

**A response to the article “Monophysitism” by W.H.C. Frend  
in the *Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 5, pp. 1669-1678**

The above-mentioned article is informative and offers a good overview of the development of the anti-Chalcedonian movement up to the seventh century. However, the author presents the term “Monophysitism” as if it was a Coptic (non-Chalcedonian) dogma. It was not fair and not neutral from him to define this term only from a Chalcedonian point of view and claim that this term reflects the belief of the Coptic Church although it never adopted this term to define its own belief in Jesus Christ. The Coptic Church prefers the Cyrilian term “Miaphysitism.” It would be more accurate to include “Monophysitism” in the Coptic Encyclopedia as a heresy rejected by the Copts and to dedicate another entry for “Miaphysitism” to express the belief of the Coptic Church.

This article aims to define Miaphysitism and provide evidence that this is the longstanding and dominant Christological view held by the Copts and Oriental Orthodox Churches. The Miaphysite position will be contrasted with Monophysitism to show that the latter was rejected as heresy by the Alexandrian fathers. In fact, the term Monophysite was often applied to the Copts (and non-Chalcedonians) as a derogatory term to vilify them.

### **The Definition**

Miaphysitism holds that in the one person of Jesus Christ, Divinity and Humanity are united in one or single nature ("physis"), the two being united without separation, without confusion, and without alteration. It was coined by Cyril of Alexandria. The important issue for this term is that the non-Chalcedonian Churches confess in “one nature from two,” “one incarnate nature,” and not “only one nature”. The human nature in Jesus Christ has never been ignored or devalued. In their history, Copts have not used the title of Monophysite (Monophysitism) to describe themselves or their theology. The liturgical texts of the Copts provide ample evidence that they do not subscribe to a view that diminishes the manhood of Christ.

The non-Chalcedonian Churches’ understanding of “Mia-Physis” does not simply refer to the number one implied by “mono,” but the term refers to a composite nature “one of two,” and not a numerical one. The old Oriental Churches are “non-Chalcedonian” not because they subscribe to a Monophysite Christology, but because they do not accept the Christological formulation of Chalcedon.

The term “Monophysitis” was first used in the seventh century by the pro-Chalcedonians to characterize their opponents, i.e., the anti-Chalcedonians (Winkelman 1980, p. 49). With the term “Monophysitism” one is in fact referring to the heresy of Eutyches, whom the Coptic Church anathematized. At the Council of Chalcedon, Dioscorus of Alexandria declared: “If Eutyches holds opinions contrary to the doctrines of the church, he deserves not only punishment but hell fire” (Price and Gaddis 2005, vol. 1, p. 159). The writings of the Coptic patriarch Timothy II (457-477), which the author completely ignores, also witnesses to this fact (ed. Ebied and Wickham 1970). In many places Timothy condemns

those who do not confess that God the Word is consubstantial in flesh with us. He means the Eutychianists. Timothy also quotes many Church Fathers (mostly authentic) to prove the correctness of his belief, and thus he refutes the accusation made by the author here that the Coptic Church adopts the Eutychian heresy.

## **The Christological Formula “One Incarnate Nature of God the Word”**

### ***1. The Phrase***

The old Oriental Churches, Cyril I, Dioscorus I, and the Apollinarian school use the term *Mia-physis* but with vastly contrasting meanings and understandings. Admittedly many scholars say that this phrase originally had been coined by the Apollinarian School (Samuel 1977, p. 236). It should be noted that although a term or a document has an unorthodox origin, this does not exclude its use by orthodox theology once rehabilitated. A very famous example from the Church history is the Nicene term “*homoousion to patri*” (of the same substance with the Father), which at one time had been part of the Valentinian vocabulary and had been condemned by the local Council of Antioch which had anathematized Paul of Samosata in c. 268 AD. However, after long discussion, the Council of Nicaea in 325 did adopt the phrase and it became very important for the theological significance of the council. Dioscorus of Alexandria once said about this accusation that we should not reject all what the heretics said since they occasionally confess the truth. (i‘tirāfāt al-ābā’ 266)

The Gospel of John (1:14) can be cited in support of the Incarnation of the Logos and the phrase “One Incarnate Nature...,” and came to be looked upon as part of the Athanasius legacy to Christian theology, and Cyril of Alexandria had adopted it as an indispensable terminological tool to expound the orthodox understanding of the person Jesus Christ, particularly in opposition to the teaching of Nestorius.

### ***2. The teaching of St. Cyril***

Cyril of Alexandria always gave just weight to Christ’s Divinity and His manhood in all his writings. The Christology of St. Cyril can be summarised in a few points *viz*:

(1) One incarnate Nature; (2) The unity between the two Natures “hypostatic union” (2nd and 3rd letters to Nestorius); (3) The Holy Virgin Mary is “Theotokos” (2nd and 3rd letters to Nestorius); (4) The distinction in thought only (letters 40, 45, 46); (5) Christ is one Nature of two “*εκ*,” and in his Christological formula “one Incarnate Nature...,” he does not deny any the human Nature of Christ; (6) The Logos united to Himself manhood animated with a rational soul of the same substance as us; (7) Christ endured blameless passion of the body and the soul, and there was no confusion or mixture or different natures in Him; (8) He assumed a flesh united to a real and perfect manhood; and (9) He is without sin.

## **Dioscorus of Alexandria**

### ***1. Council of Ephesus II 449***

In order to understand the position of Dioscorus of Alexandria at the Second Council of Ephesus in 449, we have to understand his teaching about Christology and the theological basis of the earlier Council of Constantinople (448).

Dioscorus of Alexandria had to balance two important roles in this council. First, he was the nominee of Emperor Theodosius II with special instruction to investigate the legality of the condemnation of Eutyches in the light of the Nicene faith as ratified by the First Council of Ephesus in 431. Second, he had his own theological conviction, derived from the Alexandrian tradition in which he had been brought up to defend. Because of the protracted conflict between Alexandria and Antioch with regard to the reunion in 433, Pope Dioscorus opposed the Antiochene viewpoint, and on this issue there was agreement between himself and the emperor.

The condemnation of Flavian, Eusebius, and others and the acquittal of Eutyches handed down by the Second Council of Ephesus ratified the theological position held by the first council in 431 on the basis of which Nestorius was anathematised. In other words, the second council of 449 asserted the Alexandrian view of the reunion of 433 against the Antiochene interpretation which the synod of 448 had owned and adopted (Samuel 1977, pp. 28-34).

### ***2. The Position of Pope Dioscorus in the Council of Chalcedon 451***

The phrases Dioscorus submitted and defended at the Council of Chalcedon were “from two natures” and the “one incarnate nature of God the Word.” In addition affirmed in agreement with the Council of Chalcedon that Christ was one *hypostasis* and one *prosopon*, and that the union of the natures was hypostatic. Although he persisted to defend the phrase “from two natures,” he did not maintain the phrase “two natures before and one nature after,” and made clear that he agreed with the phrase “from two natures after the union.” For him, the phrase “from two natures” meant the continued existence in the one Christ of Godhead and manhood even after the union. As a result of the union, neither of the natures had been lost or reduced. But their union is so intimate and real that, while referring to the incarnate Lord, it is incorrect to say that he is acknowledged as existing “in two natures” or he is “two natures after the union”; it should only be that He is “from two natures” at every moment. For Dioscorus, therefore, Christ is composed of two natures. The crux of the issue between Dioscorus and the Council of Chalcedon lay in the two prepositions “from” or “of” (ἐκ) and “in” (ἐν). Whereas the council insisted on “in two natures,” Dioscorus would only accept “from.” The rejection of “in two natures” by Dioscorus merely implied that he was asking for an amendment in the definition. It did not mean that Dioscorus accepted the Eutychian heresy; on the contrary, he may not have seen in this phrase the same theological meaning for the phrase “two natures after union.”

The position of Dioscorus does not imply an abortionist Christology. He stated at the Council of Chalcedon that he was opposed to “confusion,” “division,” “change,” and

“mixture,” and in so doing anticipated the four famous adverbs of the Chalcedonian definition. In opposing the phrases “in two natures” and “two natures after union,” it is clear that his concern was not to assert a theological position that ignored or minimized the full reality and perfection of Christ’s manhood (Samuel 1977, pp. 182-183).

The Council of Chalcedon deposed Dioscorus not for doctrinal heresy but ecclesiastical indiscipline, as made clear by Anatolius of Constantinople (Hamilton and Brooks 1899, p. 44). This implies that the council did not find any heretical meaning in this terminology or Christological teachings (Samuel 1977, p. 64ff). According to Romanides: “Dioscorus was considered quite orthodox in his faith by such leading fathers of the Council of Chalcedon as those represented by Anatolius of Constantinople” (Greek Orthodox, Review, vol.10, Nr.3, p. 77).

It should be noted at this point that the phrase “Of (from) two natures” (“ἐκ δύο φύσεων”) was in the first definition, but the phrase “ἐν δύο φύσεσιν” was later added to the last version of the definition of Chalcedon on advice of the Roman legate. The latter phrase is originally from the Tome of Leo (Samuel 1977, 75ff; Schaff 1990, vol. 2, pp. 62-63.).

However, Frend gives the reader the impression that Patriarch Dioscorus of Alexandria was the sole cause of troubles that happened at the Council of Chalcedon, and employs generalizations that should not be used in a scientific article, such as: “The arrogant behavior of Dioscorus had created a rift among the seventeen Egyptian bishops...” In place of such language, Frend should have discussed the writings of Dioscorus, which he completely ignored.

The problem at Chalcedon was mainly the definition of terms such as “nature” and “hypostasis.” While the Chalcedonians made a distinction between “nature” and “hypostasis,” the non-Chalcedonians understood the two terms to be synonymous. In a letter written by Dioscorus in his exile (Moawad 2010, p. 303), he explains that: “Some people in their ignorance think that if we say that Christ suffered in (his) body and not in (his) divinity, we agree with the adherents of the Council of Chalcedon. But we plead and say to them that Saint Cyril wrote as follows: ‘We should not refuse and escape from all what (our) opponents say because they often confess what it should be (confessed).’ So if the adherents of the Council of Chalcedon confess that God the Word suffered in (his) body and not in (his) divinity, we agree with them. But if they say that he is two natures and divide the one Son into two hypostasis and two sons, we do not agree with them, because in this case our fathers call the natures: hypostasis.” However, at the Council of Chalcedon Dioscorus was ready to confess that Christ is “from two natures” but not only “two natures” (Price and Gaddis 2005, vol. 1, p. 194).

This problem at Chalcedon became aggravated because every party defined the theological terms with regard to a specific heresy. The anti-Chalcedonian party stressed the *unity* of the two natures to avoid any Nestorian belief. On the other side, the Chalcedonian party stressed the *differentiation* between the two natures to refute the

Eutychian heresy. In fact, both parties condemned Nestorius and Eutyches. It is partly for this reason that present-day dialogue between these churches has been successful.

### ***3. The Christological Teaching of Pope Dioscorus of Alexandria***

Although Dioscorus did not leave behind very much of his writing, there are a sufficient number of statements, both written and spoken, with which we can ascertain the direction of his theological thinking. In addition to the phrases “of two natures” and the “One Incarnate Nature of God the Word” that Pope Dioscorus insisted upon at the Council of Chalcedon, we can summarize his teaching in these points:

1. Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, Himself God, in His incarnate state. He was begotten of the Father as God, and the same was born of Mary as man. He is, therefore, at once consubstantial with God the Father and consubstantial with us men.
2. Jesus Christ is at once God and man, so that “Men saw Him walking on the earth; and they saw Him as God, the Creator of the heavenly hosts. They saw Him asleep in the ship as man, and they saw Him walking upon the waters as God...”
3. This two-foldness does not involve a division of the one Christ into two natures (Samuel, 184-185).

Finally, it should be stated that the Christological teachings of Cyril and Dioscorus of Alexandria were always clear, not only in the theological tradition of the Coptic Church, but also consistent with Coptic liturgical practice.

The Christological teaching of the Coptic Church can be found in its liturgy, especially in the Book of Psalmody, a book of hymns for evening and midnight praise in the Coptic Church. For example in the Theotokia of Sunday: “one of two, a Holy Divinity, consubstantial (co-essential) with the Father (ὁμοούσιον ττ πατρὶ), incorruptible. And a holy Humanity, begotten without seed, consubstantial with us (ὁμοούσιον τὸν αὐτὸν ἡμῖν), according to the economy. This which He has taken, from you (i.e., the holy Virgin) O undefiled, He made it one with Him, as a hypostasis (καθ' ὑπόστασιν).”

In the Theotokia of Monday: “Jesus Christ the Word, who was incarnate, without alteration (ἀτρέπτως), became a perfect man (τέλειος ἄνθρωπος). He was not separated (φωρξ) (ἀχωρίστως), mixed (θωβ) (ἀμείκτως), or confused (χωα) (ἀσυγχύτως), of any kind, after the unity, but one Nature, one Hypostasis, and one Prosopon, for God the Word.” This means that In Him was no separation, mixture or confusion of any kind.

In the Theotokia of Tuesday: “...and likewise, He (Jesus) took flesh from you (Mary), without alteration (ἀτρέπτως)...Co-essential with us, and perfect, and also has, a rational soul (ψυχή λογική). He remained God, as He is, and became, a perfect man (τέλειος ἄνθρωπος)”.

The text of the Theotokia of Thursday clearly explains the meaning of one nature: “One of two, Divinity and Humanity, wherefore the Magi silently, worship uttering His Divinity etc.” (Awad, 2007, p. 134ff).

In the three liturgical texts of the three Coptic Anaphoras, the priest in the last prayer recites the following before Communion: “Amen (x3). I believe (x3) and confess to the last breath that this is the life-giving Flesh that Your only-begotten Son, our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ, took it from our Lady, the Lady of us all, the holy Theotokos, Saint Mary. He made it one with His Divinity without mingling (ἀμείκτως), without confusion (ἀσυγχύτως), and without alteration (ἀτρέπτως)...Truly, I believe that His Divinity parted not from His humanity for a single moment, nor a twinkling of an eye.”

In 1964 there began an unofficial dialogue between the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian churches in Aarhus, Denmark, which continued in Bristol, England (1967), Geneva, Switzerland (1970), and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (1971). An official dialogue began in Geneva in 1985 that was continued in Egypt in 1989. The starting point of the dialogue was to avoid using terms of disagreement and instead formulate a Christological statement with modern terms of consistent definitions. The 1988 agreement between the Coptic Church and the Roman Catholic Church, for example, reads as follows: “We believe that our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Logos is perfect in His Divinity and perfect in His Humanity. He made His Humanity One with His Divinity without Mixture, nor Mingling, nor Confusion. His Divinity was not separated from His Humanity even for a moment or twinkling of an eye. At the same time, we anathematize the Doctrines of both Nestorius and Eutyches” (Gros, Meyer, Rusch 2000, p. 689).

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