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Armenian Christology and the Council of Chalcedon

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ARMENIAN CHRISTOLOGY
AND
THE COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON

A Seminar Paper Submitted to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Historical Theology
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by

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Introduction

The Armenian Church, along with the Egyptian Coptic, Ethiopian, Syrian Jacobite, and Malankara Church of South India, is part of the communion of Oriental Orthodox Churches.¹ These Churches comprise the Monophysitic branch of Christianity, which holds that there is only one nature in the Incarnate Christ.² They separated from the Eastern Orthodox Churches over the Council of Chalcedon in 451, six centuries before the Great Schism between the East and the West. While the Eastern Orthodox Churches accept the first seven ecumenical councils as authoritative, the Monophysitic Churches accept only the first three councils: Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), and Ephesus (431). It is important to note that Monophysites are not Eutychians: Monophysites teach one united nature after the Incarnation; Eutyches taught that the human nature of Christ was absorbed into the divine nature. Ecumenical talks in recent decades have led to some agreement between the Orthodox and the Monophysites.³ All of the Monophysitic Churches are in communion with one another, but there are differences in each one's Christology or distinctive type of Monophysitism. The purpose of this study is to trace the historical and theological development of the Monophysitic Christology of the

¹Paulos Gregorios, William H. Lazareth, and Nikos A. Nissiotis, eds., *Does Chalcedon Divide or Unite?: Towards Convergence in Orthodox Christology* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981), ix.

²Williston Walker, Richard A. Norris, David W. Lotz, and Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), 180.

³Gregorios, Lazareth, and Nissiotis, viii.

Armenian Church, especially as it is related to the Armenians' rejection of the Council of Chalcedon.

The first section of this paper will be devoted to a brief history of the Armenian Church, especially St. Gregory the Illuminator's role in Armenia's conversion to Christianity. The second part is devoted to the Armenian Church and its involvement with the first three ecumenical councils. The third portion of the paper will focus on the events leading to the Council of Chalcedon. Finally, the fourth section discusses the development of Monophysitism and the rejection of Chalcedon, especially by Armenian Christianity.

The Beginnings of Armenian Christianity

Moses Khorenats'i (of Khoren, 407?-492?) is considered the father of Armenian history because he has preserved more of Armenia's pre-Christian past than anyone else.⁴ Some of Khorenats'i's history (which is also found in the Church history of Eusebius) is disputed by modern scholarship, but much of it has worked itself into the fabric of Armenian tradition. Part of this tradition is that Armenia's Christian beginnings can be traced to apostolic times. The tradition states that the original founders of Christianity in Armenia were the apostles St. Thaddeus (one of the seventy from Luke 10) and St. Bartholomew (one of the twelve apostles). These two have been designated as the First Illuminators of Armenia. Their graves are preserved and venerated in the ancient churches of Artaz and Albac, respectively, in

⁴Moses Khorenats'i, *History of the Armenians*, translation and commentary by Robert W. Thomson, Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 1.

southeastern Armenia. The journeys, preaching, and martyrdom of St. Bartholomew in Armenia is the more accepted tradition of the two within Christianity. The traditions regarding St. Thaddeus vary. One tradition recognizes him as Thaddeus Didymus, brother to the apostle Thomas, one of the twelve.⁵ A second tradition relates that one of the twelve, St. Thaddeus (also known as Lebbaeus or Judas, son of James), was instrumental in the evangelization of Armenia.⁶

The period of apostolic visits to Armenia is commonly placed between A.D. 35 and 60. Based on these traditions, the Armenian Church claims that it is an apostolic Church. Whether or not the traditions of Bartholomew and Thaddeus are true, Christianity did make inroads into Armenia.⁷ Tertullian writes that there were Christians in Armenia before the middle of the third century.⁸ According to Eusebius of Caesarea, Dionysius of Alexandria sent a letter to Merujan (Meruzanes), a bishop in Armenia, around the year 254.⁹ There is evidence

⁵Malachia Ormanian, *The Church of Armenia*, 2d English ed., trans. G. Marcar Gregory, ed. Terenig Poladian (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co. Limited, 1955), 3.

⁶*Ibid.*, 4.

⁷Leon Arpee, *A History of Armenian Christianity* (New York: The Armenian Missionary Association of America, 1946), 9.

⁸Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian (I, II, III)*, vol. 3, *The Writings of the Fathers Down to 325: Ante-Nicene Fathers*, American Edition edited by A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 157 (page citation is to the reprint edition).

⁹C. F. Cruse, trans., *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 235 (page citation is to the reprint edition).

that the Christianity in Armenia during this time was heretical, possibly a form of Adoptionism. Three great persecutions of Christianity in Armenia are recorded in its early years: the first under Artashes around 110, the second under Khosrov around 230, and the third under Tiridates (Trdat) lasting from 287 until his conversion to Christianity over twenty years later.¹⁰ By the middle of the third century, Christianity had almost disappeared in Armenia because of constant invasions from Persia and the attacks of Sarmatian tribes from Eastern Europe.¹¹

While Armenia claims an apostolic tradition, Christianity did not become the prevailing national religion until the fourth century. On a human level, the conversion of Armenia is primarily due to the efforts of St. Gregory the Illuminator. The story, parts of which are also disputed, is attributed to Agathangelos, who claims to be an eyewitness of the events that he was ordered to record. Many scholars doubt that Agathangelos (whose name means “Bearer of Good News”) was an actual person who witnessed the history he described.¹² Khorenats`i refers to Agathangelos as the archivist of King Tiridates of Armenia.¹³

The story of Gregory and the conversion of Armenia related in this study is a brief summary of the history recorded by Agathangelos. Gregory was the son of Anak, an Armenian

¹⁰Arpee, 9.

¹¹E. F. K. Fortescue, *The Armenian Church*, (New York: AMS Press, Inc. 1970), 17.

¹²Agathangelos, *History of the Armenians*, translation and commentary by R. W. Thomson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976), xxv.

¹³Khorenats`i, 213.

nobleman of the Parthian Arsacid dynasty. Tiridates was the son of Khosrov, the king of Armenia, also a member of the Parthian dynasty and a kinsman of Anak. The Parthians were also the ruling dynasty in Persia, but power changed hands to another dynasty, the Sassanians, led by Artishir. Khosrov wanted to overthrow the new dynasty in Persia, and he successfully carried out several invasions. Artishir was unable to repel the Armenian attacks, so he decided to have Khosrov assassinated. The Persian king persuaded Anak to treacherously murder his own kinsman. Once Khosrov was dead, the Persians were able to take over Armenia. However, Anak was slain by the Armenian nobles for his traitorous act. Thus, while they were still young, Gregory and Tiridates were both left as orphans in A.D. 240.¹⁴

Gregory escaped to Caesarea in Cappadocia and Tiridates found asylum in Rome. While in exile, Gregory was converted to Christianity and the Roman Emperor Licinius trained Tiridates. In 287, the Emperor Diocletian helped Tiridates to regain his father's throne from the Persians in Armenia.¹⁵ A great festival was held for the return of Tiridates to his native land. The celebration was held at the pagan temple of the goddess Anahita in the city of Eriza. Meanwhile, Gregory had also returned to Armenia; however, he did not disclose his identity because his father, Anak, had murdered Tiridates' father, Khosrov. Gregory was also a Christian, and Christianity was not popular with Diocletian or his protégé Tiridates.

Gregory appeared at the festivities incognito and was asked by the king to worship Anahita. Gregory refused to do this because he was a Christian; he was then taken into

¹⁴Arpee, 15.

¹⁵Ibid.

custody and cruelly tortured. Under torture, Gregory confessed that he was the son of Anak. Tiridates was infuriated and immediately had Gregory thrown into the pit of the dungeon of the fortress of Artashat (Artaxata) in the Ayrarat (Ararat) province; this pit was infested with deadly snakes and no one had ever survived it. But Gregory lived in the pit until his release thirteen years later.

King Tiridates adopted policies with regard to Christianity similar to those of the Roman Empire at that time. The king believed that the presence of Christians inhibited the appeasement of the pagan gods, and he issued two edicts declaring Christianity to be illegal. As punishment for the torture and death of thirty-seven nuns, Tiridates was seized by an impure demon and turned into the likeness of a wild boar. The king's household and the entire population of the royal city of Valarshapat became demon-possessed and the nation underwent terrible ruin. The king's sister, Khosrovidukht, had several visions from God relating that the country could be saved from its afflictions only through Gregory. Everyone thought she was mad because they assumed that Gregory had died years earlier; however, it was discovered that Gregory had been miraculously kept safe from the snakes and was secretly provided with bread and water by a Christian widow for all this time. When Gregory was finally released from the pit, he instructed the king and the people over a period of sixty-five days with a series of sermons. Gregory's catechism, known simply as the *Teaching*, combined an elaborate exposition of the faith with an exhortation to repentance.¹⁶ The Armenians also fasted during

¹⁶Robert W. Thomson, translation and commentary, *The Teaching of St. Gregory: An Early Armenian Catechism*, Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Harvard

this period and many miracles were witnessed. Large numbers of people converted to the Christian faith, including King Tiridates. Also, the king and all those who were afflicted were cured of their torments and their demons were expelled. People from all parts of Armenia came to the region of Ayrarat to hear Gregory's preaching. ...

King Tiridates proclaimed his new faith to be the official religion of the kingdom and, in 301, Armenia became the first nation to embrace Christianity as the state religion.¹⁷ Tiridates proposed that Gregory be elected to the position of Catholicos of All the Armenians. Gregory modestly declined this honor at first, but he eventually accepted it humbly. He was escorted to Caesarea and ordained by Leontius and his bishops as catholicos of Armenia. St. Gregory the Illuminator served as catholicos for twenty-five years until his son, Aristakes, succeeded him. After his retirement as catholicos, Gregory continued to play an active role in Armenian Church life until his death shortly after the Council of Nicea.¹⁸ Besides serving as the spiritual leader of the Armenian people, Gregory was also instrumental in the conversion of Georgia, Caspian Albania, and Persian Atropatene.¹⁹

University Press, 1970), 10.

¹⁷Ormanian, 5.

¹⁸Agathangelos, 35-421 (even pages are in Armenian, odd pages are in English).

¹⁹Ormanian, 14.

The Armenian Church and the First Three Councils

Nicea

Gregory's son, Aristakes, served as the Armenian representative to Nicea in 325. The primary purpose of this council was to condemn Arianism, a heresy perpetuated by Arius of Alexandria who taught that Christ was not fully divine. Arius held that the Son of God was created in time, and that he was of similar substance (*homoiousios*)—but not of the same substance (*homoousios*) as the Father. According to Khorenats'i, Constantine summoned Tiridates and Gregory to come to the council, but Tiridates was unable to leave Armenia for political reasons. Also, Gregory did not wish to go because he was a humble man and he knew that he would be honored at the council for being a Confessor—one that had not apostatized under torture.

Aristakes traveled to Nicea with Euthalius of Edessa, Jacob of Nisbis, and John, bishop of Persia. At Caesarea, they met Leontius the Great and continued on with him to the council.²⁰ There is no information regarding the activities of Aristakes while he was at Nicea, but it is known that he signed the text of the creed and the canons of the council. His name appears in the list of signatories as “Aristakes of Greater Armenia.” Variant texts also have it as “Aridsegisus” or “Arsapius.” Gregory and the other bishops immediately accepted the creed and canons of Nicea upon Aristakes' return to Armenia. Apparently, Gregory also added a few canons of his own specifically for use in the Armenian Church.²¹ The creed adopted at the

²⁰Khorenats'i, 245-246.

²¹Mesrob Ashjian, “The Acceptance of the Ecumenical Councils by the Armenian Church,”

Council of Nicea is as follows. It is thought by some to be an adaptation of the creed of Eusebius of Caesarea:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance (*homoousion*) with the Father. By whom all things were made, both which be in heaven and in earth. Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day he rose again, and ascended into heaven. And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead. And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost. And whosoever shall say that there was a time when the Son of God was not, or that he is of a different substance (*hypostasis*) or essence (*ousia*) [from the Father] or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion—all that so say, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them.²²

It is evident that the creed adopted at Nicea was carefully worded so that it unambiguously condemned Arianism and its followers; the Armenian Church steadfastly upholds this judgment.

Constantinople

The second ecumenical council met in Constantinople in 381. This council condemned Arianism, Apollinarianism (which denied that Christ had a human spirit), and Macedonianism (the Arian extension to the Person of the Holy Spirit); an addition to the creed was made—specifically against Macedonianism—which declared that all three Persons of the Holy Trinity

Ecumenical Review 22 (1970): 352.

²²Henry R. Percival, ed., *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, vol. 14, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2d series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1890; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 3 (page citation is to the reprint edition).

were consubstantial with one another.²³ There is no historical evidence that an Armenian representative was at Constantinople, but the tenth-century historian Yovhannes of Drasxanakert, following Khorenats'i, writes that Catholicos Nerses the Parthian took an active role in the council:

And then Theodosius released and sent home those who were captured in exile by Valentianus [sic]. From there he kept with him Nerses the Great, until through him he could turn the impious blasphemy of Macedonius into the true faith. And then he called a council of one hundred and fifty bishops in Constantinople, who rejected the anathematized Macedonius and all those who questioned the Holy Spirit.²⁴

This tradition is not considered reliable because Catholicos Nerses died in 373 and could not possibly have participated in the council.²⁵ Also, Theodosius did not become Augustus in the East (along with Gratian in the West) until 379 and could not have been acquainted with Nerses.²⁶ Although there was no Armenian present at Constantinople, the Armenian Church did accept the canons and decrees of the council. The creed adopted at Constantinople is as follows. One can see the great similarity with the Nicene Creed and the fuller explanation of the Holy Spirit, especially the affirmation of his divinity:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of

²³Erwin L. Lueker, ed., *Lutheran Cyclopedia: A Concise In-Home Reference for the Christian Family*, rev. ed., (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975), s.v. "Councils of Constantinople," by Erwin L. Lueker, 198.

²⁴Mesrob K. Krikorian, "The First Three Ecumenical Councils and Their Significance for the Armenian Church," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 16 (1971): 196-197.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 197.

²⁶Walker et al., 144.

God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the Right Hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead. Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver-of-Life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spake by the prophets. And [we believe] in one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. We acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins, [and] we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.²⁷

This creed, known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed is essentially the same creed that is used in many liturgies today. The only differences are that the Western Church adds the *filioque* clause—“and the Son”. Also, Lutheran Churches typically use the word ‘Christian’ in place of ‘Catholic’ due to the creed’s translation into German.

It is generally affirmed that the creed adopted at Constantinople was not a new production, but was an adaptation of a creed already in existence. It is likely that the creed was based on the first of two creeds of Epiphanius found at the end of his *Ancoratus*.²⁸ After Epiphanius’ first creed (which he claims is from the Council of Nicea), he writes: “In our generation, . . . you and we and all the orthodox bishops of the whole Catholic Church together, make this address to those who come to baptism, in order that they may proclaim and

²⁷Percival, 163 (page citation is to the reprint edition).

²⁸Ibid.

say as follows.”²⁹ This statement is followed by the second creed, which is about twice as long as the preceding one.

Krikorian writes that the version of the Nicene Creed used in the Armenian liturgy was recompiled on the so-called Athanasian version.³⁰ However, an examination of the Armenian Creed reveals that much of the wording is identical with that of the longer second creed in the *Ancoratus*. The Armenian version of the creed is as follows:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, of things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of God the Father, Only-Begotten, that is of the substance of the Father. God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God. Begotten and not made. Himself of the very nature of the Father by whom all things came into being in heaven and on earth, both visible and invisible. Who for us men, and for our salvation coming down from heaven, was incarnate, was made man, was born perfectly of the Holy Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit. Thus he assumed flesh, soul and mind and everything that is in man, truly and not in semblance. He suffered and was crucified and was buried, and the third day He rose again; and ascending into the heaven with the same body, sat at the right hand of the Father. His is to come with the same body and with the glory of the Father, to judge the quick and the dead, of whose kingdom there is no end.

We also believe in the uncreated and perfect Holy Spirit who spoke through the Laws and the Prophets and the Gospels; Who descended in the Jordan, preached through the Apostles and dwelt among the saints. We also believe in only One, Universal, Apostolic and Holy Church; in one Baptism, in repentance, in absolution and forgiveness of sins; we believe in the resurrection of the dead, in the everlasting judgment of souls and bodies, in the kingdom of heaven and in the life everlasting.³¹

²⁹Ibid., 164.

³⁰Krikorian, 194.

³¹Kourken Yaralian, ed. *The Sacred Music and Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Church* (New York: The Armenian Prelacy, 1992), 165, 167 (even pages are in Armenian, odd pages are in English).

The differences between the Armenian Creed and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed are apparent, concerning both the Son and the Holy Spirit. This unique phraseology is found in Epiphanius. In the Armenian Church, following the congregation's confession of the creed, the Deacon recites an Anathema similar to the one of the Nicene Creed. The Anathema includes the Holy Spirit as well as the Son in order to anathematize Macedonians as well as Arians:

The Holy Universal and Apostolic Church anathematizes those who say there was a time when the Son did not exist, or there was a time when the Holy Spirit did not exist, or that they came into being out of nothing, or who say that either the Son of God or the Holy Spirit is of different essence, or that they are changeable or alterable.³²

The Celebrant also recites a doxology traditionally attributed to St. Gregory the Illuminator, but actually originating in the fifth or sixth century:³³

But we glorify Him, who existed before all eternities, bowing down to the Holy Trinity and the One-Godhead, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and always, forever and ever.³⁴

Ephesus

The Councils of Nicea and Constantinople concentrated mainly on Trinitarian heresies concerning a Person or Persons of the Holy Trinity. Ephesus was the first council in which the primary concern was Christological in nature; i.e. one that involves the relationship between the divinity and humanity in the Person of Christ. (Constantinople also condemned the

³²Ibid., 167.

³³Krikorian, 195.

³⁴Ibid.

Christological heresy of Apollinarianism, but the council was called primarily to affirm the full divinity of the Holy Spirit in response to the Macedonian heresy.) In general, the Alexandrian school focused more on the divinity of Christ and the Antiochene school placed more emphasis on Christ's humanity.³⁵ This difference between the patriarchates led to a rivalry for primacy between them. The Christological controversy over Nestorianism was an instance of the different theologies that had developed in Alexandria and Antioch. Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople and a former Antiochene monk, taught that the two natures in Christ were not in communion with one another except in a moral sense. This teaching caused Nestorius' opponents to conclude that he was teaching the existence of two Christs. Nestorius affirmed that the Virgin Mary was *Christotokos* (Christ-bearer), but denied that she was *theotokos* (God-bearer).³⁶ He did this in order to keep the eternal divinity of the Logos distinct from the man Jesus, who was born in time.

The third ecumenical council, which condemned Nestorianism, was held at Ephesus in 431. Cyril of Alexandria had been the most fervent opponent of Nestorius in this controversy; Cyril's letters and twelve anathemas served as the primary basis of Nestorius' condemnation at Ephesus. Cyril was indeed an orthodox theologian who was concerned that his doctrine correspond to that of Nicea and Constantinople but his condemnation of Nestorius was by no

³⁵Walker et al., 162.

³⁶Lueker, s.v. "Nestorianism," 571.

means based on solely theological concerns, for Cyril had inherited the desire for power from his uncle and predecessor, Theophilus.³⁷

The condemnation of Nestorius at Ephesus did not occur without resistance. The council condemned and deposed Nestorius in one day when he wasn't present to defend himself. A few days later, the Nestorian party arrived and condemned Cyril and Memnon, the bishop of Ephesus. A few days after that, delegates from Pope Celestine arrived from Rome and sided with the Alexandrian party. The situation was such that Emperor Theodosius II confined leaders on both sides in order to gain time to arrive at a solution. Eventually, the Alexandrian school won out and Nestorius was deposed and retired to a monastery near Antioch. As a result, there was somewhat of a schism between the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools after the council.³⁸

The Council of Ephesus was especially important to the Armenians because Nestorianism had made inroads into their country. Nestorianism was influential in the Persian Empire, and its teachings had been introduced into Armenia through the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Nestorius' teacher. St. Sahak (Isaac) was catholicos of Armenia during the rise of Nestorianism and the Council of Ephesus. St. Sahak became catholicos in 387 and remained officially in that role for over fifty years.³⁹ However, his leadership was plagued with problems due to the political situation in Armenia. The Sassanian dynasty succeeded the

³⁷Walker et al., 167.

³⁸Ibid., 168-169.

³⁹Ormanian, 14.

Parthians in Persia, and the Byzantine Empire succeeded Rome as the major western power. East and West continued to battle for control of Armenia because of its strategic location along trade routes to India and China. Also, the Sassanians and Byzantines collaborated and caused the collapse of Armenia's ruling dynasty, the Arsacids, in 428.⁴⁰ When the Arsacid dynasty fell, St. Sahak was exiled and the government inaugurated a succession of antipatriarchs, but Sahak continued to be the spiritual head of the Armenians and was beloved by his flock. Sahak was considered by the Armenian Church to be the legitimate catholicos when he died in 439.⁴¹

These political problems made it impossible for Sahak to attend the Council of Ephesus. However, he was notified of the council's decisions. Khorenats'i writes:

In those times the impious Nestorius unworthily sat on the episcopal throne of Byzantium. And following the Jewish interpretation he blasphemed the all-holy virgin as being the mother of a man and not the mother of God. For the one born from her had a beginning [he claimed], but was called Son by grace from Mary and another was Son from the Father before ages; so that there were two Sons, whereby the Trinity became a Quaternity. Therefore the holy fathers gathered in Asia at Ephesus, which faces the sea. In a written statement Celestine of Rome, Cyril of Alexandria, Juvenal of Jerusalem, John of Antioch, Memnon of Ephesus, Paul of Emesa, Theodotius of Ancyra, and many others, altogether two hundred fathers, anathematized Nestorius and confessed our Lord Jesus Christ as one Son of God and the all-holy Virgin Mary as the mother of God.

And because Sahak the Great and Mesrop were not present at that council, the bishops Cyril of Alexandria, Proclus of Constantinople, and Acacius of Melitene wrote to them in warning. They had heard that some of his heretical disciples, taking the books of Theodore of Mopsuestia—the teacher of Nestorius and the pupil of Diodore—

⁴⁰Anahid V. Ordjanian, *Armenia: Crossroads of Cultures* (New York: Armenian Exhibit Committee of the Advisory Council for Armenian Studies at Columbia University in the City of New York, 1980), no page numbers.

⁴¹Ormanian, 21.

had gone to Armenia. Then our translators, whose names we mentioned earlier, arrived and found Sahak the Great and Mesrop in Ashtishat in Tarawn; they presented to them the letters and canons of the council of Ephesus in six canonical chapters, and accurate copies of the Scriptures.⁴²

The six translators referred to by Khorenats`i—Joseph, Eznik, Koriun, Leontius, John, and Ardzan⁴³—were Armenian *vardapets* (archimandrites) who had been studying theology in Constantinople since 425.⁴⁴ (Mesrop, an Armenian monk and friend of Sahak, invented the Armenian alphabet in 404;⁴⁵ he and Sahak, along with one hundred translators worked for nearly three decades to produce an Armenian Bible that was completed in 433.⁴⁶) After Sahak received the students, he abided by the decision of the council and ordered the expulsion of all Nestorians from Armenia.⁴⁷ While the Council of Ephesus condemned Nestorius, the Armenians felt that it did not go far enough in condemning the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia that had caused so many problems in their nation. Hence, Sahak summoned the Council of Ashtishat in 435 and criticized Theodore in a letter to Proclus, the patriarch of Constantinople.⁴⁸

⁴²Khorenats`i, 335-336.

⁴³Ibid., 334.

⁴⁴Krikorian, 198.

⁴⁵Arpee, 27.

⁴⁶Ormanian, 18.

⁴⁷Ashjian, 353.

⁴⁸Ormanian, 21.

From Ephesus to Chalcedon

Eutychianism and the *Latrocinium*

Even though the Council of Ephesus officially condemned Nestorianism, the controversy was far from over. In order to restore communion between Alexandria and Antioch, a compromise had to be made. Antioch would consent to the condemnation and deposition of Nestorius if Cyril would consent to a compromise confessional formula. Cyril approved the *Formula of Reunion* that he received from John of Antioch in 433. The *Formula* approved of the term *theotokos* and confessed a union of two natures. Nestorius was eventually banished to Egypt where he died around 450.

It seemed that a truce had been made between Alexandria and Antioch until 436, when Cyril again became suspicious. This time Cyril wrote against Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, Nestorius' teacher. The controversy arose again, but the Alexandrian side was in possession of all the power. Cyril died in 444 and was succeeded as bishop of Alexandria by Dioscorus. Dioscorus was not as gifted a theologian as Cyril, but he was even more determined than his predecessor to have primacy over Antioch. Also in 447, Flavian succeeded Proclus (the successor of Nestorius) as bishop of Constantinople. Since Flavian was inclined toward Antiochene theology, conflict between the two schools was on the horizon.

Unfortunately, when a heresy is refuted, another heresy often results when one tries to combat it. This was the case when Eutyches of Constantinople tried to oppose the error of Nestorius. Eutyches was a popular archimandrite in Constantinople who was the chief

supporter of Dioscorus in that city. In order to affirm the unity of the two natures of Christ, Eutyches taught that Christ was of two natures before the Incarnation, but of only one nature afterward. He asserted that the human nature of Christ had been absorbed into his divine nature, so that the human nature was essentially nonexistent. The result was that Christ possessed a single divine nature. Flavian condemned this teaching in a synod that was held in Constantinople in 448, and Eutyches was deposed and declared a heretic.

Eutyches appealed to the imperial court, but the court ordered a confession of faith from Flavian. In the meantime, Dioscorus requested a general council to deal with the matter. Both Eutyches and Flavian appealed to Pope Leo I, and Leo responded by writing a letter to Flavian; this letter is known as Leo's *Tome* and became the basis for the *Definition of Chalcedon*. The *Tome* upheld the teaching that Christ was one Person subsisting in two natures. Dioscorus and his followers considered Leo's position to be too close to Nestorianism.

At the request of Dioscorus, Theodosius convened a council to meet at Ephesus in 449. The Reading of Leo's *Tome* was forbidden and the council upheld the doctrine of Eutyches and also condemned Flavian. Dioscorus had won at the expense of the relationship between Alexandria and Rome. Pope Leo denounced this council and called it a *latrocinium*, or a robber-synod, because the Church had been robbed of orthodoxy. He requested another council but Theodosius was a supporter of Alexandrian theology, and would not call for one.⁴⁹

⁴⁹Walker et al., 169-171.

The Council of Chalcedon

Pope Leo I, in defense of Flavian, called a synod in Rome against Eutyches and Dioscorus; he also convinced the new orthodox emperor Marcian to call a general council so that the decision of Leo's synod would be authoritative. (Theodosius had been accidentally killed in 450.) Marcian called the fourth ecumenical council to be held at Chalcedon in 451. The bishops at this council, like Cyril's position at Ephesus, stated that the creeds of Nicea and Constantinople should normally be sufficient to define the faith, but that new heresies had arisen since then that had to be dealt with. The council accepted Cyril's second letter to Nestorius and his letter that accepted the *Formula of Reunion* as adequate expressions against Nestorianism. The bishops also declared that Leo's *Tome* was in agreement with Cyril's doctrine, and that it defined the orthodox faith against Eutyches. The bishops produced the *Definition of Chalcedon*, based on Leo's *Tome*, Cyril's letters, and the *Formula of Reunion*.⁵⁰

The *Definition of Chalcedon* is as follows:

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial (*homoousion*) with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God (*theotokos*), according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures (*physesin*), *inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably*; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person (*prosopon*) and one Subsistence (*hypostasis*), not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only-begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus

⁵⁰Ibid., 171.

Christ; as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.⁵¹

The language of the Chalcedonian *Definition* is very close to that of Leo's *Tome*. The distinction between nature (*physis*) and subsistence (*hypostasis*) is one that had not been made before in the Christological debate, though it had been foreshadowed in the *Formula of Reunion*. It is also a distinction that did not satisfy everyone, especially those with Monophysitic leanings. The Alexandrian party was also not pleased with Canon XXVIII of the council, which designated Constantinople as the New Rome, and granted it equal status with old Rome.⁵²

The Rejection of Chalcedon

Monophysitism vs. Orthodoxy

Those who did not accept the Chalcedonian *Definition* felt that it encouraged Nestorianism all over again with its acceptance of two natures; this party eventually came to be known as Monophysites, literally "one nature." (Those who accept Chalcedon are referred to as Dyophysites, "two natures.") As mentioned above, this was the first time a distinction between *physis* and *hypostasis* had been made. In spite of this fact, the battle cry of those at

⁵¹Lueker, s.v. "Council of Chalcedon," by Herbert T. Mayer, 148. Greek words are taken from John H. Leith, ed., *Creeeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3d ed. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 36.

⁵²Walker et al., 172-173.

the Council of Chalcedon was “Leo agrees with Cyril.”⁵³ However, the anti-Chalcedonians claimed that the council was in opposition to the formula of Cyril of Alexandria: “*mia physis (or hypostasis) tou theou logou sesarkomene*” (one nature of the divine Word Incarnate).⁵⁴ While they approved of the phrase “out of two natures” in the *Formula of Reunion*, the Monophysites could not approve of the phrase “in two natures” in the Chalcedonian *Definition*.⁵⁵

In spite of the fact that Chalcedon was an imperial council, the Church was divided between the Monophysites and the Orthodox, and the decrees of Chalcedon were not enforced. In 476, a council at Antioch declared Chalcedonian doctrine to be dubious and Emperor Basiliscus issued a decree that denounced Chalcedon. In 482, Emperor Zeno issued the *Henoticon* (Edict of Reunion) in an attempt to unite the Church.⁵⁶ Acacius, patriarch of Constantinople, probably drafted the *Henoticon*. The core of the document reads as follows:

We confess that the only-begotten Son of God, himself God, who truly became man, our Lord Jesus Christ, who, *homoousios* with the Father according to the Godhead and the same *homoousios* with us according to manhood, came down and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and of Mary the virgin and ‘*Theotokos*’, is one and not two. For we affirm that both the miracles and the sufferings which he voluntarily endured in the flesh are those of one Person. We altogether reject those who divide or confuse or introduce a phantom, since this true incarnation which was without sin of the ‘*Theotokos*’ did not bring about an addition of a Son. For the Trinity remained a

⁵³Ibid., 173.

⁵⁴Gregorios, Lazareth, and Nissiotis, 3.

⁵⁵Walker et al., 173.

⁵⁶Ormanian, 26.

Trinity even when one of the Trinity, the divine Logos, became incarnate.⁵⁷ . . . And we anathematize any one who has held or holds any other opinion, either now or at any other time, whether at Chalcedon or at any other Synod; and in particular do we anathematize the aforementioned Nestorius and Eutyches and all who upheld their teaching.⁵⁸

The *Henoticon* did not specifically condemn the *Definition of Chalcedon* or Leo's *Tome*; it also avoided the use of the word 'nature'. The *Henoticon* was based on the position that the first three ecumenical councils were sufficient to define the faith.⁵⁹

Zeno's policy was successful in the East, but did not achieve lasting results. Pope Simplicius felt that the *Henoticon* attacked Chalcedonian orthodoxy, and excommunicated Acacius of Constantinople, as well as the patriarch of Alexandria and Emperor Zeno in 484.⁶⁰ This was the beginning of the Acacian Schism between Rome and the East that lasted until 519, when Emperor Justin restored the authority of the *Definition of Chalcedon*.⁶¹ Even though East and West were reunited, the Monophysites continued to be separated from orthodox (Chalcedonian) Christianity.

The emperor Justinian, Justin's nephew, made an attempt to reconcile the Monophysites with the Chalcedonians in 533. He published an edict that approved of all four

⁵⁷Leif Frivold, *The Incarnation: A Study of the Doctrine of the Incarnation in the Armenian Church in the 5th and 6th Centuries according to the Book of Letters* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1981), 145.

⁵⁸Krikorian, 203.

⁵⁹Walker et al., 174-175.

⁶⁰Krikorian, 203.

⁶¹Walker et al., 175.

ecumenical councils and made the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed the sole symbol of the Church.⁶² Justinian also sanctioned a popular *theopaschite* (suffering God) formula, “One of the Trinity suffered in the flesh,” with the hope that the Monophysites would accept Chalcedon; Leontius of Jerusalem also supported this doctrine. Justinian was not successful at attempting to unite the two parties, but he never gave up trying to do so.

In another attempt to win the Monophysites over in 544, Justinian condemned the *Three Chapters*—writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Ibas of Edessa, and Theodoret of Cyrrihus. As previously mentioned, Theodore was Nestorius’ teacher. Ibas and Theodoret had both written against Cyril and were declared orthodox at Chalcedon. Not only did the Monophysites still refuse to accept the Chalcedonian *Definition*, but many orthodox bishops also did not approve of the condemnation of the *Three Chapters*; thus, instead of restoring unity, Justinian merely succeeded in creating more disunity. The *Three Chapters* were officially condemned at the fifth ecumenical council at Constantinople in 553. However, by this time, the Monophysite Churches had ceased to be separate parties within the Orthodox Church but had become autonomous national Churches in Syria, Egypt, and Armenia, Ethiopia, and Persia. These Churches would remain separated from orthodox Christianity by their rejection of the Council of Chalcedon and of two natures in Christ.⁶³

⁶²Lueker, s.v. “Justinian I,” 435.

⁶³Walker et al., 175-179.

The Armenian Church and Chalcedon

The previous subsection outlined the general historical development of the aftermath of Chalcedon and the rejection of this council by the Monophysite Churches. The current subsection will concentrate specifically on the rejection of the Chalcedonian *Definition* by the Armenian Church. As mentioned above, the Armenian Church accepted the decrees of the first three ecumenical councils. Nestorianism especially plagued Armenia, and Sahak was extremely diligent in his efforts to banish all Nestorians from Armenia. However, the Armenians were not a part of the Eutychian controversy that led up to the *Latrocinium* and the Council of Chalcedon. Armenia was too concerned with her struggle just to remain Christian in her own battles against Persia. When the Arsacid dynasty fell in 428, the Sassanians began a campaign to reinstate Zoroastrianism in Armenia with hopes that this would help them to control political power.⁶⁴

The Armenian political turmoil of the fifth century continued to plague the Church. Although he was never named catholicos, Mesrop took over the spiritual guidance of the Armenians after Sahak's death in 439, while Soormak was the antipatriarch recognized by the Persian government. Mesrop died a few months later in 440, and Hovsep (Joseph) was named Sahak's replacement as catholicos. When Soormak died in 444, another antipatriarch was not appointed. Due to the efforts of the Armenian governor-general, Vasak Suni, Hovsep was officially recognized as the patriarch by the Persian government.

⁶⁴Ordjanian.

In 449, the Persian king, Jezdegerd, published a decree that made Zoroastrianism mandatory among all of his subjects; he also began a systematic persecution of all Christians.⁶⁵

Hovsep and a synod of bishops met at Artashat in 550 to draw up a reply to the king's demands. They set forth the fundamentals of their faith, and then declared this statement as a response:

From this confession none ever can shake us, neither angels nor men, neither sword, fire, water nor any bitter torture. All our goods and chattel we commit into your hands; our bodies also are at your disposal. Do as you will. If you choose to leave us in the free exercise of this faith, we on our part will exchange you for no other lord on earth; neither, however, will we own in heaven any other Lord than Jesus Christ only, besides whom there is no God.⁶⁶

After this decree, ten of the chief Armenian satraps were summoned to Persia and given the choice of renouncing their Christian faith or immediate exile from their homeland. They all pretended to apostatize so they could return to Armenia and organize a resistance. The Persian government gave the Armenians one year to renounce their Christianity—from August 450 to August 451. The Armenians, however, chose not to apostatize. On 26 May 451, Vardan (Vartan) Mamikonian led a force of 66,000 Armenians against 220,000 Persians. Unfortunately, the Persian army was reinforced by a large number of Armenians—influenced by Vasak Suni—who were loyal to the Persian cause. Vardan, eight other generals, and 1027 Armenian soldiers fell at the battle of Avarayr. The Armenian Church commemorates the death of these martyrs on Shrove Tuesday.

⁶⁵Ormanian, 21-22.

⁶⁶Arpee, 45.

Catholicos Hovsep was arrested and eventually martyred in 454 along with other clergymen. Hostility between the Armenians and the Persians continued until Valarse became the new Persian king in 484. Valarse realized that the efforts to cause the Armenians to renounce their faith were useless. Valarse proclaimed religious liberty and named Vahan Mamikonian, a nephew of St. Vardan, as the military commandant of Armenia.⁶⁷

Due to their troublesome relationship with Persia all of this time and their geographical isolation from Europe, the Armenians were not able to deal with theological problems until 484—over three decades after the Council of Chalcedon, but only two years after Zeno issued the *Henoticon*. The *Henoticon*, but not the *Definition of Chalcedon*, was presented to the Armenians for approval, and they accepted it without reserve. At this time, the Armenian Church had not yet seen the Chalcedonian statement.⁶⁸

The Armenians were made aware of Chalcedon sometime during the patriarchal reign of Babguen of Othmoos (490-516). The Nestorians, who had established a foothold in Persian Mesopotamia, were presenting problems to the Syrian Christians. The Syrians were faithful to the decrees of Ephesus and had requested help from Armenia regarding their difficulties with the Nestorians. Due to the influence of Sahak, the Armenian Church was extremely anti-Nestorian in its theology; also, they had always been more inclined toward the Alexandrian tradition than to that of Antioch. In spite of the fact that Chalcedon condemned Nestorianism as well as Eutychianism, the Nestorians were still favorable to the Chalcedonian statement

⁶⁷Ormanian, 22-23.

⁶⁸Frivold, 145.

because of its acceptance of two natures. All of these factors, plus the fact that Marcian—the emperor who orchestrated the council—refused to aid Armenia in her fight against Persia led to the rejection of Chalcedon by the Armenian Church.

The Armenians also had no further interest in doctrinal formulations. As far as they were concerned, all theological matters had already been settled at Ephesus. They felt that, in trying to combat Eutychianism, the Council of Chalcedon had gone too far and had, itself, embraced Nestorianism. Under the leadership of Catholicos Babguen, a synod of Armenian, Georgian, and Caspo-Albanian Churches assembled at Dwin in 506 and officially proclaimed the profession of faith made at Ephesus in 431. They rejected Arianism, Macedonianism, Nestorianism, and Eutychianism. This was the first declaration made by the Armenian Church in regard to the Council of Chalcedon. Since that time, the Armenian Church has resisted making any new dogmatic statements. The decision arrived at in 506 was confirmed at another synod at Dwin in 554 under the reign of Catholicos Nerses II.⁶⁹

Conclusion

The Armenian Orthodox Church adheres to a Christology that is Monophysitic or non-Chalcedonian. The Armenians accept the formula of Cyril of Alexandria as the orthodox doctrine about the Person of Christ: “one nature of the divine Word Incarnate.”⁷⁰ They view themselves as orthodox and see Dyophysites as deviating from the apostolic Christian faith.

⁶⁹Ormanian, 26-28.

⁷⁰Gregorios, Lazareth, and Nissiotis, 3.

Monophysites do not make a distinction between *physis* and *hypostasis*. They believe that any distinction between the two approaches is too close to Nestorianism, and would be in opposition to the first three councils. Ecclesiastical history reveals that, in many cases, one heresy is merely a response to the one that came before it. Monophysitism was definitely a reaction to Nestorianism—especially for the Armenians who were plagued with the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia in their country. Monophysitism seems to have developed gradually in the Armenian Church, but was officially endorsed at the Council of Dwin in 506, when the Armenian Church formally rejected Chalcedon over fifty years after the council was held.

The separation between Orthodox Christianity and Monophysites occurred more than fifteen centuries ago. There have been many schisms in the Church since that time, including the Great Schism in 1054 and the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Much of the separation within Christianity is being reversed in the twentieth century due to the efforts of the ecumenical movement, primarily within the context of the World Council of Churches. This is not necessarily a positive thing in many cases because external unity is often sought at the expense of doctrinal unity.

An example of this occurred in 1997 when, after three decades of dialogue between the Roman Catholic and Armenian Churches, the Armenian catholicos Karekin I and Pope John Paul II signed a declaration officially ending the controversy over the nature of Christ. The declaration stated that past differences were due to “linguistic, cultural and political factors”

and that they “should not continue to influence the life and witness of the Church today.”⁷¹ Karekin’s action brought protests from Armenian bishops, clergy, and laity who believe the catholicos signed a formula that is Chalcedonian.⁷² As this paper has shown, the Armenian rejection of Chalcedon, while involving “linguistic, cultural and political factors,” primarily is theological in nature. This joint declaration between the Roman Catholic and Armenian Churches is especially ironic considering that Rome and the Chalcedonian Eastern Orthodox disagree on lesser points of doctrine than Christology. Some Armenian Churches (as well as some Chalcedonian Eastern Orthodox) are known as Uniate (or Uniat) Churches. Uniate Churches—another example of external unity without doctrinal agreement—are Eastern Churches who submit to the Roman papacy, while retaining their own rites and canon law.⁷³ They are the result of the second Council of Lyons (1274)⁷⁴ and the Council of Florence (1438-45).⁷⁵ It should be noted that the Christological agreement that Catholicos Karekin signed at the Vatican involved the Armenian Church as a whole, and not just the Uniate Churches.

⁷¹Reuter (London), “Vatican City,” *Armenian, Catholic Churches End 1500 Year Rift*, 24 May 1997, <<http://www.cilicia.com/armo24d.html>> (22 July 1999).

⁷²*Haykakan Jamanak* (Yerevan, Armenia), “Delegation Asks Catholicos to be Mindful of Doctrine,” 11 April 1997, *Armenian, Catholic Churches End 1500 Year Rift*, 24 May 1997, <<http://www.cilicia.com/armo24d.html>> (22 July 1999).

⁷³Lueker, s.v. “Uniate Churches,” 782.

⁷⁴Ibid., s.v. “Union Movements,” by Arnold C. Mueller, 783, “Councils of Lyons,” 507.

⁷⁵Ibid., s.v. “Union Movements,” by Arnold C. Mueller, 783, “Council of Florence,” by Carl S. Meyer, 303.

In spite of the fact that the aforementioned agreement does not involve true doctrinal unity, the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox (Monophysitic) Churches have had remarkable success in theological discussions with each other. Four agreed statements between the two communions were achieved in unofficial consultations held between 1964 and 1971.⁷⁶ The primary basis of agreement has been Cyril of Alexandria's formula: "one nature of the divine Word Incarnate." The first statement drafted at Aarhus, Denmark declares: "We recognize in each other the one orthodox faith of the Church. . . . On the essence of the Christological dogma we found ourselves in full agreement."⁷⁷ If this statement is indeed true—if these Churches are moving towards doctrinal agreement—it is possible that one of the most ancient of schisms in the Christian Church may be healed in our time.

Soli Deo Gloria!

⁷⁶Gregorios, Lazareth, and Nissiotis, 1.

⁷⁷Ibid., 3.

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