

The Christology of Philoxenos of Mabbug

(Paul Verghese)

This paper tries only to select some aspects of the Christology of Philoxenos of Mabbug, who was Bishop of the city of Mabbug (Hierapolis) in the early sixth century. These aspects are chosen with reference to the ongoing discussion among theologians of the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Orthodox traditions regarding the Person, Nature and Will of Christ.

This learned Syrian theologian (c.440-50) and his works have been studied in some detail in the massive work of Fr. André de Halleux of Louvain*. His importance in the post-Chalcedonian Christological controversy is second only to that of Severus of Antioch, though he is definitely much less known in the West.

~~Philoxenos~~

Philoxène de Mabbug, sa vie, ses écrits
sa théologie, Louvain, Imprimerie
Orientaliste, 1963. 571 pages.

His Discourses were ^{edited &} published with an English translation by E. A. Wallis Budge, London 1894

Nature of Theology ~~The distinction~~ For Philoxenus theology has to transcend sense-experience. It is not simply reflection on the claims of Revelation, but is an aspect of radical, ontological transfiguration of man himself by the contemplation of divine mysteries into which of the Incarnation into which he is incorporated by baptism. Theological reflection is thus growth in faith, and ~~his~~ growth in holiness is an indispensable condition for a profound apprehension of the divine mystery.

"Becoming without Change" - This is his basic formula. He starts from the Biblical Axiom "The Word became flesh", and the Divine Logos is the subject of the Incarnation for him throughout. But how to understand this process? Who became? From where? What did he become? Why? These are the four questions to which he applies himself. The question of "how" he regards as beyond rational comprehension. The wrong ways of understanding he regards as basically Arianism, docetism and Synousiasm (or Conjunctionism).

Becoming and Assumption.

Philoxenos' problem was this - Did Christ ever exist as only a man? He saw the attempt to speak about two natures as presupposing the existence of a hypostasis of man with human nature; to him it was impossible to conceive of a nature without a hypostasis.^x And so he looked with some suspicion ~~to~~ on the Christology of his opponents as stating that what God the word assumed was a full human being with a hypostasis and nature. This meant to him that man became God in Christ. He wanted to affirm the opposite. God became man in Christ.

He preferred therefore the theology of "becoming" ~~rather~~ to that of "assumption", because assumption meant to him the assuming of "a man other than God". One can assume only that which existed; but one can become something through a certain event - namely the Word became flesh, remaining Word.

The metaphors of the O.T. were assumptions by God. He assumed the burning bush

See esp. the letter to the monks of Serenus 9-10
"Two natures.... are evidently also hypostases, for nature considered apart ~~from~~ or enumerated cannot but be also hypostasis. If there are two hypostases, as there are two natures, then the conclusion is inescapable that there are also two sons, and therefore also two gods." Quoted by Hallens p. 331

or the form of the three angels that appeared to Abraham. The difference between the Anthropomorphisms of God in the O.T. and those in the N.T. is that the former are metaphors, while the latter are mysterious realities. In the bosom of the Virgin, God is contained completely, as man finite and limited. This is the great mystery of the Incarnation.

Philoxenus admits that the idea of Assumption can also be supported by Scripture. Heb 11:17 says clearly: ou gar de pou aggelon epilambanetai, alla spermatos Abraham epilambanetai. But the word assumed the seed of Abraham without change in his own hypostasis, according to Philoxenus.

Becoming without change. But there is a difference between divine becoming, and other spatio-temporal becomings we know of. The latter always implies change. But God cannot change. Thus Philoxenus seeks to affirm becoming without change, passion (suffering) of the impassible, death of the immortal. He thus avoids theopaschianism and docetism. He affirms Christ's consubstantiality with us, as well his consubstantiality with God, but the two cannot be confused.

Here, of course, is the perpetual

illogicality of the great mystery of the Incarnation, which different formulas can witness to, but no formula can resolve finally.

The immutability of God consists in three fundamental characteristics of God - His eternity, His perfection and His freedom.

Eternity God can "become" without change, because he "existed" without "becoming". This is the position of Athanasius, Cyril and Philoxenus. Change belongs to those who exist in time and space, not to the Self-Existent in eternity. To change is to cease to be in part and begin to be in a different form.

Perfection He is perfect. He did not become man because He needed something. He did not cease to be God when He became man. The becoming of God does not belong to a class with other becomings. It is something we know from Revelation. He becomes man, not because He needed something, but for us, for our sake, not for Himself. He became, in other words, out of love and not out of necessity. His becoming is a new creative act, of freedom and love.

Freedom In other words, He became, because He willed so in freedom and love, even as He did in the case of the first creation. The ~~change~~ incarnation does not originate in the nature of God, but in His will. It is an aspect of His omnipotence, which is His basic freedom. It is thus not in contradiction with His nature, but neither is it a necessity of His nature.

To the possible argument that "God is unchanging; so He cannot become", Philoxenos replies: "It is God who becomes, so He becomes unchangingly".

5. One of the Holy Trinity - God the Word.

The Logos is one of the Three hypostases of the Holy Trinity. What happens to all three hypostases, of the same ~~nature~~ ^{nature} ousia, when one of them becomes? When we say "God the Word" we are not uttering a tautology. God signifies the Common nature or ousia, and Word signifies the person or the hypostasis. The first distinguishes God from His creature; the second distinguishes among the persons of the Trinity.

Philoxenos affirms the perfect unity of the Divine ousia in all acts ad extra

* Here we notice the confusions in the terms hypostasis, ousia and physis current in the whole Christological debate. Did Athanasius himself make a clear distinction between the three? Onumo, the Syriac word for Person, does not necessarily mean, even in Ephrem the Syrian, hypostasis in the Greek philosophical sense.