



Eirini Artemi

The Term *Theotokos* in the Writings of Cyril of Alexandria

Abstract

The word *Theotokos* was the pillar of the dogmatic truth that the Word of God, the preexisting Son of God was born by the Virgin Mary at a specific time. Christ was a total man remaining total God. He wanted to recapitulate in his person the whole human race and to lead it in the objective salvation. The incarnate Word came out of Himself and created Himself man, in every way similar to us without sin, and thus as the God-man He once and for all saved man from his course towards non-existence. The primitive man of sin is reborn in the person of the creator of new life. With the incarnation of the Word, not only the truth about the triune God is revealed, but also the complete truth about the world and the true, authentic and



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complete man is revealed. Cyril of Alexandria explained analytically the Incarnation of the Word –God. Christ is the Son of Mary and the coeternal with God His Son. He is one person with two natures, divine and human. His divine nature is beyond time and human nature was born by Holy Virgin Mother with the help of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Virgin Mary has given birth not only to a real man but to a man and a God at the same time. For this reason, Mary should be called *Theotokos*. Virgin Mary is called *Theotokos* because God is incarnate. Christ is “God incarnate and humanized”, so his mother is on *Theotokos*. Moreover, the name *Theotokos* is an inevitable consequence of the name “Theanthropos”. Both names stand and fall together. The rejection of the term *Theotokos*” leads to the annulment of the entire mystery of the saving divine Economy. The mother of Christ should be called and is Theotokos: “Theotokos virgin, hail most blessed Mary, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, for you have given birth to the Saviour of our souls”.

Keywords

Cyril of Alexandria, Person of Christ, Christology, Theotokos, Christotokos

1 The incarnation of Logos in the writings of Cyril of Alexandria

After the Protoplasts’ (First- formed people) disobedience, according to the teaching of the Church, Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise, losing at the same time all the goods of the original state and wearing the “skin garments”¹ of sin and death.

¹ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *De Incarnatione Unigenitii*, Sources Chrétiennes (SC) 97, 697⁴¹ (=Patrologia Graeca (PG) 75, 1225AB). Hebr. 1:3-4.

The man had done the wrongness to disobey the order of God and his guilt was revealed before the eyes of God. This error destroyed the image of God in the human being. The consequence was Holy Spirit abandoned man. So all the qualities granted by the Triune God to the First-formed people were lost². Death and rot took over the world. The reign of Satan and his sin began immediately. The latter was bequeathed by Adam to all his descendants, who were and are dominated by the carnal impulse³. However, the all-good God did not leave the suffering man in a state of sin and death. Because of His infinite goodness and love, He decided to restore His beloved creature to its original state⁴. In time, the incarnation of the Divine Word would be the way to save all of humanity, even if God could save humanity “in a thousand ways”⁵. Only with salvation in Christ Jesus could the rational being be freed from death and be worthy of life again. Thus, by the incarnation of the Only Begotten Son of God, man is “transformed”. However, the restoration of man and the reconciliation of the world with God was impossible for a common man to accomplish through his death. The incarnation and death of the Son of God would become the bond of man's re-approach to God⁶.

² Gen. 3:21.

³ EIRINI ARTEMI, *The mystery of the incarnation into dialogues of Cyril of Alexandria: “Quod unus sit Christus” and “De incarnatione unigeniti”*, (Athens: publ. 24grammata, 2013), p. 64.

⁴ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Commentarii in Lucam*, PG 72, 669B. Luk. 5:17. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *In Isaiam*, PG 70, 832A. Is. 41:7-8.

⁵ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Quod unus sit Christus*, SC 97, 754²⁰ (=PG 75, 1321C): “The Only Begotten did not become man only to remain in the limits of the emptying. The point was that he who was God by nature should, in the act of self-emptying, assume everything that went along with it. This was how he would be revealed as ennobling the nature of man in himself by making {human nature} participate in his own sacred and divine honours”

⁶ EIRINI ARTEMI, *The mystery of the incarnation into dialogues of Cyril of Alexandria: “Quod unus sit Christus” and “De incarnatione unigeniti”*, (Athens: publ. 24grammata, 2013), p. 64.

In the gospel of John it is written

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was at the beginning with God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth”⁷.

Cyril of Alexandria explained that the apostle John did not mean to tell us that the Word changed his divine nature into flesh. “God is immutable by nature: He remains what He was and is forever. Christ is Emmanuel, perfect God and perfect man”⁸. That is, he has in one person both natures, the human and the divine. This fact for Cyril was a major theological problem at that time, facing the heresy of Nestorius. Characteristically, in Cyril’s note in the Gospel of Matthew, it is noted that “Christ is the total man and total God in His nature”⁹. Of course, not only in his note in the gospel of Matthew but also in Luke, Cyril spent most of his text proving that Christ is Emmanuel, that is, the perfect God and perfect man.

Cyril spoke of “the Incarnation of the Son and Word of God. He explained clearly that the only begotten Son, born according to the nature of God the Father, came down, and was incarnate, he partook of flesh and blood like to us; he made our body his own and came forth a man from a woman, not casting off his existence as God, or his generation of God the Father, but even in taking to himself flesh remaining what he was”¹⁰. Cyril insisted on “the Incarnation because this was the sentiment of the holy Fathers; therefore they ventured to call the holy Virgin *Theotokos*”¹¹, not

⁷ Jn 1:1-2, 14, New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised Catholic Edition (NRSVACE).

⁸ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Quod unus sit Christus*, SC 97, 755³ (=PG 75, 1321D).

⁹ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *In Matheum*, PG 72, 381D.

¹⁰ Cyril of Alexandria, *Epist. II ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 45B.

¹¹ “The term *Theotokos* – Θεοτόκος – does not mean the same as ‘Mother of God’ in English or the common Latin translation. In English, one must

translate *Theotokos* as 'Bearer of God'- The correct Latin would be *deipara* or *dei genetrix*, not *Mater Dei*. Had Nestorius been more prudent he would have realized that the term *Theotokos* had a comparatively long usage – it had been used by Origen, Alexander of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Cyril. In the Latin West Tertullian had used the term *Dei Mater* in *De patientia* 3, and Ambrose also used it in his *Hexameron* V, 65. (*Patrologia Latina*. 14, 248A). More significant is that the Antiochene theologian Eustathius (bishop of Antioch from c.324 to 330), so often considered a forerunner of Nestorius, had some remarkably un-Antiochene tendencies in his Christology, one of which was the use of the term *Theotokos*. If there is a theological difference, however slight, between *Theotokos* and Mother of God, then there are certainly serious theological implications between *Theotokos* and the term favoured by Nestorius – *Χριστοτόκος* – *Christotokos*. But there is even a difference between *Theotokos* and the Mother of God. Why would one want to stress the difference between *Theotokos* and the Mother of God? Is it not becoming overly minute, insignificant, something that in reality is the same thing? But the fact is that there is a grammatical and conceptual difference between the two terms. If the Greek theologians had intended the diminished meaning of Mother of God, then they easily could have completely avoided *Θεοτόκος* by employing always the term *μήτηρ θεού*, a term readily at their disposal and one, which they did use at times. But the point is that for them there was a difference between *Θεοτόκος* and *μητήρ θεού*. The term Mother of God has no specificity –by and of itself but within the thought world of Christian Trinitarianism it could grammatically and conceptually mean that the Blessed Virgin is the Mother of God the Father or of God the Holy Spirit. But the term *Theotokos* has specificity because of the "tokos" –by and of itself it can only refer to Bearing God the Son. The English term is too abrupt, not precise enough, and does not have the internal integrity that *Theotokos* has. Further, the English term tends to bring into prominence the glory of Mary's motherhood, whereas the Greek term focuses attention on the Godhead of him who was born. And the Greek term *Theotokos* protects in and of itself the revealed fact that Christ was the very God who became man and, in assuming manhood from the Virgin, lost nothing of the Godhead, which was his eternally. Conversely, the term *Theotokos* protects the revealed fact that he who was born of the *Theotokos* must have been man as well as God. The point of the term *Theotokos* is not as abstruse as many historians of Christian thought to assume." (GEORGE FLOROVSKY, *The Byzantine Fathers of the Fifth*

as if the “nature of the Word or his divinity had its beginning from the holy Virgin, but because of her was born that holy body with a rational soul, to which the Word, being personally united, is said to be born according to the flesh”¹². Christ from the beginning in the womb of His mother was the perfect man and remained perfect God,

“the two natures being brought together in a true union, there was of both one Christ and one Son; for the difference of the natures was not taken away by the union, but rather the divinity and the humanity make perfect for us the one Lord”¹³.

Cyril applied the words “Christ” and “Son” on purpose, due to make obvious to the bishop of Constantinople Nestorius that the first term had to do with the human nature of Jesus and the second presented His deity, His divine nature as the Word of God. There was a real and only union of two natures, a “hypostatic union”. This term was used by Cyril of Alexandria in his Christological teaching to confront Nestorius’ falsehoods¹⁴.

Cyril explained that the Word did not convert into human flesh but, in receiving human nature, He made this flesh His very own, enlivened with a rational soul so that He was “at once” God and man¹⁵. He stressed to him that the Only-begotten Word of God was incarnate and made man¹⁶,

Century, trans. Raymond Miller, et al., Vol. 8, in *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, Vaduz: BUCHervertriebsanstalt, 1987, p. 223)

¹² CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. II ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 45C.

¹³ IBID.

¹⁴ ANDREW THEODOROU, *The Christological terminology and the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria and Theodoret of Cyrus*, Athens 1955, p. 81.

¹⁵ JOHN A. MCGUCKIN, *St Cyril of Alexandria, the Christological Controversy. Its History, theology and texts*, (N. York: pub. E.J. Brill, 1994), p. 212. In the Third Letter to Nestorius, Cyril talked of the hypostatic union as a “natural union”, by which he meant a radically concrete union “such as the soul of man has with its own body”.

¹⁶ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. III ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 109C.

"That was, taking flesh of the holy Virgin, and having made it his own from the womb, he subjected himself to birth for us, and came forth a man from a woman, without casting off that which he was; but although he assumed flesh and blood, he remained what he was, God in essence and truth"¹⁷.

He was at once God in the likeness of man¹⁸. The Word became flesh and was, as such, born of a woman. Even though, as God, he existed before all ages.

"A common man was not firstborn of the holy Virgin, and then the Word came down and entered into him, but the union being made in the womb itself, he is said to endure a birth after the flesh, ascribing to himself the birth of his flesh"¹⁹.

Moreover, "the two natures being brought together in a true union, there is of both one Christ and one Son; for the difference of the natures is not taken away by the union, but rather the divinity and the humanity make perfect for us the one Lord Jesus Christ by their ineffable and inexpressible union"²⁰.

2 The introduction to the whole of Christianity of the term "Theotokos" by Cyril of Alexandria

Cyril of Alexandria, an ardent supporter of the title "Theotokos" for the mother of the incarnate Divine Word, directly or indirectly defended this term throughout his writings. The Alexandrian theologian noted that the Virgin Mary was rightly called Theotokos because she carried the Son and Word of God in her

¹⁷ IBID.

¹⁸ IBID.

¹⁹ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. II ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 45C.

²⁰ IBID.

womb, which became the throne of the second Person of the Holy Trinity²¹.

Thus, at once “ἐξ ἄκρας συλλήψεως”, God-Word became a perfect man, becoming a man in the womb of the Mother of God, “Θεοτόκος γέ σαρκικῶς, τούτέστι, κατὰ σάρκα”, without suffering any change or distortion, even in the human nature, nor in the divine. His birth by the Virgin was a “carnal” birth “ἐν σαρκί”, which means that eternal God was born in a specific time only according to His human nature²². In Christ, there is a single, inseparable Person, in whom two complete and perfect natures have united “undivided, inseparable, unmixed and unchangeable” “ἀσυγχύτως, ἀτρέπτως, ἀδιαρέτως καὶ ἀχωρίστως”: the divine nature and the human nature. The union of the natures was “ἐξ ἄκρας συλλήψεως”, therefore, from the first moment when the human nature of Christ was conceived in the Virgin Mary, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ as Man and God, was not any moment outside the mystery of the union of natures. He never lived as a separate man, who was later assumed by the Word of God. If this had indeed happened, then the human nature of Christ would have been a distinct person. This would have destroyed the composite hypostasis of Christ²³.

In the time of St. Cyril of Alexandria, Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople declined the divinity of Christ as the real God - the eternal Son of God. He could not accept that Christ is a real man, with a body, soul, and mind “νοῦς” and simultaneously eternal God. Nestorius’ apprehension of the mixture of the two natures of Christ made him disinclined to name Mary *Theotokos*. The refusal of *Theotokos* and its substitute only with *Christotokos* revealed problems with the salvation of the human race. “If Mary bore only a human Christ, indirectly there was a denial that

²¹ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *In Psalmis*, PG 69, 1217A.

²² CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *De Incarnatione Unigenitii*, SC 97, 684²⁷⁻²⁹ (=PG 75, 1201B):

²³ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *De Incarnatione Unigenitii*, SC 97, 690¹⁰⁻¹⁵ (=PG 75, 1212B).

Christ was God, too"²⁴. On this point, Christ would be one more among the holy people of Israel²⁵. Cyril renounced the denial of the term *Theotokos* for the Virgin Mary and its replacement with the words *Christotokos* or *Anthropotokos*.

"Mary bore the Only-begotten Word of God made flesh (body and soul). The Logos was united with human nature hypostatically, and with his human nature (his flesh) is one Christ, Emmanuel, the same God and man. The refusal to use the term *Theotokos* and its replacement only with *Christotokos* caused problems regarding the salvation of the human race. If Mary bore only human Christ, indirectly there was a denial that Christ was also God"²⁶.

From this perspective, "Incarnation of the Word of God became an illusion and the redemption of the human race was undermined since Christ's sufferings were not those of the Word God incarnate, but of one who was a mere man"²⁷. In the Incarnation of the Son of God, the most important role belonged to *Theotokos*. Cyril used the term *Theotokos* for the Virgin Mary as the Great Athanasius, the predecessor to the throne of Alexandria had done previously: "Our father Athanasius of the church of Alexandria ... called the Virgin Mary as *Theotokos*"²⁸.

²⁴ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Quod unus sit Christus*, PG 75, 1273A. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. I ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 41C.

²⁵ EIRINI ARTEMI, "The rejection of the term *Theotokos* by Nestorius of Constantinople and the refutation of his teaching by Cyril of Alexandria", *De Medio Aevo* 2 (2012/2), p. 125-149. <http://capire.es/eikonimago/index.php/demedioaevo/article/view/55/96>. See. EIRINI ARTEMI, "Cyril of Alexandria's critique of the term *Theotokos* by Nestorius Constantinople", *Acta Theologica* 32. 2 (2012) 1-16.

²⁶ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Quod unus sit Christus*, PG 75, SC 97, 726¹²⁻¹⁵ (=PG 75, 1273A).

²⁷ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. I ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 236A-C.

²⁸ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. ad Monachos Aegypti*, PG 77, 13BC. Prbl. ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *Contra Arianos III*, PG 77, 349C, 385AB. ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *dialogus de Holy Trinity*, V, PG 28, 1272B.

Cyril explained to Nestorius that anything that was taught distorted the truth of the Christian faith, and he urged him to accept the term *Theotokos* for the Holy Virgin Mary²⁹. This holy doctor emphasized that the rejection of the term *Theotokos* was tantamount to a refutation of Christ's divinity and a falsification of the Divine Incarnation. Then, Christ would not be true and simultaneously "perfect" God and "perfect" man; he would be a mere tool of the Deity, a God-bearing man.³⁰ He passionately emphasized that Christ was not a God-clad man, nor did the Word of God merely dwell in a man, but rather that He was made flesh, or perfect man, according to the Scriptures. Cyril supported the fact that "the holy Virgin can be called the Mother of God. For if our Lord Jesus Christ is God", he wondered, "how should the holy Virgin who bore Him not be the Mother of God", adding:

"They say that God the Word hath taken a perfect man from out the seed of Abraham and David according to the declaration of the Scriptures, who is by nature what they were, of whose seed he was, a man perfect in nature, consisting of an intellectual soul and human flesh: whom, man as we are by nature, fashioned by the might of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the Virgin and made of a woman, made under the law, so that he might ransom us all from the bondage of the law, and receiving the sonship marked out long before, He in a new way connected it to Himself, preparing him to undergo the trial of death according to the law of men, raising him from the dead, taking him up into Heaven, and setting him on the Right Hand of God"³¹.

Cyril stressed that the Only-begotten Word of God was incarnate and made man: That was, taking flesh of the holy Virgin, and having made it his own from the womb, he subjected himself to be born for us, and came forth as a man from a woman, without casting off that which he was; but although he assumed flesh and

²⁹ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epistula II – Cyrilli ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 41B.

³⁰ *IBID.* PG 77,41C.

³¹ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Quod unus sit Christus*, PG 75, 1273A-D.

blood, he remained what he was, God in essence and truth³². Christ was a perfect man with a body (*sarx*) and a soul (*nous*), and he was born by the Virgin Mary. It was obvious that the holy Virgin Mary did not give birth to a common man in whom the Word of God dwelt³³, lest Christ be thought of as a God-bearing man. For all this, the holy Virgin should be called *Theotokos* and She is *Theotokos*³⁴.

Conclusions

The Incarnation is the descent of the eternal Word of God into human conditions and limitations in order radically to alter and restore them, without annihilating them. God remains God and his manhood is manhood still, but now charged with divine power and capable of restoring to the fullness of life the believer who shares in it sacramentally. So "the Word was made Flesh", "The Word was made Man." And in thus speaking seeing that the Divine Scripture overtakes calls the whole creature by the name of flesh alone, as in the prophet Joel: "I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh".

"But comprehending the whole by the part, evangelist John names man from the flesh: for thus it was right and not otherwise. Man is a creature rational, but a composite, of soul that is and of this perishable and earthly flesh. And when it had been made by God and was brought into being, not having of its nature in corruption and imperishableness –for these things appertain essentially to God Alone–, it was

³² CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epistula XVII – Cyrilli ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 109C.

³³ IBID., PG 77, 112A.

³⁴ EIRINI ARTEMI, "The Virgin Mary, *Theotokos*, and Christ, true God and true man. The mystery of Incarnation according to Cyril of Alexandria" *Mirabilia* 17 (2013/2) 52-74.

sealed with the spirit of life, by participation with the Divinity gaining the good that is above nature"³⁵.

Cyril argues in all of his works that the divine Word had no need whatsoever to appear as man. Fr. McGuckin explains that two conclusions thus followed inevitably about the incarnation: firstly that it was an entirely free act of divine power, a Charis, or gracious act, of God. Secondly, it was not for God's benefit but for mankind's. Thus the incarnation was a restorative act entirely designed for the ontological reconstruction of human nature had fallen into existential decay as a result of its alienation from God"³⁶.

The womb of the Virgin Mary receives the heavenly Bread, our Redeemer, and Savior Jesus Christ. In Christ, His two natures were united hypostatically. And since the holy Virgin was brought forth corporally God made one with flesh according to this reason the Virgin Mary should be called Theotokos, not as if the nature of the Word had the beginning of its existence from the flesh. Cyril argued that according to the Nicene Creed, we believe in "one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God," and that it is this one, only-begotten Son of God "who, for us, men and our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate."³⁷

In the Bible, according to Cyril, it is obvious we do not see the Son of Mary saying and doing some things while the Son of God says and does others. The One we encounter in the Gospels is this one, eternal, divine Son who assumed a true human nature and dwelt among us. Therefore, according to Cyril, it is proper to use the

³⁵ IBID.

³⁶ JOHN A. MCGUCKIN, *St. Cyril of Alexandria. The Christological Controversy. Its History, theology and texts*, (New York: pub. Ej. Brill, 1994), p. 184.

³⁷ THOMAS G. WEINANDY, "Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation," in *The Theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria: A Critical Appreciation*, eds. Thomas G. Weinandy and Daniel A. Keating (London: T&T Clark, 2003), pp. 23–54.

title *Theotokos*, not because the divine nature came into being through Mary, but because the one born to Mary is God incarnate³⁸. The title *Theotokos* says something about the identity of Jesus. Whereas Nestorius proclaimed, "I refuse to acknowledge as God, an infant of two or three months old," Cyril's theology was consistent with the worship of the infant Christ described in Scripture³⁹.

To sum up:

"the one Lord Jesus Christ must not be divided into two Sons... Accordingly, they boldly called the holy Virgin 'God's mother' [*Theotokos*], not because the nature of the Logos on the deity took the start of its existence in the holy Virgin, but because the holy body which was born of her, possessed as it was of a rational soul, and to which the Logos was hypostatically united, is said to have had a fleshly birth."⁴⁰

³⁸ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epistula II – Cyrilli ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 41B-45A.

³⁹ JOHN A. MCGUCKIN, *St. Cyril of Alexandria. The Christological Controversy. Its History, theology and texts*, (New York: pub. Ej. Brill, 1994), p. 64.

⁴⁰ CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Epist. III ad Nestorium*, PG 77, 109C, 112A.

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