

# Redemptive Deification in the *Commentary on the Gospel of John* by Cyril of Alexandria: An Examination of Doctrinal Presuppositions

In pre-eighteenth century Europe, the task of interpreting Scripture was considered a theological enterprise, and the certainties of faith were developed in the ecclesial community through the process of this exegetical and theological reflection. The development of a modern critical approach to Scripture in the eighteenth century aimed to break free of the patterns that had shaped Christian Biblical interpretation for centuries. The traditional teaching about verbal inspiration was undermined and Scripture was seen as a fallible human product. The interpretation of Scripture became independent of dogmatics and a breach developed between a purely historical interest and Christian God-talk.

This article aims to probe the problem whether the theologian can legitimately explain Biblical texts in a way which goes beyond historical exegesis, but which seems to be required by the theologian's own dogmatic beliefs. In order to consider this problem, we have chosen a *Commentary on John's Gospel*<sup>1</sup> written by one of the Fathers of the Church: Cyril of Alexandria (c.376-444 CE). We will compare Cyril's understanding of soteriology in this *Commentary* with that of

---

\* Martin Micallef is an academic member of the Department of Sacred Scripture, Hebrew and Greek at the Faculty of Theology, University of Malta, where he lectures mainly on the Gospel of John, New Testament exegesis, and anti-semitism in the New Testament. He is the Chief Editor of the Faculty of Theology's peer-reviewed research journal *Melita Theologica*.

<sup>1</sup> By "John," "the Gospel of John," "John" or "the Fourth Evangelist," and so, we simply mean the Fourth Gospel without making any claim on the authorship of this Gospel.

John in order to see what is the common ground, if there is any, between the two authors in this regard. We will probe what is defensible and what is indefensible in Cyril's efforts to interpret John's Gospel by asking how far do Cyril and John speak the same theological language, and how far do Cyril's Nicene doctrinal presuppositions make him speak a language remote from John and use the text differently from its author's intentions.

We will divide Cyril's arguments into three main sections: (i) the relationship of Cyril's soteriological arguments with his understanding of the obedience of Christ; (ii) the effects that Cyril's notion of soteriology have on those who believe in Christ as the Son of God; (iii) the relationship which Cyril attributes to the coming of the Son of God with his Passion, Death and Resurrection. It may seem paradoxical that we have chosen an ancient commentator representing the Eastern tradition in Biblical interpretation for our investigation. Someone may raise the question: what has Cyril to do with our modern approach to the Gospel? However, the very fact that Cyril is nearer to John in time and culture than we are, may mean that he has something to teach us.

## The Obedience of the Second Adam

*The Commentary on John's Gospel* written by Cyril of Alexandria, considered by many as his greatest exegetical work,<sup>2</sup> manifests the deep theological character of his thought. "For him, theology was the interpretation of Scripture. He did not distinguish between theology and biblical interpretation. For a long time, this made his *Commentary on John* one of the best pieces in Biblical interpretation."<sup>3</sup> The complexity of Cyril's arguments and his ardent intention to defend the Divinity, the Humanity, and the Oneness of the Son were "not a

---

<sup>2</sup> Many scholars hold that this *Commentary* belongs to the period before the Nestorian controversy. G. Jousarrd in several articles has shown that the *Commentary* was written between 425-428 CE. See G. Jousarrd, "L'activité littéraire de Saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie jusqu'à 428," *Mélanges Podechard* (1945): 159-174; G. Jousarrd "Saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie aux prises avec la 'communication des idiomes' avant 428 anti-ariens," *Studia Patristica* 6 (1962): 112-121. Cyril's *Commentary* is a verse by verse commentary made up of twelve Books, of which Books VII and VIII (Jn 10:18-12:48) are lost. The text of this *Commentary* is found in *PG* 73 and 74, 9-756. In this article, we will use the old English translation by P.E. Pusey, *The Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John by St. Cyril Archbishop of Alexandria*, 2 vols (Oxford: James and Parker, 1874, 1885). We will refer to this edition simply as (P) adding to it the volume and the page number.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Micallef, "Christological Insights in the Commentary of the Gospel of St. John by Cyril of Alexandria," in *In Joyful and Serene Service of his Lord's Word: In Memory of Rev Dr Joseph Calleja*, ed. Anthony Abela, *Melita Theologica, Supplementary Series* 5 (2003): 139.

barren intellectual concern.”<sup>4</sup> Instead, his ideas as expressed in this *Commentary* are “intimately connected with a concern about soteriology.”<sup>5</sup> Following the Patristic tradition, Cyril believed that there was a necessary connection between the nature of Christ’s person and the salvation that he brought. The claim about the Son as the bringer of salvation “was the primary and determinative influence upon the development of their (the Fathers’) Christologies.”<sup>6</sup> If “Soteriology makes Christology necessary, Christology makes Soteriology possible.”<sup>7</sup>

Coming from the Alexandrian tradition,<sup>8</sup> Cyril’s conception of salvation is broader than the Western emphasis on salvation solely as liberation from sin.<sup>9</sup> For Cyril, salvation primarily meant a “life-giving” or “deification.”<sup>10</sup> For this term or idea, Cyril evidently depended on Irenaeus: “God became man that man might become God.”<sup>11</sup> Only if the Son is truly God can He deify humankind. Cyril accompanied this soteriological principle with another one taken from Gregory of Nazianzus: “What is not assumed is not healed.”<sup>12</sup> This principle is included in Cyril’s comment on Jn 12:50: “The Word of God made one with Himself human nature in its entirety, that so he might save the entire man. For that which has not been taken into His Nature, has not been saved.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Maurice F. Wiles, *The Spiritual Gospel: The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel in the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 147.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> D.F. Winslow, “Soteriology ‘Orthodoxy’ in the Fathers,” *Studia Patristica* 15 (1975): 393.

<sup>7</sup> Leander K. Keck, “Toward the Renewal of New Testament Christology,” in *From Jesus to John: Essays on Jesus and New Testament Christology in Honor of Marinus de Jonge*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 84, ed. Martinus C. de Boer (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 324.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed presentation of the Alexandrian tradition see, Robert Victor Sellers, *Two Ancient Christologies: A Study in the Christological Thought of the Schools of Alexandria and Antioch in the Early History of Christian Doctrine* (London: SPCK, 1954); Robert Victor Seller, *The Council of Chalcedon: An Historical and Doctrinal Survey* (London: SPCK, 1961); Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: A Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 34-85.

<sup>9</sup> On this point see the comments of Constantine N. Tsirpanlis, *Introduction to Eastern Patristic Thought and Orthodox Theology* (Collegeville/MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 61.

<sup>10</sup> See Basil Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 205.

<sup>11</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haeresis*, v.i.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, Ep. 101.4-7 in *The Later Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Cyril of Jerusalem to St. Leo the Great*, ed. Henry Scowcroft Bettenson (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>13</sup> Jn 12:50 (P. 2:152); see also Jn 4:34 (P.1:226).

These principles reveal that for salvation or deification, Cyril demanded the Incarnation of God. Only if the Son is truly God and truly man, can he deify humankind. For this reason, one can rightly say that Cyril's teaching of deification is inseparable from his Christological arguments. Moreover, it is only in the light of this soteriological concern, that one must understand Cyril's attack against Arianism and his rejection of Apollinarism.

The Arian Christ, it was argued, was not fully and inherently divine in his own right and not being such could not be the divine savior required by mankind. Similarly, the Apollinarian Christ was not fully human and not being such could not bring salvation effectively to the real point of human need.<sup>14</sup>

Cyril's comment on Jn 16:33 - "I have overcome the world" - is one of his best comments which presents the combination of his Soteriological and Christological concern.

(Christ) conquered as one of ourselves, and for our sakes. For if He conquered as God, then it profiteth us nothing; but if as man, we are herein conquerors. For he is to us the second Adam, who came from heaven, according to the Scripture.<sup>15</sup>

What is remarkable in this comment is Cyril's use of the Adam typology which is one of the key theological concepts used in his *Commentary on John's Gospel*. In this regard, Wilkens rightly notes:

I know of no patristic commentator whose entire exegetical enterprise is so controlled by a single biblical image as in Cyril. The biblical image is that of the second Adam or the heavenly Adam drawn from Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15.<sup>16</sup>

Cyril's use of the Adam typology is exhaustive.<sup>17</sup> The purpose of Cyril's use of this typology is threefold: to show that Christ was truly *human* as Adam was; to show that this *man* (Christ) was a *unique man*, for he is a heavenly man (his resurrection from the dead shows that it was God who lives this human life); to present the Son's obedience and its benefits to humanity. The obedience of the Son restores what was lost in the sin of the first Adam. Cyril's *Commentary*

---

<sup>14</sup> Maurice F. Wiles, "Soteriological Arguments in the Fathers," *Studia Patristica* 9 (1963): 321.

<sup>15</sup> Jn 16:33 (P.2:476-477); see also Jn 16:7 (P.2:441).

<sup>16</sup> Robert L. Wilken, "St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Mystery of Christ in the Bible," *Pro Ecclesia* 4 (1995): 470.

<sup>17</sup> See Robert L. Wilken, "Exegesis and History of Theology: Reflection on the Adam-Christ Typology in Cyril of Alexandria," *Church History* 35 (1966): 139-156.

on *John's Gospel* is very rich on this notion of restoration of God's grace into humanity.<sup>18</sup>

The Only-Begotten, *being* by Nature God and *in the form of God* the Father, and in equality with Him, *emptied Himself* according to the Scripture, and became Man born of a woman, receiving all the properties of man's nature, sin only excepted, and in an unspeakable way uniting Himself to our nature by His own free will, in order that He might in Himself first, and through Himself, regenerate it into the glory which it had at the beginning; and that He, having proved Himself the second Adam, that is, a heavenly Man, and being found first of all, and the first fruits of those who are built up into newness of life in incorruption ... might henceforth through Himself send good gifts to the whole race. For this cause, though He is Life by Nature, He became as one dead, that having destroyed the power of death in us, He might mould us anew in His own Life.<sup>19</sup>

Cyril's arguments on the renewal which the obedience of the Second Adam brought to humanity is explained in great detail in one of Cyril's famous comments, namely on Jn 1:32 - "John bore witness, 'I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him.'" Cyril's comment on this Johannine text brings forward the reasons why the Fourth Evangelist does not simply write that the Spirit "descended" on Jesus, but that the Spirit "remained" on Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

Since then the first Adam presented not the grace given to him by God, God the Father was minded to send us from heaven the Second Adam ... that as by the *disobedience* of the first Adam, we became subject to Divine wrath, so through the obedience of the second, we might both escape the curse, and its evils might come to nought ... By receiving It (the Spirit) as Man (the Son), he preserved It to our nature and might again in root us the grace which had left us.<sup>21</sup>

In Cyril's words, the obedience of the second Adam is therefore a salvific obedience. The Son "having proved Himself the second Adam, that is, the

---

<sup>18</sup> See D.J. Unger, "Jesus Christ the Secure Foundation according to St. Cyril of Alexandria," *Franciscan Studies* 7 (1974): 404-414.

<sup>19</sup> Jn 17:18-19 (P.2:539); see also Jn 15:7 (P.2:395); Jn 17:4 (P.2:496).

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion on the role of the Holy Spirit in Cyril's *Commentary on John's Gospel*, especially in the episode of Jesus' baptism see, Robert L. Wilken, "The Interpretation of the Baptism of Jesus in the Later Fathers," *Studia Patristica* 11 (1967): 272; John McIntyre, "The Holy Spirit in Greek Patristic Thought," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 7 (1954): 353-375; A. Manzone, *La dottrina dello Spirito Santo nell'IN JOANNEM di San Cirillo d'Alessandria* (Roma: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1972), 1-71; G.C. Berthold, "Cyril of Alexandria and the Filioque," *Studia Patristica* 19 (1987): 146; R. Sparato, "La festa dell'Incarnazione: Esegese di S. Cirillo di Alessandria a Luca 4:16-21," in *Esegese e Catechesi nei Padri (secc. IV-VII)*, ed. S. Felici (Roma: Pontificum Institutum Altoris Latinitatis, LAS, 1993), 75-82.

<sup>21</sup> Jn 1:31 (P.1:142); see also Jn 19:5 (P.2:608); Jn 7:39 (P.1:547).

heavenly Man,<sup>22</sup> obeys the Father by becoming man, receives the Spirit *as man*, that is, as the second Adam, so that he first sanctifies his own humanity, and as a consequence of this sanctification, the second Adam sanctifies the rest of humanity.

The Only-Begotten was made therefore Man as we, that in Him first the good things returning and the grace of the Spirit rooted might be preserved securely to our whole nature, the Only Begotten and Word of God the Father lending us the Stability of His Own Nature, because the nature of man had been condemned in Adam as powerless for stability and falling ... into perversion. And then in the turning of the first the loss of good passes through unto the whole nature; in the same way I deem in Him too Who knoweth not turning will the gain of the abundance of the Divine Gifts be preserved to our whole race.<sup>23</sup>

Such comments reveal how the Adam typology provided Cyril a useful tool to explain the Son's obedience as a salvific act. Cyril considered the divinization of humanity as basically the work of the Incarnate Logos and his Spirit and the result of this activity in the rest of humanity. Cyril stands very close to the Fourth Evangelist on this point. At the same time, he parts company from the Fourth Evangelist's thought. Both the Fourth Gospel and Cyril regard the coming of the Son as the means by which believers have life "in Him," nevertheless, the Adam typology is alien to John. Nowhere does John speak of Jesus as "Adam." This is only a Pauline motif found mainly in Rom 5 and 1 Cor 15. It is only the use of "life-giving" agent in 1 Cor 15:45 which seems to have a common ground with Jn 5:21.<sup>24</sup> John Ashton has made the point with more force when he contends that:

Looking back over the long Christian centuries, we may be astonished to see how quickly Paul and John, who surely never met in life, came to be joined together after death in other people's writings. And we may be surprised too at the extent to which this comfortable yoking has dominated Christian theology ever since.<sup>25</sup>

Paul provided Cyril with the key to the interpretation of the Bible. In the words of Wilken: "From Paul, Cyril learned to speak of the second Adam, the heavenly man, a new creation and, most of all, the centrality of the Resurrection in the biblical narrative."<sup>26</sup> For Cyril, it was "essential that the interpretation of

<sup>22</sup> Jn 17:18-19 (P.2:539).

<sup>23</sup> Jn 7:39 (P.1:549). See also Jn 1:32-33 (P.1:145).

<sup>24</sup> On this point see the comments of Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 2 (New York: Crossroads, 1971), 354.

<sup>25</sup> John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 238.

<sup>26</sup> Wilken, "St. Cyril of Alexandria," 477-478.

the Bible be consistent and it can only be consistent if one reads the Bible in the light of its overall *skopos*.<sup>27</sup> For Cyril, the Son's identity can be known simply by combining together all that the Bible says about him. Thus, we can understand why Cyril articulates the theological themes of the Fourth Gospel with this distinctive method. The Alexandrian Patriarch drags into his arguments other texts from the different books of Scripture, for he regards the Scripture as a continuous narrative about the person of Christ.<sup>28</sup> Yet, Cyril's reading of John with the eyes of Paul is one of Cyril's most notorious weak points.

### The Mediation of the Son

Our next task is to examine how Cyril connects the theme of deification with that of mediation. In doing so, we will also probe whether Cyril comes close to John's thought. The dominant conception of deification in Cyril's thought bridges the gap between the human and the divine in the person of the Incarnate Logos. Christ's oneness with humanity and with God are of equal importance for Cyril, in order to show that Christ provides the link between the two. Cyril relates the idea of the Son's *deification* to that of the Son's *mediation* by presenting *deification* as the result of the Son's *mediation*.<sup>29</sup>

*No one therefore will come to the Father, that is, will appear as a partaker to the Divine nature, save through Christ alone. For if He has not become a Mediator by taking human form, our condition could never have advanced to such a height of blessedness.*<sup>30</sup>

For as He (the Son) is closely related to the Father, and through the sameness of their Nature the Father is closely related to Him; so also, are we to Him and He to us, in so far as He was made Man. And through Him as through a Mediator are we joined with the Father. For Christ is a sort of link (*methorion*) connecting the Supreme Godhead with manhood.<sup>31</sup>

The culmination of this unity with Him as man is that Jesus Christ raises those who believe in him to his status as "children of God." This assimilation

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 477.

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed discussion on this point see, Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 30-45.

<sup>29</sup> See Jacques Liébaert, *La doctrine Christologique de Saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie avant la querelle nestorienne* (Lille: Facultés catholiques, 1951), 229.

<sup>30</sup> Jn 14:5-6 (P.1:243).

<sup>31</sup> Jn 10:14 (P.2:84).

is not identification. Humanity can never be a Son of God “by nature” as the Incarnate Logos, but only by adoption and “by grace.”

We mount up unto dignity above our nature for Christ’s sake, and we too shall be *sons of God*, not like Him in exactitude, but by grace in imitation of Him. For He is Very Son, existing from the Father; we adopted by His Kindness, through grace receiving *I have said, Ye are gods and all of you are children of the Most High*.<sup>32</sup>

Cyril’s arguments on how the Logos fully assumed a human body to work out salvation *in* and *through* that bodily condition are not only presented in those passages in which he refers to the Second Adam, but are also found in those passages in which he speaks of the Eucharist.<sup>33</sup> The Alexandrian Patriarch explains that the Humanity assumed by the Divine Logos is lifted up to an extraordinary glory. It becomes none other than the Humanity of the one who is God. The same thing happens in those who receive the Eucharist. The Eucharist deifies and transforms those who receive it. In a comment made in connection with the life-giving quality of the Eucharist, Cyril develops the following analogy. “Consider that water is cold by nature, but when it is poured into a kettle and brought to the fire, then it all but forgets its own nature, and goes away unto the operation of that which has mastered it.”<sup>34</sup>

For Cyril those who are joined with Christ through the Eucharist, are joined with him not simply in a *spiritual way* but in a *physical way* like “melted wax.”<sup>35</sup> Cyril points also to those biblical texts which depict Christ performing physical healings and raising people from the dead to clarify the way how the Eucharist deifies those who receive it.

When he raises the dead, the Saviour is found to have operated, not by word only, or God-befitting commands, but He laid a stress on employing His Holy Flesh as a sort of co-operator unto this, that He might shew that It had the power to give life, and was already made one with him. For it was in truth His Own Body, and not another’s. And verily when He was raising the little daughter of the chief of

---

<sup>32</sup> Jn 1:12 (P.1.104-105)

<sup>33</sup> See Henry Chadwick, “Eucharist and Christology in the Nestorian Controversy,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 2 (1951): 145-164; J.L. McInerney, “Soteriological Commonplaces in Cyril of Alexandria’s *Commentary on John*,” in *Disciplina Nostra*, ed. D.F. Winslow (Philadelphia: Patristic Foundation, 1979), 179-185.

<sup>34</sup> Jn 6:53 (P.1:419); see also Jn 6:15 (P.2:370).

<sup>35</sup> Jn 15:1 (P.2:370). Cyril’s argument about the Eucharist is also extended to his teaching about the Church. The Eucharist not only joins those who receive it with Christ; it also joins together those who receive it, making them one body. See Emile Merx, *The Whole Christ: The Historical Development of the Doctrine of the Mystical Body in Scripture and Tradition* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1936), 337-364.



the Synagogue saying, *Maid arise*. He laid hold of her hand, as it is written, giving life, as God, by His All-Powerful command, and again, giving life through the touch of His Holy Flesh, He shews that there was one kindred operation through both. Yea and when he went into the city called Nain, and one was being carried out dead, *the only son of his mother*, again He *touched the bier*, saying, *Young man, to thee I say, Arise*. And not only to His Own Word gives the power to give life to the dead, but that He might shew that His Own Body was life-giving. He touches the dead, thereby also infusing into those already decayed ... If by the touch alone of His Holy Flesh, He giveth life to that which is decayed, how shall we not profit yet more richly by the life-giving Blessing when we also taste it? For It will surely transform into Its own good, i.e., immortality, those who partake of it.<sup>36</sup>

Cyril's explanations of Christ's mediation seem to be close to what the Fourth Evangelist says in his Gospel. For the Fourth Evangelist and Cyril, Christ's mediation is not *functional* or *ministerial* like that of Moses.<sup>37</sup> Christ mediates life *in* and *through* His own life. In Cyril's thought it is this transforming mediation that gives purpose to the Incarnation.

Christ ... is seen to be the bond of union between us and God the Father; as Man making us, as it were, His branches, and as God by Nature inherent in His own Father. For no otherwise could that nature which is subject to corruption be uplifted into incorruption, but by the coming down to it That Nature Which is high above all corruption and variableness, lightening the burthen of ever sinking humanity, so that it can attain its own good ... We have, therefore, been made perfect in unity with God the Father, through the mediation of Christ.<sup>38</sup>

This insight is very close to what John says in 1:17 - "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." What is striking here is the Fourth Evangelist's choice of verbs "was given (*edothē*) – came (*egeneto*)" which indicate that while the law is something that could be separated from Moses through whom it was given 'grace and truth' which 'came by Jesus Christ' can never be dissociated from Himself.<sup>39</sup> In the words of the Johannine scholar Robert T. Fortna:

---

<sup>36</sup> Jn 6:53 (P.1:418-419).

<sup>37</sup> See B. Forte, "La dimensione Cristologica, Pneumatologica ed Eucharistica della Chiesa nel *Commentario a Giovanni* di S. Cirillo d'Alessandria," *Rivista di Letteratura e di Storia Ecclesiastica* 7 (1975): 97.

<sup>38</sup> Jn 17:22-23 (P.2:554-555).

<sup>39</sup> Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1991), 133.

John's most characteristic word for salvation ... (is) life, and ultimately it is not a quality, a state, to which Jesus brings men, but Jesus himself. 'I am the resurrection and the life' (11:25; cf 14:6) ... By his coming, as the one sent from the Father, he gives to men the life which he himself is.<sup>40</sup>

For John, God's salvation or (eternal) life is being actualized in the person of Jesus Christ. The coming of the Son supersedes and renders obsolete the places which were attached to God's presence, such as the Temple<sup>41</sup> or the sacred mountain of the Samaritans.<sup>42</sup> God is now met in the person of his Son Jesus Christ as we read in Jn 14:6 - "No one comes to the Father except through me."<sup>43</sup> This is probably also the meaning of Jn 1:51. According to Wayne Meeks,<sup>44</sup> the imagery behind this enigmatic Johannine saying is drawn from Jacob's vision of the ladder.<sup>45</sup> The point which the Fourth Evangelist seems to convey is that the Son of man joins heaven and earth through his own person. The same idea is repeated by C.K. Barrett: "John surely is concerned not only to make a Christological point in a straightforward ontological proposition, but to emphasize movement, traffic ... Jesus as the Son of man becomes the means by which men have communion *with God*."<sup>46</sup>

There seems to be a close relationship between the Fourth Gospel and Cyril on the way they express their respective notion of "life-giving" as both the Fourth Evangelist and Cyril considered salvation or life as the gift which is mediated by the one sent by God in his own being. At the same time, one should also notice the difference between the Fourth Gospel and Cyril's comments. On the one hand, Cyril developed the notion of life-giving in terms of the Trinitarian doctrine. The Son mediates life because he is "homoousios" with the Father in his Divine Nature which is now enfleshed. On the other hand, the Fourth Evangelist also presents the Son as the one who like the Father gives life.<sup>47</sup> The Fourth

---

<sup>40</sup> Robert T. Fortna, "From Christology to Soteriology: A Redaction-Critical Study of Salvation in the Fourth Gospel," *Interpretation* 27 (1973): 40.

<sup>41</sup> See Jn 2:19-22.

<sup>42</sup> See Jn 4:20-24.

<sup>43</sup> W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christian and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 334, proposes that "there is a deliberate presentation of the replacement of 'holy places' by the person of Jesus" in the Fourth Gospel.

<sup>44</sup> Wayne Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 44-72.

<sup>45</sup> See Gen 28:12.

<sup>46</sup> C.K. Barrett, "Christocentric or Theocentric?" in *Essays on John*, ed. C.K. Barrett (London: SPCK, 1982), 10-11.

<sup>47</sup> Jn 5:21.

Evangelist, however, does not present this in terms of “natures” and “essences.” What he wants to convey is simply that in dealing with the Son, the believers are dealing with the Father. In John’s Gospel, therefore “we see Christology in the making, with many tensions unresolved.”<sup>48</sup> In the words of Raymond E. Brown: “Although the Johannine description and acceptance of the divinity of Jesus has ontological implications (as Nicaea recognized in confessing that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is himself true God), in itself this description remains primarily functional.”<sup>49</sup> John seems to have understood what he was doing simply as a way of underlying that the unseen God is met in Jesus. Jesus as the Son is authorized by God to speak his words and to do God’s work.<sup>50</sup>

### Christ Suffered and Died for us

Cyril’s notion of deification as the result of the mediation of the Son through his Incarnation raises an important question. Once the Incarnation has taken place, is not the passion something that might be dispensed with? In John’s Gospel the whole of Jesus’ ministry is presented as salvation. Jesus’ death on a cross forms part of this ministry. It is the ultimate expression of the Son’s obedience which he maintained to the end:<sup>51</sup> it is the Father’s “command” to the Son to lay down his life;<sup>52</sup> the “cup” he must drink;<sup>53</sup> and the “hour” before which he was distressed.<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, it is the last mode of revelation - “When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority but speak thus as the Father taught me.”<sup>55</sup> Does Cyril get this insight right or does he consider the obedience of the Son as exclusively related to the Incarnation? In order to answer this question, one must examine how Cyril speaks of the death and resurrection of the Son.

Cyril regularly speaks of the Incarnation and every aspect of it as an act which happened “for us.” In his exhaustive catalogue of those things that Christ did

---

<sup>48</sup> William Loader, *Jesus in John’s Gospel: Structure and Issues in Johannine Christology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2017), 392.

<sup>49</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, i-xii, Anchor Bible Series, vol. 29 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 408

<sup>50</sup> See for example Jn 5:19-20.25-26; 10:18.32.37-38.

<sup>51</sup> Jn 19:30; Jn 4:34. See also Jn 17:4.

<sup>52</sup> Jn 10:18.

<sup>53</sup> Jn 18:11.

<sup>54</sup> Jn 12:27.

<sup>55</sup> Jn 8:28.

“for us,” Cyril includes Christ’s death and resurrection.<sup>56</sup> As a matter of fact, Cyril does not treat the death of Jesus as a separate event from the Incarnation. The Incarnation was only the beginning of those things Christ did “for us.” For Cyril, Christ’s death stands in closest conjunction with the whole movement of the Incarnation and it would be a mistake if one says that Cyril relates salvation exclusively to the Incarnation. Cyril regularly refers to Christ’s death as “a saving passion”<sup>57</sup> presenting it mainly as a sacrifice of atonement as evidenced in the following three texts from his *Commentary on John’s Gospel*.

The first text is Jn 1:29. In his comment on this Johannine text - “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” - Cyril shows that from the very beginning of his Gospel, John points forward to the salvific meaning of the blood of Christ poured “for us” on the cross. He explained John the Baptist’s confession by referring to the imagery of the sacrificial lamb and of the suffering servant of Isa 53:7 - “Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearer is dumb.”

One Lamb *died for all*, saving the whole flock on earth to God the Father, One for all ... For since we were in many sins, and therefore due to death and corruption, the Father hath given the Son a redemption for us, One for all, since all are in Him, and He above all. One died for all, that all should live in Him.<sup>58</sup>

The second text is Jn 6:51 - “The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.” In his comment on this Johannine text, Cyril scrutinizes the Scriptures for evidence that Jesus’ death is a sacrifice of atonement to God’s will. Starting from Psalm 40:6-8 which is also quoted in Heb 10:5-10, Cyril writes:

He says in the Psalms too, offering Himself as a spotless sacrifice to God the Father, *Sacrifice and offering Thou wouldst not, but a Body preparedst Thou Me. In whole burnt-offering and offerings for sin Thou tookedst no pleasure; then said I, Lo I come (in the chapter of the book it is written of Me) to do Thy will, O God, was My choice.* For since *the blood of bulls and of goats and the ashes of an heifer* sufficed not unto the purging away of sin ... Christ himself came in some way to undergo punishment for all.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Jn 1:29 (P.1:131-132); Jn 14:3 (P.2:235-236).

<sup>57</sup> Jn 8:20 (P.1:577).

<sup>58</sup> Jn 1:29 (P.1:132).

<sup>59</sup> Jn 6:51 (P.1:409-410).

Cyril then quotes Isa 53:5 and 1 Pt 2:24. “For with *His stripes we were healed* and *His Own Self bare our sins in His Own Body on the tree* and He was crucified for all ... that .. we might live in Him.”<sup>60</sup>

The third text is Jn 10:11 - “The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Cyril’s comment on this Johannine text reflects his concern that Jesus’ sacrificial death has a soteriological significance.

He (Jesus) explains the proper method of testing a good shepherd, for He teaches that in a struggle for the salvation of the flock such a one ought not to hesitate to give up even life itself freely, a condition which was of course fulfilled by Christ ... when Christ announced as the Good Shepherd over all, in the struggle with the pair of wild and terrible beasts, He laid His life for us. He endured the cross for our sakes ... that He might deliver all men from condemnation of sin.<sup>61</sup>

The three texts we have just presented exhibit Cyril’s emphasis that Jesus suffered and died “for us.” Cyril repeats this phrase over and over again in these chosen texts to show that Christ did not suffer for his own sake. Like the Incarnation, the passion of Christ was an act for the benefit of humanity. Moreover, these three texts, which are only a sample of what Cyril says in many other passages throughout his *Commentary on John*, reveal how Cyril considered Christ’s obedience as a sacrificial offering. Two main points must be noted here.

First, Cyril’s reference to Psalm 40 or to Heb 10:5-10 in his comment on Jn 6:51. Cyril’s point of focus in reference to this Psalm is the accomplishment of Christ’s work through his obedience unto death. Jesus fulfilled and perfectly displayed God’s will in the sacrifice of his body on the cross, which is superior to the sacrificial offerings prescribed by the law. Cyril frequently refers to Hebrews, especially when he wants to speak about Christ’s sacrificial death. The designation of Christ as “High Priest” is a good example. During the Arian controversy, there was an increased interest in the theme of Christ’s priesthood.<sup>62</sup> Cyril adopted this theme in his comment on Jn 17:9-11 to show that Christ’s death on the cross was a spotless sacrifice for others.

Being our truly great and all-holy High Priest, by His own prayers He appeases the anger of His Father, sacrificing Himself for us. For He is the Sacrifice, and is Himself our Priest, Himself our Mediator, Himself a blameless Victim, the true

---

<sup>60</sup> Jn 6:51 (P.1:410).

<sup>61</sup> Jn 10:11 (P.2:76).

<sup>62</sup> See Frances M. Young, “Christological Ideas in Greek Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 20 (1969): 150-163; Paul M. Parvis, “The Commentary on Hebrews and the *Contra Theodorum* of Cyril of Alexandria,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 26 (1975): 415-419.

Lamb which taketh away the sin of the world. The Mosaic ceremonial was then, as it were, a type and transparent shadowing forth of the mediation of Christ, shown forth in the last times, and the High Priest of the Law indicated in his own person that Priest Who is above the Law. For the things of the Law are shadows of the truth ... But Christ Who manifested Himself in the last times above the types and figures of the Law, at once our High Priest and Mediator, prays for us as Man ... For He, being a holy High Priest, blameless and undefiled, offered Himself not for His own weakness, as was the custom of those to whom was allotted the duty of sacrificing according to the Law, but rather for the salvation of our souls, and that once for all.<sup>63</sup>

At this point, however, one must note that nowhere does John explicitly refer to Jesus as High Priest. In his monograph on the passion of Christ in John's Gospel, Ignace de la Potterie states that "the rich theme of Jesus-High Priest, in the category of the ritual order, which we find in the Epistle to the Hebrews, plays practically no part (in John)."<sup>64</sup> J.P. Heil, however, reaches a different conclusion as he brings evidence from the Fourth Gospel which tends to indicate that this Gospel applies the motif of High Priest to Jesus "in a more subtle and symbolic way as part of the Fourth Gospel's well-established dramatic irony."<sup>65</sup>

The second point one must notice is the fact that the Fourth Gospel does not give the atoning significance of Jesus' death as much weight as Cyril does. There is no doubt that the idea of Jesus' death as atonement is present in John's Gospel. There are various allusions to it in this Gospel. The positioning of Jn 1:29 at the beginning of this Gospel may form an *inclusio* with the various Passover allusions of the passion narrative.<sup>66</sup> The idea of Jesus' death as atonement seems to have also been known to the Fourth Evangelist in a Eucharistic context.<sup>67</sup> Thus,

---

<sup>63</sup> Jn 17:9-11 (P.2:506-507).

<sup>64</sup> Ignace de la Potterie, *The Hour of Jesus: The Passion and the Resurrection of Jesus according to John, Text and Spirit* (Slough: St Paul Publication, 1989), 114. See also page 126.

<sup>65</sup> J.P. Heil, "Jesus as the Unique High Priest in the Gospel of John," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 57 (1995): 730.

<sup>66</sup> See Jn 19:14.29.31. For good comments on these Johannine passion texts see M.J.J. Menken, *Old Testament Quotations in the Fourth Gospel: Studies in Textual Form*, Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 15 (Netherlands: Pharos, 1996), 147-166; Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave, A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1994); Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, xii-xxi, Anchor Bible Series, vol. 29a (Garden City, New York: Doubleday: 1970), 953.

<sup>67</sup> On this point see the works of Martinus C. de Boer, *Johannine Perspectives on the Death of Jesus*, Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 17 (Netherlands: Pharos, 1996), 233-234; M.J.J. Menken, "John 6.51c-58: Eucharist or Christology?," *Biblica* 74 (1993): 8; J.T. Forestell, *The Word of the Cross: Salvation as Revelation in the Fourth Gospel* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical

Bultmann's remark that "Jesus' death as atonement for sin has no place in John"<sup>68</sup> is too sweeping. Having said so, one must also recognize that the significance of Jesus' death as atonement sacrifice does not play a central part in the Christology of the Fourth Gospel. John does not fully develop this idea: he only adopts it and uses it "incidentally, illustratively and confessionally."<sup>69</sup>

When one compares John's with Cyril's comments on the significance of the atoning death of Jesus, one may therefore conclude that Cyril seems to have given much more weight to the atoning significance of Jesus' death than John did. In spite of this, the Alexandrian Patriarch comes very close to John in his explanation of the Johannine term of "glorification."

### The Glorification of Christ

In order to delve into the heart of Cyril's thought, our next task is to examine Cyril's use of the term "glorification" in relation to Jesus' death. The best place to start at is his comment on Jn 13:31-32 - "Now is the Son of man glorified." Many Church Fathers have struggled with this Johannine text as they found it very difficult to interpret because it is a text which seems to lead toward the Arian position. If the Son is God, why does the Fourth Evangelist present *the glory* as if it were something the Son did not possess? Cyril's comment on this text is a plausible answer to this question. He starts his argument by specifying the problem: "We must now inquire what manner of glorification that is to which he now specifically alludes: for some perhaps may say, was He not surely glorified before this, by the mighty wonders which He wrought?"<sup>70</sup> Cyril then enumerates a number of miracles and he states that the term "glorification" does not come to terms with in these miracles. It is here that Cyril spells out the meaning of the term "glorification."

The perfect consummation of His glory and the fullness of His fame were summed up in the facts of His suffering ... For this reason, then we shall reckon that He was now glorified, although there never was a time when He was not *Lord of Glory* ... *Now is the Son of Man Glorified*, and by this He is pointing to His suffering as Savior, as being already at the doors.<sup>71</sup>

---

Institute, 1974); L.P. Jones, *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John*, Journal for the Study of New Testament Supplement 145 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1997), especially 179-218.

<sup>68</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (London: SCM, 1993), 53.

<sup>69</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Jesus in the Gospels: A Biblical Christology* (Louisville/Kentucky: John Knox, 1995), 283.

<sup>70</sup> Jn 13:31-32 (P.2:209).

<sup>71</sup> Jn 13:31-32 (P.2:210).

His comment on Jn 12:28 is very close to that of Jn 13:31-32.

Since this is the cause for which I have come *glorify Thy Son*, that is, prevent me not from encountering death, but grant this favour to Thy Son for the good of all mankind ... For in his wisdom he in these words speaks of being crucified as being *glorified*, and the cross is a glory ... the undergoing this for the benefit of others is a characteristic of excessive compassion and of supreme glory. And the Son became glorious also in another way. For from the fact that He overpowered death, we recognized Him to be Life and Son of the Living God. And the Father is glorified when He is seen to have such a Son begotten of Himself, of the same Nature as Himself ... and when He says: *Glorify Thy Son*, He means this: *Give Thy consent to Me in My willingness to suffer ... for instead of suffering He spoke of glory.*<sup>72</sup>

These comments clearly show that for Cyril, *the Son's sufferings are the Son's glorification*. This intuition indicates that although Cyril may have given too much emphasis to the Son's death as atonement, by presenting the Son's sufferings as his glorification, he came very close to the way John understands the meaning of the Son's death. The Fourth Evangelist couples the crucifixion-resurrection event as the glorification and exaltation of Christ.<sup>73</sup> This notion is expressed in John's use of the verb "to lift up" or "to exalt."<sup>74</sup> In being lifted up on the cross, God's plan of salvation is accomplished, and the Son returned to his Father. The cross and the resurrection of Christ, therefore, are the means by which the Son enters into his previous glory.

## Conclusion

It is time to draw together the threads of this study and seek to assess whether our account of Cyril's *Commentary* has thrown light on the possibility of theological interpretation. In describing the Biblical studies prior to the eighteenth century, scholars usually employ the term "pre-critical" which may suggest that the Biblical commentators of that period did not use their critical abilities. It is true that particular historical questions were not asked, but one can scarcely regard writers like Cyril of Alexandria as lacking in critical abilities.

---

<sup>72</sup> Jn 12:28 (P.2:153).

<sup>73</sup> On this point see George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary 36 (Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1987), 211; Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, xiii-xxi, 610; Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 2:480; T.D. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 541.

<sup>74</sup> See Donald Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of John*. The Passion Series (Collegeville/MN: Fowler Books, 1991), 34-35.



While in the course of commenting on the Johannine text, Cyril had to wrestle with basic and perplexing questions, the acuteness of observation and attention to details must be quoted as a valuable mark of Cyril's *Commentary on John*.

For Cyril, the Fourth Gospel was the foundation stone of his faith. One may rightly say that in terms of the theological subject-matter, there is an agreement between John and Cyril which is not presupposed in modern biblical scholarship. Cyril was evidently talking about the same God as John, namely, the God of Israel and of the Church. Cyril was also speaking about the same Jesus as John, namely, the man of Nazareth in whom his followers see God's decisive loving intervention; who was crucified and rose again, and who is now glorified. The same can be said with regard to the Spirit, through whom both God and Jesus are defined in relation to believers.

Despite all the limitations, Cyril grasps and articulates in his own generation's language the essence of John's message, namely, that salvation is found in Jesus Christ in whom God is revealed. Cyril's interpretation of John, therefore, provided a contribution to the theological and pastoral needs of his day. It also meets a need which the purely descriptive historical method fails to satisfy,<sup>75</sup> as it speaks of God and so illuminates the believer's relationship with God. Cyril's method is not ours, yet it constantly reminds us that: "There can be no serious use of the Bible for theology unless one has a clear idea of how the interpreter moves from a description of the biblical witness to the object toward which these witnesses point."<sup>76</sup>

The preoccupation with historical description of early Christianity prevents many modern biblical commentators from speaking with the text, about who God is and where salvation is to be found.<sup>77</sup> This is the central content of

---

<sup>75</sup> Walter Wink, *Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 1, has gone far to assess the historical-critical method as "bankrupt," arguing that this "critical method has reduced the Bible to a dead letter." The 1993 Document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on Biblical Interpretation, though it uses the historical-critical method as a control on the other biblical approaches, accepts a two-fold reaction against this approach. In his evaluation of this document, J. Holman, "A Dutch Catholic Perspective," in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, ed. J. L. Houlden (London: SCM, 1995), 131, writes that "the community of the faithful has clearly indicated that it cannot bake bread to feed its soul from the material which historical criticism offers." For more arguments on this point see Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> Brevard S. Childs, "On Reclaiming the Bible for Christian Theology," in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. C.E. Braaten and R.W. Jenson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 14.

<sup>77</sup> William Wrede, for example, saw the main task of New Testament scholarship as a matter of reconstructing and describing the development of early Christian thought as a chapter in the history of religion. He objected to present the New Testament material in terms of doctrinal

Scripture for Christians spelled out in a succession of theological articulations. For Cyril, however, the Church's dogmas "have an intrinsic connection with the 'fuller sense' of the Scripture, being the unfolding of what was already present."<sup>78</sup> On the one hand, it is this comprehensive and richly theological approach which made Cyril's *Commentary on John* valuable for his time. Cyril's aims are still the same as those of the theologian today, but the way the latter achieves these aims is different from Cyril's method. On the other hand, Cyril was more than merely drawing out what was already implicit in John. Cyril's reading of John was rigidly guided by his doctrinal presuppositions.

After the long history of Trinitarian debate, Cyril understandably tends to read the many Johannine statements about the relationship between the Father and the Son as an ontological relationship. He used John as a vehicle to defend the Church's faith and to correct the Arians' interpretation of John which Cyril considered incompatible with the Church's living faith. This is seen especially in those instances when Cyril's reading of John entails no more than the production of proof text to support the Church's existing doctrinal framework.

Yet, one should not consider Cyril's arguments for their own sake or for speculation. For Cyril, John's Gospel is not "merely a handbook of intellectual orthodoxy, but a gospel of salvation."<sup>79</sup> Cyril's Christology is directed towards soteriology as in John. If there is a striking difference between the Fourth Gospel and Cyril with regards to their respective Christologies, this does not seem to be the case in their soteriological arguments. Like John, Cyril wanted to maintain that the activity of God impinges on people's life. But John and Cyril did this by combining two distinct emphases: on the one hand, they place the divine realm clearly within Jesus Christ, and on the other hand, they tell that those who believe can have life "in Him." What unites Cyril to John is therefore a common soteriological aim. Both John and the Alexandrian Patriarch regard the whole movement of Incarnation as the means by which the believer has life "in Him," that is, in the Son. Cyril, however, goes beyond John in offering a theory of how this happens, namely, by deification: God became man so that he might become

---

topics, arguing that this fails to bring out what it really is. His concern was with "what was believed, thought, taught, hoped, required and strive for in the earliest period of Christianity, not what certain writings say about faith, doctrine, hope, etc." William Wrede, "The Task and Methods of 'New Testament Theology,'" in *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, ed. Robert Morgan (London: SCM Press, 1973), 69.

<sup>78</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, "Exegesis, Dogmatics and the Development of Dogma," in *Dogmatic vs Biblical Theology*, ed. H. Vorgrimler (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1962), 137.

<sup>79</sup> Wiles, *The Spiritual Gospel*, 147.

God. John also has the mutual indwelling language, but that theory does not depend on any Greek philosophical conceptuality.

Rev. Dr Martin Micallef  
Department of Hebrew, Greek and Sacred Scripture  
Faculty of Theology  
University of Malta  
Msida MSD 2080  
Malta

[martin.f.micallef@um.edu.mt](mailto:martin.f.micallef@um.edu.mt)