing other than the narrative whereby the Divine Word becomes a particular human being. It is not helpful to assume that authors who speak of the divine and human natures are speaking of two preexisting things that come

of view of human history, however, this is a new reality, even if in the eternity of God the reality of the divine *hypostasis* of the Son already exists. In brief, if we bring our attention to human history, the birth of Jesus and the whole of his human life is an event. In history, this event represents something new: the presence of the Messiah is Israel.

From this point of view, Leontius' meaning is far from strange, or at least no stranger than the Christian proclamation is. It is simply this: the eternal has entered history. Gray appears not to recall that Christ is precisely the name that the tradition preferentially uses for the Incarnate Son, who is a new reality inasmuch as prior to the Incarnation Christ as such does not exist.³⁰ And just as it would be strange to say that the soul and body of a man come together in a *tertium quid* called the man, which is an "independent essence and hypostasis", so too it is strange to conclude that Leontius intends the Christ as an "independent essence and hypostasis". Rather than being an "independent essence and hypostasis", Leontius thinks that in both cases the two "parts" come together in a concrete individual who exists for itself. Just as the man resulting from the union of body and soul is a concrete individual or hypostasis, so too is Christ as result of the Incarnation of the Word a concrete individual, thus existing as a human person.

All that is needed to overcome Gray's scruple is to remember that Leontius' thought, like that of Cyril and others before him, is best understood in its narrative context. From this point of view, it is necessary not simply to correctly identify *who* is the subject of the narrative, but also the narrative of *what* this *who* has become for us and our salvation. The same subject is involved throughout the narrative and is the Word of God. But something happens between the first phase (so to speak) where the subject is presented in his pre-incarnate state (so to speak) and the historical phases where this subject is already a human being. What happens is that the Word has become flesh such that he can now also be called the Christ (or any of a range of other titles, such as "high priest" as Cyril notes, found in the New Testament). Such usage should not be controversial, but it stands behind the distinction that Gray finds so objectionable in Leontius' distinction of the Word and Christ. If one has difficulty with this distinction, one should also have difficulty with the 2nd of Cyril's chapters cited above, since Cyril

together in a third. We can certainly speak of human nature in general, but – as Leontius explains – the humanity of Jesus is not simply humanity in general but the specific and individual humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. Natures are not *hypostaseis*.

³⁰ Thomas of Aquinas is quite clear on all of this. For him, the hypostatic union is a creature inasmuch as "Whatever has a beginning in time is created. Now this union was not from eternity, but began in time. Therefore the union is something created." ST III q. 2 a.7 corpus.

makes the same distinction. "Christ" precisely not a *tertium quid*, since the *hypostasis* is always the "one and the same". Nevertheless, the name Christ refers us to the new chapter in the narrative of salvation that begins with the Incarnation, when Jesus is born in Bethlehem, the name he still bears in the Resurrection.

Christ at the Heart of Christian Reflection

For Leontius, in fact, it is Christ, rather than the Logos apart from the Incarnation, that is at the heart of Christian reflection. While he is quite clear that the Logos is the subject of the Incarnation, the same Logos presents himself "for us and for our salvation" as the Christ. It is not enough to proclaim the full divinity of the Logos, because although the Logos is complete in himself, the Christian proclamation centres on the fact that the Logos who is the Second Person of the Trinity became a complete human being for us:

The Logos is not the complete Christ, even if he is complete God, if humanity is not joined to it; nor is the soul a complete human being, even if it has a complete essence, unless the body is also understood in conjunction with it.³¹

Leontius' concern is not the divine Word apart from the Incarnation, but the "mode of union"³² by which the divine Word and humanity are brought together. Here lies the "great mystery of religion":

Since, then, the mode of union rather than the structure of nature contains the great mystery of religion, we are free from having to investigate the nature of what is united and what is fully realized in them – for that is not part of the present question: the former belongs to our understanding of God, the latter to the contemplation of nature; the former is more properly investigated in controversy with the Arians, the latter against those who completely deny that he assumed our nature; the former explains how he is related to the Father, the latter how what is ours in him is related to us; but neither explains how his parts are related to him. So let us investigate the mode of union and the product of it.³³

Brian Daley explains that this is a constant in his thought:

³¹ CNE 2. Trans. "Leontius of Byzantium: Complete Works", p. 139.

³² B. Daley argues that Leontius' use of this, otherwise unusual expression probably comes from Nemesis of Emesa's writings on the application of the anthropological model to Christ. Leontius appears to develop his position in dialogue with that of the latter. See: B. Daley, "A Richer Union": Leontius of Byzantium and the Relationship of Human and Divine in Christ," in: *Studia Patristica* 24 (1993), p. 254-258.

³³ *Epiphysis* 8, CNE 2, p. 301.

The centre of his investigations, as [Leontius] points out a number of times, is the whole person of Christ as it is present to faith: not speculations about the mechanics of origin, not hypothetical constructions of what his humanity might be apart from the Word, nor even the Word considered apart from incarnation – since the Word, also, is “not the complete Christ” – but Christ the fact, the concrete “end-product” (ἀποτέλεσμα) within history, of God’s personal assumption of human nature.³⁴

In a self-consciously narrative approach to the Incarnation, such a concern cannot be set against a concern with the *who* of the Incarnation. If the *who* is not the Logos, the narrative is no longer the Christian narrative. But it is also true that if the new situation, the new way of being Word that comes about when the Word becomes flesh and is called Christ is not also at the centre, then the narrative lacks movement, and soteriological import. Bluntly stated, we cannot sacrifice the Incarnation, the story of the Word become man and of that man becoming the Christ, in order to insist only on the question of the Eternal identity of the Word. In his inability to understand Leontius’ distinction between the Word and the Christ, Gray appears to fail to give full recognition to the new reality that comes about through the Incarnation.

The Prosopon of the Hypostasis of Christ

To give a direct account of Leontius’ probable meaning in speaking of the “*prosopon* of the *hypostasis* of Christ” it is worth keeping all of this in mind. One of the problems that Leontius faces is the conviction that since every nature must be hypostatic, the Chalcedonian claim that there are two natures in Christ seems to indicate that there are two *hypostaseis* in Christ. Leontius accepts the conviction that natures must be hypostatic but argues that this does not mean that the natures in Christ are *hypostaseis*. For Leontius, the human nature does not introduce a second *hypostasis* alongside that of the Word, since it is by the union that the human nature becomes hypostatic. For Leontius to speak of nature is not to identify a particular *hypostasis*, since one can speak of the nature as that which is shared by many *hypostaseis*. On the other hand, to speak of *hypostasis* means to speak of a really existing thing, and as such one includes its nature, both the nature that it shares with others (*physis*), and those individuating features that belong that that *hypostasis* alone. In Christ, we are confronted not just by humanity in general, but also by the particular humanity of Jesus of Nazareth.

³⁴ B. Daley, “A Richer Union”, p. 245.

[N]ature is not a hypostasis, because it is not a reversible attribution; for a hypostasis is also a nature, but a nature is not also a hypostasis: for nature admits of the predication of being, but hypostasis also of being-by-oneself, and the former presents the character of genus, the latter expresses individual identity.³⁵

Talk of nature distinguishes what is peculiar about a certain kind of thing, but also the particular distinguishing features of a given hypostasized instance of that *physis*. *Hypostasis*, instead, distinguishes one really existing instance of something of a given nature from other instances of that same nature. Individual *hypostaseis* differ in number in the sense that they can be counted. An individual *hypostasis* can be brought together from different natures, as in the case of the body and soul that come together as an individual human being, or Christ who is composed of two natures.

The function of the language of *hypostasis* is different to that of nature: it allows one to identify different instances of a certain nature.

And the one brings out what is peculiar to something universal, the other distinguishes the particular from the general. To put it concisely, things sharing the same essence are properly said to be of one nature, and things whose structure of being is common; but we can define as “hypostasis” either things which share a nature but differ in number, or things which are put together from different natures, but which share reciprocally in a common being.³⁶

This sharing in a common being does not mean that the natures are confused, but simply that they are brought together in an individually existing being.

I say that they share being, not as if they completed one another's essence, as happens with essences and with things that are essentially predicated of them – which are called qualities – but insofar as the nature and essence of each is not considered by itself but with the other, to which it is joined and assimilated. One finds this in various things, not least in the case of soul and body, whose hypostasis is common but each of whose natures is individual, with a different way of being.³⁷

Leontius shares the view of his opponents that there is no nature that is not hypostatic, but argues that this does not imply the view that for every nature there is a hypostasis, since it is one thing to be a hypostasis and quite another to be a hypostatic nature. Thus, in *Epilysis*, Leontius argues that the human

³⁵ CNE 1, p. 135.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 135.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

nature that the Word assumes is an particular nature, which means that his nature is both something shared with other human beings, and one that is his alone, marked off by its own particular characteristics from the humanity of other human beings. The fact that this humanity is an individual, concrete and particular humanity, need not mean that it is itself a *hypostasis*.

The *hypostasis* of the Word is marked off from the Father in one way, while the *same hypostasis* is marked off from other human beings according to a set of human qualities that are his alone, and which represent the individuality of his human nature. The individuality of Christ is not simply supplied by the *hypostasis* of the Logos, but also by the particular characteristics of his individual human nature. Thus, speaking of the distinction of Christ from other human beings, Leontius writes:

Of course, but this did not happen with regard to the Logos, but with regard to the class of *human beings*, from which he took his physical origin, since the Logos himself, separated as Son and Logos by distinguishing characteristics from the common substance of Godhead, is not separated by the same marks from the humanity he shares in, but being distinguished by one set from the Father and the Spirit, and by another set from his Mother and from humans, he receives through these distinguishing characteristics of the “extremes” his coherence and unity with himself, united and divided by the essential likeness of the “extremes” and the essential difference of the “parts”; and realizing the difference in a way opposite to [the way] the “extremes” [do] – if indeed in their case, the sameness of essence unites and the difference of hypostasis divides, while here the difference of essence divides and the sameness of hypostasis unites”.³⁸

The sameness of essence unites, both in the case of the Word’s consubstantiality with the Father and the in the case of Christ’s consubstantiality with us. Similarly, the difference of *hypostasis* divides, both in the case of the Word’s relationship with the Father, and Christ’s relationship with us. In the constitution of Christ, instead, the difference of natures is permanent, while the hypostatic union brings the two natures together into one.

In *Contra Nestorianos et Eutyrianos* he had already said something similar, speaking of the various relationships that need to be taken into account when speaking of Christ. There are six, which he organizes into two pairs. The first pair consists of the relationship of the Father to the Logos, and of the Logos to the Father. The second pair consists of the relationship of the Logos to his humanity and of his humanity to the Logos. The third

³⁸ *Epilysis* 1, *CNE* 1, p. 273.

pair is the relationship of Christ to us and us to him. He takes Christ to be the “connecting link” between Father and us. He writes:

So Christ, too, acts as a connecting link between two extremes with regard to us and the Father, by means of his parts – if we may consider him a whole made up of parts: he is wholly a hypostasis over against the Father, because of his divinity and along with his humanity, and he is wholly a hypostasis over against us, along with his divinity, because of his humanity. The relationships with respect to distinction and unity – those which we know him to have within himself, because of his parts, and those which he has towards the Father and us, because of the connection of the parts to the extremes – vary accordingly.³⁹

Here Leontius distinguishes the relationship between the Word and the Father from the relationship between Christ and us. Whereas the Son is, in himself, distinguished from the Father, in the Incarnation he is distinguished also from other human beings by means of the particular characteristics of his individual humanity.

It is here that we find the function of the term *prosopon* in Leontius' discourse. According to Brian Daley, Leontius uses the term *prosopon* to speak of the particularity of human *hypostaseis*. This, he explains, is because of the “particular role they play – the ‘mask’ they wear – in human history, analogous to the characters (πρόσωπα), recognizable by their masks, that were acted out in an ancient drama”.⁴⁰ Applying this to Leontius' view of the *prosopon* of Christ, Daley writes:

The Mystery of Christ – unique within history, and saving in its very uniqueness – is the union within a single concrete individual, a single hypostasis with a proper name, of the eternal God and a historically limited, fully normal human being. The historical being – the hypostasis – of Christ the Lord is the realization of both the eternal Word, the Son of God, and the man Jesus, the son of Mary, as two complete and different substances in one historical individual. And it is the “mode of union” of these two substances – God and man – as Jesus the Son, Leontius ultimately confesses, which constitutes the message of the Gospel.⁴¹

As *hypostasis*, the Word is the Eternal Son, distinguished from the Father. But becoming human, Christ takes on a concrete, particular and historical

³⁹ CNE 4, p. 149. Leontius is aware of the limits of the language of “parts” and comments himself on those limits. I refer the reader to Leontius on this.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

⁴¹ The reference he gives here is to *Epilysis* 8, quoted above.

existence. As Rowan Williams puts it, Leontius “goes a long way towards an unambiguous affirmation that the humanity of Christ in the Incarnation is fully individuated – a nature with defining finite characteristics”.⁴² The role that he assumes is recognizable within his own Jewish context as the role of Christ. Thus, the *prosopon* of the *hypostasis* is Christ, inasmuch as this is the specific human role that he takes on in history.

Conclusion

If Daley is correct in seeing in the term *prosopon* not just a synonym with *hypostasis*, but as connoting also the particular role that Christ plays within human history, then we could interpret the expression “*prosopon* of the *hypostasis*” as indicating the need for reflection not just on the *who* of the Incarnation, but also the *what*: not just on the humanity of Jesus but also on the specific role and function that the Incarnate Word, Christ, plays within history. Contemporary Christology has become used to speaking of the human nature as a *what*. I argue that if it is to successfully return to the narrative of the gospels, it should become equally aware of the specific role that Eternal Son takes on in history. Thus, we should speak not just of the *what* of the assumed human nature, but also of the *what* of Christ’s historical mission. It is one thing to say that the Eternal Son becomes human, and another thing to say that the Eternal Son takes on the *prosopon* of the Christ.

The Definition of Chalcedon states that the two natures come together in “one *prosopon* and one *hypostasis*”, and in doing so might seem to diminish the force of the term *hypostasis* in making clear *who* the subject of the Incarnation was. But just as christological orthodoxy is not established by the stating that there are two rather than one natures, so too Christological orthodoxy is not established simply by stating *who* the divine subject of the Incarnation is. This divine subject is certainly “one of the Trinity”, the Eternal Son, but that is not enough. As Rowan Williams has recently put it:

when we talk about the one hypostasis of the incarnate Word, we may mean either the eternal and simple reality which is the eternal Word or the ‘composite’ reality which is Jesus of Nazareth as animated and actualized by the Word.⁴³

Christological orthodoxy is fully expressed, not only when the protagonist of the narrative is identified as the Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity, nor even when we state that that protagonist has become human. Attention

⁴² Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, London, Bloomsbury Continuum 2018, p. 92.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

needs to be brought also to the confession that “for us and for our salvation” that protagonist took on the “form of a slave” and as such is the Christ, the “Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:8). Perhaps Leontius’ obscure expression can be useful in reminding us to do bring our discourse back to the concrete story of the gospels and remember that the “Lord’s economy on our behalf” remains the criterion of orthodoxy. The *hypostasis* in the narrative is the Eternal Son, but for us and for our salvation this *hypostasis* has become not just human, but also the Christ.