

The Theme of Marian Mediation in Cyril of Alexandria's Ephesian Writings

The origins of the idea of Mary's intercessory powers are to be sought as early as fifth-century theology, in the context of the Council of Ephesus (429–431), which deposed Nestorius and confirmed Cyril of Alexandria's christology with its usage of the title *Theotokos* as orthodox. Cyril and Nestorius espoused mutually exclusive conceptualizations of the role of Mary in incarnational theology. Nestorius was not prepared to acknowledge the title *Theotokos*, except as an example of misguided and excessive piety; if the usage of the title was inevitable, he suggested, then it was to be done with proper qualifications.¹ Cyril, on the other hand, insisted on the unconditional acceptance of the title *theotokos* and the christological reasoning on which it rested.² The Council of Ephesus aimed at confirming one of these two forms of marian theology as orthodox, instead of negotiating a settlement. Any form of negotiation would be unrealistic, partially because of the glaring difference in the theological schema of the two camps, and, partially, because orthodoxy could not be embraced by the church as a matter of compromise.

Regardless whether devotion to Mary predated, contributed to, or determined her conceptualization as *Theotokos*, Mary's depiction as a God-bearer was endorsed at Ephesus (in its Cyrilline version) as an elemental part of the theology of the incarnation. The indispensable role which Mary comes to play in Cyril's incarnational theology is directly related to the facts of her "divine motherhood" as uniting human and divine realms and, consequently, to the transformation of the *Theotokos* into a mediating figure, facilitating the restoration of the covenant between God and humanity. In this connection I propose to read Cyril of Alexandria's contribution to the emergence of the idea of marian intercession as qualified by his understanding of the Virgin Mother as a "ladder to heaven," bringing together God and creation in an unbreakable bond. In other words, I consider Cyril's rudimentary understanding of Mary as a mediating figure to be a crucial element of his incarnational theology and by extension, of his christological agenda.

It would be anachronistic to read into Cyril's reflections on the *Theotokos*' dignity a definitive understanding of the possibilities of casting Mary as an intercessor or a mediator in light of her special relationship with her son. Yet by way of supplementing his insistence on the theological rationale behind the title *Theotokos*, Cyril's works from his Ephesian period (letters, homilies and dogmatic treatises) rely on certain concepts that come to full fruition in the context of the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. Among those are his depiction of the fiat of Mary's motherhood, her instrumental role in the divine economy, and a special consideration of the life-giving properties of the Virgin's womb. Such theological motifs dominate Cyril's incarnational vision. Mary's mediating role or its subsidiary privilege, the power of intercession, is thus not a mature doctrinal notion for him but a logical corollary of the significance that he ascribes to the Virgin in the context of the incarnation. In Cyril's work this convergence of conceptual fields – divine revelation, incarnation, and marian theology, – is so unambiguous that it can only lead to one conclusion. Notwithstanding the need of extensive and reliable studies of the origins of marian veneration before Ephesus (431), Cyril's reconstruction of marian and incarnational themes has a uniquely Christian background. A careful reading of Cyril challenges what earlier studies have defined as a matter of scholarly consensus, namely that early mariology is "paganism baptized, pure and simple" and a "natural outgrowth of the

¹ For instance, Nestorius insists that if, as a figure of speech, Mary is *Theotokos* (indicating her role in Christ's unity), then she is also *anthropotokos*, or the origin of Christ's humanity. Cf. F. Loofs, *Nestoriana*. Halle 1905, 303.

² Cyril defends this idea in numerous instances throughout the controversy. A good example of his reasoning in regard to the unity between the Logos and Mary's son is found in the following statement: "Since we have elected to think correctly we certainly do not say that God became the Father of the flesh, nor again that the nature of the deity was born through a woman before it and assumed the human condition. No, instead we worship One Lord Jesus Christ, for the Word born of God and the man born completely of the holy virgin come together in unity"; *Letter to the Monks* § 17, cf. J. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy, its History, Theology, and Texts*. Leiden–New York–Cologne 1994, 255.

goddess-cults in the ancient world.”³ It will be difficult to argue then that “there is a direct line, unbroken and clearly discernible, from the goddess-cults of the ancients to the reverence paid and eventually the cult accorded to the Virgin Mary.”⁴ While the historical materials addressing the marian question in the period predating Ephesus are very scarce and thus any conclusions on their basis become tentative, I argue that, as illustrated by Cyril, they make sense to a Christian audience, participating in a Christ-commemorating liturgy and working with a Christ-focused theological vocabulary. In this connection it is useful to examine the Christian, rather than the pagan roots of marian recognition, without setting aside or disclaiming any possible influence of pagan religious practices. This is not to say that ancient devotion to Mary emerged in a cultural and intellectual vacuum, but that the context of ecclesiastical discussion on marian theology is the backbone which determines its force and development.

A good example of this Christ-centered approach to marian studies is found in Cyril’s five volume work, *Ad-versus Nestorium*, where Cyril explicitly defended Mary as *Theotokos*. In this text his argument relies on an extensive analysis of the meaning of divine *kenosis* and God’s offer of salvation. In building the image of the Virgin as the locus of the interactive exchange between human and divine, Cyril touches upon a number of seminal questions, for example: a) what is the identity of Mary’s son – human or divine? b) is Mary the mother of God or of God’s anointed? c) how exactly does God become incarnate?⁵ d) how does the incarnation compare to and differ from the indwelling of the saints by the Holy Spirit? Repeatedly Cyril links the mariological issues to the precepts of christological thinking. Cyril’s work in that regard has a distinct Alexandrian background, as shown by Jacques Liébaert, who claims that Cyril both borrowed from Athanasius and advanced his doctrine in a more coherent form related to the specific definition of the person of Christ.⁶ John McGuckin, an author of the most comprehensive treatment of Cyril’s christology published in 1996, writes: “[A]fter Cyril, and largely because of him, the Alexandrian schema of the pre-existent Word’s *Kenosis* to humanity and his deification of the flesh became the standard canon of christological language for the church universally.”⁷ This judgment is supported by Norman Russell, who describes Cyril on the dogmatic level as the “greatest patristic exponent of a christology ‘from above.’”⁸

Far from adding it as a mere footnote to the major issue of the Nestorian controversy, Cyril looks at the marian question as the impetus for re-examining the relationship between God and creation, and in the process, for a major restructuring of incarnational theology. As Cyril sees it, in Mary’s motherhood God revealed himself and “came to what was his own” (Jn 1:10). The womb of Mary served as the domain in which God clothed himself with flesh and entered the realm of history. Incarnation and divine revelation, Cyril asserts, are inseparably linked. In turn, the doctrine of the incarnation leads to a particular understanding of Mary as the mother of God, whose birthgiving provides the indisputable proof of God’s salvific appearance among his people.

As a result of the incarnation, Cyril argues, God had bestowed the benefits of his eternal life upon humanity, for in his union with the flesh the Word “has the power to bring all things to life.”⁹ This awareness of God’s good favour and the optimistic implications with which it endows Cyril’s anthropology are striking. In the context of incarnational theology, the Mother of God incarnate occupies a special place: “for she gave birth in the flesh to the Word of God made flesh.”¹⁰ The incarnation happens for our sake, Cyril argues, citing Nicaea, and it is an act of divine condescension from the one “who came down for our salvation, emptying himself.”¹¹ Assuming the form of a servant and becoming “God revealed for our sake in human form” is the ultimate act of divine freedom:

*This is how we should think that the Word of God willingly underwent his voluntary self-emptying; and this is how he humbled himself, assuming the form of a slave, even though in his own nature he is free.*¹²

³ S. Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian roots of Mariology*. Leiden–New York–Cologne 1993. Benko’s study provides an exhaustive list of cross-references between marian practices of devotion, marian imagery and vocabulary in early Christian theology, and the cults of pagan goddesses, as for example, Isis and Cybele.

⁴ Benko, *Virgin Goddess* 4.

⁵ Cf. Jn 1:14.

⁶ J. Liébaert, *La Doctrine christologique de Saint Cyrille d’Alexandrie avant la querelle nestorienne*. Lille 1951, esp. 218, 236–237.

⁷ Liébaert, *Doctrine christologique* 227.

⁸ N. Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria: Selections*. New York 2000, 63.

⁹ *Explanation of the Twelve Chapters*, ed. McGuckin, St. Cyril of Alexandria 292.

¹⁰ *Explanation of the Twelve Chapters*, ed. McGuckin, St. Cyril of Alexandria 283.

¹¹ *Third Letter to Nestorius*, ed. L. R. Wickham, *Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters*. Oxford 1983, 17.

¹² *Third Letter to Nestorius*, ed. Wickham, Cyril 255.

While in human form, the transcendence of the Word remains intrinsic to his divine nature so that even in the flesh the Son remains “ineffably begotten by nature from the Father” and co-eternal with him.¹³ In his birth “according to humanity” the Word encounters humanity in its condition of mortality, corruption, and decay, but since the flesh is his own, by transforming it into the divine life, he restores it once again to communion with God and his glory:

*As Life, he destroyed death, refusing to suffer anything contrary to his own nature; and he did this so that corruption should be weakened in the bodies of all and so that the dominion of death should be destroyed.*¹⁴

Furthermore the natures, Cyril states, human and divine,

*combined unto this real union were different, but from the two together is one God the Son, without the diversity of the natures being destroyed by the union. And it is with reference to this notion of a union without confusion that we proclaim the holy Virgin to be the mother of God, because God the Word was made flesh and became man, and by the act of conception united to Himself the temple that He has received from her.*¹⁵

Cyril affirms that God’s visibility in human form and “in the likeness of a servant” is consistent with and supports the notion that “the glory of lordship is inseparable from Him.”¹⁶ The fullness of the divine nature suffers no alteration as a result of the union. Rather the flesh or the humanity of the Word is “holy and perfectly pure,” Christ is to be contemplated in his “godlike glory” for all eternity, and his birth is a “great and extraordinary miracle.”¹⁷ Consequently, “[H]e knew only the good, and was exempt from that depravity which belongs to a human being” and so human nature was transformed by his coming.

The assumption here is that humanity is created to participate in the divine life and this is the original teleological dimension of its existence. The optimism of such anthropology is startling. As Meyendorff observes in regard to this aspect of eastern thought, “[P]articipation in God – as we have shown – is the very nature of man, not its abolition.”¹⁸ At the same time, the divine initiative is what enables this process ever to take place. Here Cyril adopts the idea which Athanasius states in his *On the Incarnation*; that human ontological stability depends on its participation in God.¹⁹

The images which Cyril chooses to illustrate this point are laden with scriptural allusions and structured to illustrate the inseparable nature of the union and the contribution that each makes to the whole.²⁰ For instance, Cyril speaks of the lily spreading out its perfume, the pearl spreading its brilliance, and the wood being cast into fire as analogies to the composite being of Christ.²¹ Cyril’s favourite analogy of the union is the relationship between body and soul:

*The one, unique Christ has no duality even though he is seen as compounded in inseparable unity out of two different elements in the way that a human being, for example, is seen to have no duality but to be one, consisting of the pair of elements, body and soul.*²²

The consideration he gives these images is instructive. Body and soul are inseparable and perceived as a joint reality, an indivisible wholeness in any individual; similarly the lily cannot exist without exuding fragrance; en-

¹³ *Commentary on Luke*, ed. R. Payne-Smith, A Commentary upon the Gospel according to S. Luke by S. Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria. Oxford 1859, 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁵ *Commentary on Luke*, ed. Payne-Smith 47.

¹⁶ *Commentary on Luke*, ed. Payne-Smith 52.

¹⁷ *Commentary on Luke*, ed. Payne-Smith 52–53.

¹⁸ J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical trends and doctrinal themes*. New York 1974, 153. Also see his discussion on eastern theological anthropology in regard to original sin; *ibid.* 143–146.

¹⁹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 11, E. R. Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*. Philadelphia 1954, 65: “he [God] gives them a share in his own image, our Lord Jesus Christ, and makes them after his own image and after his likeness: so that by such grace perceiving the image, that is, the Word of the Father, they may be able through him to get an idea of the Father, and, knowing their maker, live the happy and truly blessed life”; cf. *ibid.*, 64–65.

²⁰ Cyril’s approach is consistent with his understanding that “the Word of God became an example for us in the days of his flesh, but not nakedly or outside the limits of the self-emptying”; McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria* 103.

²¹ For a detailed discussion of the connotations of these images see R. Siddals, *Oneness and Difference in the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria*. *Studia Patristica* 18, 1 (1983) 207–211, 209; McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria* 196–201.

²² *Third Letter to Nestorius*, ed. Wickham, Cyril 23. See also his usage of this image in his *Explanation of the Twelve Chapters* § 3 and *Letter to the Monks* § 12; in McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria* 285–286, 251–252.

flamed, the wood takes in the fire.²³ Cyril's choice of these images suggests that there is an organic unity between two entities in Christ, even as they are not placed on the same ontological level of value, and that this natural, hypostatic, and organic character of the unity is what enables Christ to save and, moreover, defines salvation as the work of God.

For Cyril's soteriology it is essential that Mary mediates this type of christological union. The birth and, later on, the death of the Son of God, are experiences that bring together God and humanity:

*For he was the Word in his own body born from a woman, and he gave it to death in due season, but he suffered nothing at all in his own nature for as such he is life and life-giver. Nonetheless he made the things of the flesh his own so that the suffering could be said to be his.*²⁴

Cyril asserts that these "things" happen to the incarnate Word: before the incarnation they could not be predicated of the divine Logos. Without Mary's consent to the annunciation, the divinization of human nature would not have been possible. It is the reality of the incarnation that has made this interaction of human and divine properties realistic and appropriate to the divine plan of salvation. In the same way in which the christic unity has no parallel in created nature, in the same sense the human experiences of the incarnate Logos are transfigured by his divine identity. Cyril's theory of exchange of properties creates its own epistemology of union according to which the Word is endowed with genuine human experiences, yet the fact of the union restores to them the dimension of re-orienting and undergoing them in the fullness of divine life. Hence humanity is brought back to its original state of participating in God and offering the fullness of creation to the sanctifying love of its creator.

Mary's pregnancy and birthgiving are described as realities that form an inseparable part of the authenticity of her virgin motherhood. In this connection Cyril understands the Nestorian depiction of Christ's birth as 'passing through' from the "Virgin Mother of Christ" (in the context of a relationship of conjunction between God and humanity) to limit God to a circumscribable entity which could be moved in and out of the Virgin's body:

*What is this 'passed through' if it does not indicate the birth? Or do you say that the Word of God passed through the Virgin on his own without the flesh? Is this not complete nonsense? For it would be necessary to conceive of the divine as endowed with quantity and be capable of movement that transposes it from one place to another.*²⁵

The reality of the birth is undisputable, Cyril argues, because it is through Mary's body that God reveals his majesty in a visible and tangible form. This is why, Cyril concludes, the "holy and most pure Virgin" is to be venerated as *Theotokos*, that is to say, a figure mediating between God and humankind by virtue of her 'divine' motherhood.²⁶

The most original element of Cyril's depiction of the *Theotokos* as mediating the exchange of human and divine properties is related to the special consideration he gives to the womb of Mary as the sacred space in which God unites himself with human nature. This image is tested and refined in Cyril's homilies on Mary delivered during the Ephesian controversy, especially in his famous *Homily 4*. In *Homily 4*, a well-known even if disputed liturgical text, Cyril highlights the image of Mary as indispensable to the purposes of the divine economy.²⁷ The Virgin mother is the one, Cyril proclaims emphatically, "through" whom creation has been brought back to heaven and true faith has triumphed. She alone is the mother of God through whom the church is established and Christian rulers receive their powers.²⁸

Situating Mary at the intersection of human and divine realms with all of the possible implications that this approach has for later interpretations of her intercessory powers would continue in subsequent development of marian homiletics. Like Cyril, Theodotus of Ancyra and Proclus of Constantinople both adopted mariological

²³ The idea occurs in the treatise *Ad Reginas* PG 76, 1364, also *Apologia ad Theodosium*, PG 76, 408; cf. McGuckin, St. Cyril of Alexandria 197. Nestorius and his teacher Theodore of Mopsuestia make a similar analogy between the christic union and the Exodus image of the burning bush; see Greer, "Image of God," 58. Commenting on their usage of analogies, Greer observes that Nestorius rejects as deficient the analogy between christic union and the body and soul union in a human being. Also cf. R. Greer, Theodore of Mopsuestia: Exegete and Theologian. London 1961, 65.

²⁴ *Letter to the Monks*, ed. McGuckin, St. Cyril of Alexandria 260.

²⁵ *Adversus Nestorium*, Russell, Cyril of Alexandria 140.

²⁶ *Adversus Nestorium*, Russell, Cyril of Alexandria 132; cf. *ibid.*, 135: "the Word came down not into the flesh of any particular person ... On the contrary, having made his own the body which was from a woman, and having been born from her according to the flesh, he recapitulated human birth in himself."

²⁷ PG 77, 992BC

²⁸ *Ibid.*

motifs first proposed by the Alexandrian patriarch and worked on the consolidation of christological and marian themes. For instance, in his *Homily 4*, Proclus addresses the Virgin Mary in a way that affirms her unmediated relation to God while also underlining the divine initiative in their relationship: “He entered into you, for this was pleasing to him, and he came forth from you, for this was his will. And he was before you, as he is before all imagining, being ineffably, immutably, impassibly, invisibly, immediately, and divinely born from God the Father.”²⁹ Proclus’ *Homily 26* similarly employs a fusion of christological and mariological motifs in asserting that the one God chooses Mary for his entry into the realm of creatures, while remaining essentially God: “He sanctified the virginal gates, he dwelt without construction in the womb, and the one without beginning was born of a woman remaining what he was and yet becoming a small child.”³⁰

Similarly, references to Mary’s womb as a “container of the uncontainable” abound in another seminal work from the Ephesian period, the *Akathistos* hymn. The *Akathistos* is often ascribed to Romanos the Melodist but recent works by Leena Mari Peltomaa have convincingly argued that “the mariology of the hymn as a whole fits the context of Ephesus.”³¹ It is the theme of Ephesus – the manner of the incarnation – that leads to a description of Mary as the “womb of the divine Incarnation” in this piece.³² The introduction or Prooemium I to the *Akathistos* opens with the familiar Ephesian notion of containment in its most paradoxical form – the presence of God “unchanged but whole” in the form of a servant in Mary’s womb.³³ In this sense Mary is the “celestial ladder by which God descended” a statement which emphasizes her mediating role.³⁴ Mary cultivates the cultivator of life and is rightly called *theotokos*.³⁵ Architectural metaphors and images of Mary as the locus of salvation abound: the Virgin is a “container of the uncontainable God”, an “ark gilded by the Spirit,” an “immovable tower” of the church, an “impregnable wall,” a pillar, a lampstand, an “all holy chariot,” a tabernacle, a bridal chamber, a bridge, and a ladder.³⁶ As Peltomaa points out, these metaphors “describe brilliantly the place of Mary in the economy of salvation” and emphasize her instrumental function in general.³⁷ Their connotations of enclosure and localization are linked to the evocation of the Virgin’s name as a person most apt to give protection, victory, and healing.³⁸

To summarize, Cyril’s introduction of the theme of Marian mediation, understood as Mary’s contribution to the christic union in the reality of the incarnation, is a precursor to later interpretations of the Virgin as mediator and intercessor. The mother of the one Christ occupies a unique place in Cyril’s incarnational theology. She is the “celestial ladder by which God descended” from heaven.³⁹ Her motherhood embodies the immediate life-giving presence of God with the human race and all creation rejoices in her.⁴⁰ This explicit emphasis on Mary’s middle role between God and creation, the focal point of which is her motherhood (and her womb)⁴¹, is Cyril’s contribution to the emerging field of marian theology and a definite theological novelty.

²⁹ *Homily Four*, ed. Constanas 236–237. See N. Constanas, Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the *Theotokos*, and the Loom of the Flesh. *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 32 (1995) 169–194.

³⁰ Trans. Constanas 374–5.

³¹ Ibid.

³² See L. M. Peltomaa. The Image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn. Leiden–Boston–Cologne 2001, 205.

³³ Ed. Peltomaa, 3. Peltomaa considers Prooemium I as the theological argument of the hymn; cf. *ibid.*, 37. The conceptual structure of the Prooemium affirms the themes most pertinent to the context of Ephesus, especially the discussion of Mary as a container of the uncontainable God.

³⁴ Strophe 3, ed. Peltomaa 206.

³⁵ Strophe 5, ed. Peltomaa 3; Strophe 23, ed. Peltomaa 19: “as we sing in honour of your giving birth, we all praise you as a living temple, O *Theotokos*.” The emphasis on the *Theotokos* is developed in a context which negates a depiction of Mary as a receiver or *theodochos* (which is a Nestorian term) – a direct reflection of the Ephesian theme of the incarnation; cf. Peltomaa 148

³⁶ Strophe 23, 19, 15, 3

³⁷ Peltomaa 146.

³⁸ Cf. esp. Strophe 23, ed. Peltomaa, 19. Here the description of Mary as a tabernacle, tower, and a wall, is followed by a consideration of her role as the one through whom enemies fall and trophies are raised. The strophe ends with a powerful offering of praise: “Hail, healing of my body/ Hail, protection of my soul/ Hail, bride unwedded”; *ibid.*

³⁹ *Akathistos*, Strophe 3, ed. Peltomaa 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, cf. *Akathistos*, Strophe 11, ed. Peltomaa 15 where Mary is proclaimed a “minister of holy joy.”

⁴¹ Cf. *Second Letter to Nestorius* § 4, trans. Wickham, 7: “he underwent fleshly birth united from the very womb making the birth of his flesh his very own”; also *Third Letter to Nestorius*, § 3, trans. Wickham, 17: “he it is who was incarnate and made man, that is to say, took flesh of the holy Virgin, making it his own from the womb and underwent our human birth and came forth as man from a woman.” In this connection Peltomaa argues that the Council of Ephesus (where Cyril’s mariology won the upper hand) discussed the physical aspects of the incarnation and thus also focused on the womb of Mary. See Peltomaa 61.

