

Christology and apology in Ephrem the Syrian

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ABSTRACT

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Christology is an attempt to relate the two natures of Christ; apology on the other hand, has the dual aim of justification and attack; both these entail polar structures. It is argued in this paper that these two binary systems of opposition interfered with each other to a certain extent. This occurred because of the practice of the early church to establish institutional stability and consent via a process of polarisation. The effect of apologetic antitheses on Ephrem's description of the natures of Christ is investigated. Examples from Ephrem's work relating to the polarity between the church and Judaism, between the nature of God and Arianism, and between the nature of God and humanity are discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The first two denominators in the title of this paper are in many ways related. Christology has often been the subject of apologetics, and apologetics in turn can be described as the breeding ground of early Christology. Since the person of Christ stood in the centre of the difficulties pagan thinkers had with Christianity, the early apologists used the Logos concept, which was common to both Platonism and Christianity, to explain the person of Christ to those who were acquainted with Hellenistic philosophy (Carey 1974: 57).

It is, however, the structural similarity between Christology and apology that will be focussed upon. Christology, as the result of theological reflection, and

apology, as part of the process of that reflection, both entail systems of binary opposition. In its refined form, Christology is an attempt to define the relation between the poles of divinity and humanity in the person of Christ. Apology, on the other hand, has the dual aim of justifying Christian doctrine and at the same time demonstrating the falsity of the opposing viewpoint, be it Judaism, Hellenism or a certain heterodox movement.

The word 'apology' is here used as an archilexeme for material abstracted from inter alia the *contra haereses* and *adversus Iudaeos* literature. These works of the church fathers are generally referred to as 'polemics', but apologetics and polemics are mainly differentiated with regard to the implied reader. In the fourth century this kind of literature was meant to be read primarily by Christians. Ephrem's hymns were intended for liturgical use (Bardenheuer 1962: 342, 344) and can therefore not be called polemics, although marked polemical traits are in evidence (cf Botha 1982: 9). Since the aspect of reader criticism is stressed in this paper, it was felt that the term 'apology' is to be preferred.

The purport now will be to illustrate that the similarity of binary opposition in Christology and apology is no mere coincidence. In the case of Ephrem, the Syrian church father of the fourth century, antithetic Christological formulations seem to reflect the contemporary conflict of the church with dissenters and Jews rather than a normative doctrine. Polemics seem to incur polar thought-patterns. Where polarity is precipitated into Christological formulae, the historic context and the implicit reader should be kept in mind by the modern reader or else apology can be misunderstood as Christology.

2. POLARITY AND STABILITY

The writings of the church fathers and the documents of the early church have for a long time been read from a specific perspective. JS Semler, the father of *Dogmengeschichte*, wrote his major work on the history of dogma as a preface to the systematic theology of SJ Baumgarten. This implied relationship between the history of dogma and systematic theology was unfortunate. Each historical epoch was divided up along dogmatic lines and grouped under doctrinal categories. The assumption underlying Semler's work was that theology is the rational attempt of Christian thinkers to find intellectual expression of Christian belief (Wilken 1971: 223).

It would be more correct to say that theology developed out of a network of concrete decisions the church made in situations of conflict (Vallée 1981: 92). In the process of constituting orthodoxy the search for 'truth' or dogma was not the primary concern. As is implied by its name itself, 'orthodoxy' was born in the wake

of Christianity's search for its particular identity, and thus was the result of the drive toward a centrist position in order to establish institutional stability (Vallée 1981: 103).

The search for an own identity and the effort to establish institutional stability via a centrist position were accompanied by a process of polarisation. The church was continually trying to find a basis of consent and agreement for the mainstream of its subjects (*orthodox*) and at the same time to identify dissenters (*heterodox*, hence heretic) from what it regarded as the truth. All disagreement within the church was considered as opposition and such obstruction was severely dealt with. But the early church also had to identify its doctrinal enemies and to depict them in the blackest of terms in order to promote unity and consent within itself.

In expressing these polar structures, the early Christian writers found an useful instrument in antitheses. Since antithesis has both a unifying and a disconnecting function (Krašovec 1984: 140), it seems to be the natural stylistic instrument for purposes of consolidating opinion and urging readers to dissociate themselves from an opposing viewpoint. Where one pole of the antithesis is provided with a negative semiotic value, the reader or listener will not only gain a better understanding of the difference between the two elements, but will also feel himself opposed to the negative pole. In this way the disjunctive-conjunctive power of antithesis is utilised to create a centrifugal-centripetal set of forces around the positive pole: those who feel themselves attached to the positive pole will experience a unifying force, while those who do not share the same conviction, are repelled by it.

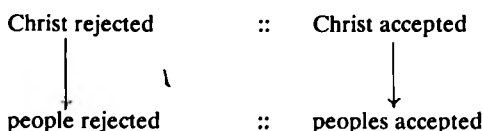
3. THE POLARITY CHRISTIANITY :: JUDAISM

Since the earliest of times, Judaism was such a negative pole which was utilised to establish institutional stability and consent within the church. Anti-Judaism did not primarily serve as a defense against attack, but was an intrinsic necessity of Christian self-affirmation (Ruether 1974: 81). The Marcionite claim of an antithesis between a good God and a Demiurge was countered by Tertullian by contrasting the good God with the inferiority of the Jewish people: the inferiority of God's old law and cult could not be due to any inferiority on God's part, but had to be accounted for by the inferiority of the people with whom God was working at the time (Efroymson 1979: 101).

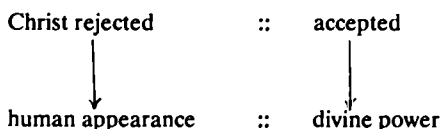
The claim that something radically new had happened when Jesus was resurrected, led Christians to the opinion that Judaism was somehow 'old' (Wilken 1971: 228). It was precisely the empirical observation that the Jewish people had not ceased to exist that compelled the church fathers to polemicise against it as being 'abolished' (Hruby 1971: 7). But this kind of polemic was also used to gain

understanding of the church itself. Christianity was interpreted in relation to Judaism, and Christian tradition knew no other way to view Judaism than as an inferior foreshadowing of Christianity (cf Wilken 1971: 227).

The contrast between Judaism and Christianity, between the chosen people and the church of the peoples which was chosen in its place, is already evident in the New Testament itself. For Ephrem the attitude towards God's Son, Jesus Christ, seemed to be the decisive factor in deciding the claim of both Jews and Christians that they are the true people of God. The rejection of Jesus by the Jews consequently became the basis of a dual polar structure which may be represented as follows (cf Botha 1982: 27-32):



The question *why* the Jews did reject Jesus had to be answered. The answer is more or less explicitly stated by Ephrem: because they could not, or would not, *recognise* him as God. This in itself posed the question as to the mystery of Jesus's divinity. For this reason the above-mentioned polar structure was also related to Christology:



A comparable pair of related polar structures may be detected in I Corinthians 1: 18-25 where Paul speaks about the offensive nature (to the Jews and gentiles) of the message that Jesus (as God) was crucified, a message that speaks of the wisdom of God for those being called by God.

In Ephrem's collection of hymns *De Virginitate* 28: 11, he has the following to say:

He is the praiseworthy Nature (keyana), which does not change. - But on account of his love He did obtain (qena) changes. - Symbols, types, covered (him) like colours - as well as all likenesses in every way. - The crucifiers saw him and they dishonoured him. - The weeds saw him and alienated him. - The church saw him and, since it recognised

is nature, - worshipped (him in) his transformations.

In this stanza, the Jews ('crucifiers') are contrasted with the church: they dishonoured Christ (since they could not or would not recognise his disguised appearance), while the Church recognised his nature and worshipped him. From this verse it would seem that Ephrem discerned only *one* nature in Christ, namely that of God, clothed in his human appearance. Ephrem often made use of the imagery of putting on clothes when speaking of the incarnation (cf *De Eccles* 13: 21, *De Ieiunio* 3: 6, *Crucif* 1: 16, etc). This would seem to place Ephrem in the same doctrinal category as the Alexandrian Logos-sarx-christology (cf Beck 1953: 78). But is this really what he intended?

The sound-play in the Syriac indicates that the unchanging nature is contrasted with the changes of the incarnation. Not the union of the two natures, but the inability of the Jews to recognise the unchanging nature of God is focussed upon:

A Nature (keyana) not changed	::	B obtained (qena) changes
C crucifiers saw, dishonoured	::	D church saw, recognised
E weeds saw, alienated	::	E ("), worshipped

A complex chiasmic pattern is built into these antitheses: dishonoured -- worshipped (C-E), alienated -- recognised (E-D); dishonoured, alienated -- changes (CE-B); recognised, worshipped -- unchanged nature (DE-A). The antithesis between God's unchanging nature and the ability of his nature to change, seems to be functional in accentuating the antithesis between the Jews and the church and should therefore not be read out of context. By calling the Jews 'the crucifiers', and 'the weeds' (probably a reference to the parable of the weeds in Matthew 13: 24-30), one set of poles is semiotically marked negative so that the Christian reader will try to dissociate himself from it.

The polemical tenor of these co-ordinated polar structures is almost always in evidence when Ephrem speaks about the incarnation. The only explanation that can be given for the fact of the crucifixion is that Jesus concealed his divinity for soteriological reasons. This is no excuse for the Jews, though, since the believers did recognise his divine nature in spite of seeming human weakness (cf also *De fide* 39: 1, 51: 2; *Azym* 2: 1, 9: 13, 13: 25; *Crucif* 1: 16, etc).

4. THE POLARITY GOD :: ARIUS

Christianity versus Judaism was not the only polarity the church had to cope with in Ephrem's time. In finding a broad basis of consent, several dissenters from the

mainstream of Christian theology were identified. Their views were represented or even misrepresented by others in sharp contrast to the rule of faith so as to remove the threat to doctrinal unity, but also to consolidate a large number of less divergent opinions. In more ways than one, these heretics were made scape-goats in order to redeem the unity of the church.

One such heresy which was a real danger during all of Ephrem's years, was that of Arianism. Arius pushed the Christological question back to the origin of the pre-incarnate Logos. If the Father begat the Son, He that was begotten had a beginning of existence and therefore it is evident that there was (a time) when the Son was not. Since the status of the Logos was that of a creature according to the Arians, the union of the Logos (in place of a human soul) with a human body explained Jesus's ignorance, his growth in wisdom, and the need for help in temptation (Kelly 1977: 282).

According to Eustathius of Antioch (died 336), the Arian movement was set to teach its followers that Christ took a body without a soul in order to persuade them that the Logos could not have been from the same unchanging nature as the Father (cf Kelly 1977: 283). Eustathius's reactionary distinction between two natures in the God-man, which branded his Christology as 'an anticipation of Nestorianism' (Williams 1974: 357), was imitated by his younger contemporary Ephrem. Thus Ephrem taught that the fact that Jesus became hungry and that he prayed, relates completely to the body. 'Hunger' and 'Prayer' are names in which the Living One concealed himself in order to give life to all (*De Fide* 29: 2-4):

2. The weak body in which he clothed himself when he descended,
- is similar to his names and his acts. - And as it was necessary that he
became hungry, - so it was also necessary that he should pray. - And
as that hunger was completely of the body, - so was his neediness
completely of the body. - Do not find death through the names - in
which that Living One clothed himself to give life to all.

3. For the Mighty One had in needy names - clothed himself out of
love for you, because of the body. - In which one of them will you
stand fast, as they are true, wonderful and praiseworthy? - True is the
name of the Father, trustworthy the name of the Son, - lovable that of
the Forgiver and fearful that of the Judge. - Since he is human, he is
confined; - without confines is he, since his nature is God.

4. The weak lump of earth was rash and descended - to explore the sea, how big it is; - he traced the sources in order to know - from where they come up and to where they reach. - The contemptible cannot even investigate himself, - not even from which place the hand took him, - that hand that moulded him - and that set limits for him, those that he treated with contempt.

The 'weak lump of earth' refers to Arius who ventured to explore the origin of the Logos and treated Christ with contempt on account of his humanity. The purpose of this short acrostic, bearing the name of Ephrem himself, is to contrast the seeming weakness of the great God with the real weakness of a haughty being. The validity of this interpretation is demonstrated by the explicit antithesis clay::potter in the final stanza, as well as by the reference to the same metaphor ('hand' and 'mould') in the fourth stanza.

There are therefore two antithetical structures which are also interrelated:

without confines	::	confined
↓		↓
Mighty One	::	weak body
	X	
weak lump of earth	::	explore the sea
↓		↓
cannot investigate own origin	::	ventured to trace sources
↓		↓
limits set for contemptible	::	treated limits with contempt

The marked antithesis between the human nature and divinity of Christ should in this instance be seen against the background of the anti-Arian polemic. It is in fact not so much the weakness of Christ's human nature that is contrasted with the divine nature, but the weakness of Arius. Thus understood, it becomes unnecessary to express concern over *diese Dehnbarkeit und Unbestimmtheit bei grundlegenden Begriffen* which one may otherwise find *enerträglich und unverstündlich* (Beck 1953: 86). Ephrem was continually exclaiming the inscrutableness of God. In *De Virginitate* 52: 8-10 he declares it to be impossible to understand the divine nature, since man cannot even investigate the smallest of creatures, cannot see the eyes or ears of a gnat. By presenting the doctrinal antithesis between orthodoxy and

Arianism as an antithesis between the inscrutableness of God and the weakness of Arius, Ephrem makes it easy for his readers to identify the positive pole, thereby providing a rallying point for their opinion.

From this example it becomes clear why all parties in the divided Syrian church, Nestorians and Jacobites alike, in later centuries competed with one another in reverence for Ephrem (Bardenhewer 1962: 342). While he spoke about the nature of Christ 'which is God' on the one hand, seemingly providing the Monophysites with his authority, he was at the same time distinguishing between the humanity and divinity of Christ in a manner reminiscent of Eustathius's suggestion that the Word 'dwelt in' humanity, which served as His temple, His house, His tent (Kelly 1980: 284). He was, however, not trying to explain the unity of natures in Christ, but to promote the unity of the Syrian church.

5. THE POLARITY GOD :: HUMANITY

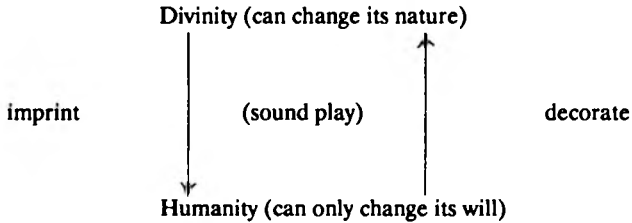
The two natures of Christ also provided Ephrem with a parnetic opportunity. The fact that Christ, although himself God, found it necessary to abstain from food and to pray, the fact of the incarnation itself, he found a major source of exhortation for the Christian community. *De Nativitate* 1: 97-99 provides the following example:

97. That Lord of the natures today * changed himself against his nature; - so that it should not be difficult also for us * to change our wicked will.

98. The body is bound by its nature, * unable to increase or diminish - The will is free however, * to grow in all dimensions.

99. Today the divinity * imprinted (teb'at) itself in humanity, - so that humanity should also decorate (tes-tabet) itself * in the signet-ring (tab'a') of divinity.

In the light of the well-known formulation of Chalcedon a century later, namely that Christ was 'in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably', Ephrem's statements that he 'changed himself against his nature' and that 'the divinity imprinted itself in humanity' sounds patently heretical. The real antithesis for Ephrem is, however, between the 'Lord' and 'us', between divinity and humanity:



The double metaphor of verse 99 explains the polarity: when God became man, he changed his nature by imprinting himself in humanity like a signet-ring in wax. Humanity is still bound by its nature and cannot effect bodily change, but due to the incarnation, man can change his wicked will and thereby decorate himself with divinity like a finger putting on a signet-ring. The incarnation therefore serves to exhort Christians to 'deification' of the will.

In *De Ecclesia* 12: 4-5, Ephrem is exploiting the 'problem' of Christ's fasting and keeping vigil to exhort the Christian community to do the same:

4. Jesus became like a military commander to us, - He put on armour so that his ranks would imitate him. - He contemplates and inspects his army, - and he warns and is angry with the unarmed. - If he was unarmed, then also our unarmedness would be in order. But if he is armed, then it is a sorry state for us. - Look, the fast was like his armour - and look, the watching was like his spiritual sword.

5. Who would therefore be able to absolve us, - or which is the hyssop that would wash us white, - and whose mouth could make petition for us - and who could restore our increase? Because if God was needy without being needy, - forged an armour and put it on, although nobody could come near him, - who would not put on the breastplate, - while his murderer is with him!

f The 'Jesus' of the fourth stanza is simply spoken of as 'God' in the fifth. But there is a good reason for doing so, because it is the 'us' of the fifth stanza that is contrasted with Jesus's divinity, not his humanity. The argument is from the lesser to the greater: if Jesus took these measures despite his divinity, how much more do we need to do the same.

6. CONCLUSION

Since polarity is basic to the whole structure of Ephrem's thought, his antitheses relating to the person of Christ should not be understood as Christological pronouncements. Like many other fathers of the church, he was concerned with the well-being of the church rather than with exact theological formulation. In the continued search for a centrist position, his polarisation of the natures of Christ would now seem to underwrite the Alexandrian viewpoint of the Word-Flesh-type, then again that of the Word-Man-type. It is not easy to describe his understanding of the natures of Christ, but his Christology certainly was interrelated with and influenced by his concern for polemics and paraclesis.

The 'final' word in Christology, the verdict pronounced by the Creed of Chalcedon, is steeped in antitheses which reflect the opposing viewpoints within the church rather than giving an explanation of the problem. It does not say in the first place what should be believed, but rather what should not be believed. In the light of the experience gained from studying a few examples from the work of Ephrem, it seems a timely reminder that the search for stability and identity in the early church should always be kept in mind when reading its documents. Christology, or any other subject, cannot be understood without the context of apology. It may often prove true to say that Christology is in fact apology.

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