

**God Tasted Death for us:
Nestorius and Cyril on the Suffering of Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews**

John L Drury¹
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The Christological battle between Nestorius and Cyril was waged with the weapons of exegesis. The general character of their respective schools is well known with regard to Old Testament interpretation. Yet when it comes to New Testament epistles, their methodological differences are not so cut and dry. In this paper, I will compare and contrast these two thinkers' use of Christological texts in Hebrews. My thesis is that they share a form of dogmatic exegesis, by which the meaning of texts is at least partially predetermined by prior theological commitments.

In order to substantiate this claim, I will first outline the typical characterization of their respective schools of interpretation. It will be clear that such characterizations are inadequate for describing their interpretation of epistles in dogmatic disputes. In the case of the Epistle to the Hebrews, differing theological commitments regarding divine impassibility provide the determining factor. After quickly outlining this theological difference, I will analyze Nestorius' and Cyril's interpretation of four key texts: Hebrews 2:9, 2:17-18, 5:7-9 and 10:28-29. I will then conclude with some reflections on the significance of these debates for contemporary theology.

Before proceeding further, a note on scope is in order. First of all, my thesis is not aimed at modifying the prevailing view of Antiochene and Alexandrian exegetical

¹ Bio: John is a Ph.D. student in Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. He received an M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary and a B.A. in Religion and Philosophy from Indiana Wesleyan University. He has previously presented papers at WTS, and has been published in *Theology Today*, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, and *Koinonia Journal*. John is also an Adjunct Professor of Bible and Theology at Somerset Christian College and an ordained minister in The Wesleyan Church.

differences.² Rather, it is intended to supplement this view in a case where it does not apply. Secondly, this paper does not offer a history of Hebrews interpretation.³ Attention is focused exclusively on Nestorius' and Cyril's use of key texts rather than their historical antecedents. Finally, for the sake of charitable interpretation as well as ease, I have selected Nestorius' *Bazaar of Heracleides* and Cyril's *On the Unity of Christ* as the focus of comparison.⁴ These represent mature extended works of the two thinkers under investigation.

Two Schools of Exegesis: Alexandria and Antioch

The conflict between Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, and Nestorius, student of the famed Antiochene Theodore of Mopsuestia, continued an ongoing power struggle between two great theological schools of the early church. The intellectual locus of this struggle was the proper interpretation of the Bible. Do the words of Scripture permit and even invite *allegoria* that leads the soul to multiple layers of spiritual truth? Or do we find in the narratives and images of the Bible *theoria* that can be applied across time and place? The Alexandrian tradition as developed by Clement and Origen opted for *allegoria*, while the Antiochenes Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia defended *theoria*.⁵ Into these respective schools Cyril and Nestorius were initiated.⁶

² For an attempted revision of the typical view by means of comparative exegesis of the Minor Prophets, see Hieromonk Patapios, "The Alexandrian and the Antiochene Methods of Exegesis: Toward a Reconsideration" *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 44:1 (1999) 187-198.

³ For an overview of Hebrews interpretation during the Patristic period, see Rowan A. Greer, *The Captain of our Salvation: A Study in the Patristic Exegesis of Hebrews* (Mohr: Tübingen, 1973).

⁴ Nestorius, *The Bazaar of Heracleides* (Driver, G. R. and Hodgson, L. eds. and transl.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925) hereafter cited in-text; Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ* (McGuckin, John A., transl.; Crestwood, NY: St. Valdmir's Seminary Press, 1995) hereafter cited in-text.

⁵ For a concise summary of the differences between these two schools and their representative figures, see Karlfried Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 15-23.

⁶ For a study of Cyril's unique appropriation of Alexandrian exegesis, see Alexander Kerrigan, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: Interpreter of the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1952).

The methods of *allegoria* and *theoria* were especially helpful in cases of anthropomorphism (e.g., the “hand” of God) or historical obscurity (e.g., Jewish food regulations). But how did these two schools approach New Testament argumentative material? During the Fifth Century debate over Christology, thinkers from both schools turned to such texts where neither *allegoria* nor *theoria* would settle the debate. Some other method was needed.

Despite the sharp division between Antioch and Alexandria over Biblical interpretation, in the midst of doctrinal debate Nestorius and Cyril shared the same method. They both made use of well-worn “dogmatic exegesis.” Such a method assumes certain texts refer to the doctrinal matter at hand. Debate surrounds the question as to which aspect of the doctrine they refer. Athanasius used this method famously against the Arian citation of Philippians 2 by asserting that the “lowering” in the passage referred to the humanity, not the deity, of Christ. The same kind of dogmatic logic is at work in Nestorius’ and Cyril’s treatment of key Christological passages in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The significance of such a procedure is that theological assumption replaces methodological principle as the determining factor. In light of the significant role played by prior theological commitments, I will outline the basic doctrinal debate between Nestorius and Cyril before turning to specific exegetical examples.

The Center of the Christological Debate: Divine Impassibility

What theological assumptions did Nestorius and Cyril bring to the interpretation of a New Testament epistle? Although the subtleties of the Christological controversy remain contested, the basic contours of the debate are clear. In response to a question about pious language for Mary, Nestorius rejected *theotokos* and recommended

Christokos. Cyril rushed to the defense of *theotokos* language, and the discussion escalated to debate over the relation of deity and humanity in Christ. The subsequent stirred to the Council of Ephesus after which – not without intrigue – Nestorius was condemned.⁷

In the course of the debate, Nestorius emerged as the defender of the distinction between deity and humanity in Christ – hence Mary as *Christokos*.⁸ Cyril, on the other hand, stressed the unity of deity and humanity in Christ.⁹ Although such generalizations are accurate, they do not reveal what was at stake in the debate. If it were simply a matter of emphasis, room would have been more easily made for both positions. The issue at hand was divine impassibility. It seemed intuitively obvious to all parties involved that if God suffered, then God would cease to be God.

For Nestorius, the way to defend divine impassibility was to hold the line on the distinction.¹⁰ If God were united wholly with a human being, God would suffer and therefore cease to be God. Nestorius says to Cyril, “[Y]ou evacuate him of impassibility and of immortality” (39). The whole idea of an incarnation of God falls apart if God ceases to be God in the process. A suffering God is no better than the pagan gods.

Cyril too affirmed divine impassibility, but did not share Nestorius’ fears. Cyril thought it sufficient to simply specify that the Logos suffered *in the flesh* (115). No

⁷ For a detailed narration of the controversy, see John Anthony McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy: its History, Theology, and Texts* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994) ch. 1. For a retelling from an imperial perspective, see Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Emperors: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) ch. 5.

⁸ For an analysis of Nestorius’ Christology, see J. A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria* ch. 2.

⁹ For an analysis of Cyril’s Christology, see J. A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria* ch. 3.

¹⁰ Donald Fairbairn agrees that divine impassibility was at the center of the debate in “*Theopatheia: Nestorius’ Main Charge against Cyril of Alexandria*,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56 (2003): 190-207. Joseph M. Hallman also traces the significance of divine suffering the Christological controversy in “The Seed of Fire: Divine Suffering in the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius of Constantinople,” *Doctrinal Diversity: Varieties of Early Christianity* (Everett Ferguson, ed.; New York: Garland, 1999) 71-93. Unfortunately for our purposes, neither scholar gives extended attention to the interpretation of key texts in Hebrews.

stronger distinction was needed, provided one was careful with the language. The focus could remain on the divine-human unity of Christ and the gracious act whereby God “did not disdain the poverty of human nature” (55).

As we shall see, these disparate theological commitments become the determining factor in each theologian’s interpretation of Scripture. When Nestorius encounters a text implicating God in suffering, he ensures that the suffering is borne by the human Jesus in distinction from the divine Logos. In the face of the same texts, Cyril must find a way to simultaneously affirm divine impassibility and the divine-human unity of Christ. I will deal with four key texts of this sort found in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Comparative Exegesis of Hebrews 2:9

The majority text of Hebrews 2:9b reads “Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (NASB). This is a classic text on the suffering of Jesus. At first glance, there seems to be nothing interesting here, for neither party questioned the suffering of the human Jesus. It is this very textual simplicity, however, that shows how Nestorius and Cyril make dogmatic use of any text at hand.

Although we do not have an extant reference to Hebrews 2:9 in Nestorius’ corpus, it was a favorite text of Theodore of Mopsuestia.¹¹ Furthermore, Cyril cites the text in an explicit rebuttal to his opponent’s interpretation of it (113). What is intriguing about the text is that a minority textual tradition found in Antioch reads *χωρις θεου* (“without God”) rather than *χριτι θεου* (“by the grace of God”).¹² It is likely that Nestorius

¹¹ In a fragment of his commentary on Hebrews, Cyril implicitly attacks the Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia while expositing Hebrews 2:9. See P. M. Parvis, “Commentary on Hebrews and the *Contra Theodorum* of Cyril of Alexandria,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 26 (Oct 1975) 415-419.

¹² For a text-critical overview of Hebrews 2:9, see Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of*

encountered this version and saw it as a definitive proof-text that the human Jesus suffered as a distinct subject from the divine Logos.

Cyril directly combats such an interpretation of Hebrews 2:9. Although the subject of the suffering in the verse is clearly Jesus, Cyril quotes the verse in context to show that the whole passage is speaking about the divine Son who became like us for a little while. Cyril claims that the author “makes it obvious to whom his words refer, clearly the Only Begotten” (114). Cyril makes a dogmatic exegetical move by specifying the referent of suffering as the divine Logos. He goes on to note that the Word “is not given on behalf of us nakedly, as it were, or as yet without flesh, but rather when he became flesh” (114). This important qualification makes it possible for him to conclude, “To say that he suffered does no disgrace to him, for he did not suffer in the nature of the godhead, but in his own flesh” (115). By making these specifications, Cyril is able to ascribe suffering to the Logos while retaining the impassibility of divine nature.

Although the bare text seems to say very little on the matter, both sides of the Christological debate take Hebrews 2:9 as an opportunity to make doctrinal assertions. The minority status of the *χωρις* tradition suggests those who wished to defend divine impassibility tampered with the text. God tasting death apparently left a bad taste in their mouths. Cyril’s extended treatment reveals the lengths to which he will go to both affirm the suffering of the Logos and at the same time defend divine impassibility. He wants to see God really taste death yet without ceasing to be the immortal God. Both are cases of

Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the New Testament (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 146-150. The variations in Syriac Bibles follow variants of Greek the manuscript tradition. See Sebastian P. Brock “Hebrews 2:9 in Syriac Tradition,” *Novum Testamentum* 27 (Jul 1985): 236-244 as well as a more concise discussion in *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition* (Kerala, India: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1989) 30.

dogmatic exegesis: the crux of the argument surrounds the precise theological referent of Scriptural words.

Comparative Exegesis of Hebrews 2:17-18

Hebrews 2:17-18 is another text referencing the suffering of Christ. It reads: “Therefore, he had to be made like his brethren in all things, that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since he himself was tempted in that which he has suffered, he is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted” (NASB). Although the text makes a simple allusion to Christ’s solidarity with us in suffering, both Nestorius and Cyril see in this text an opportunity to advance their respective views.

Nestorius quotes these verses in the context of defending his distinction between Christ’s human body and the God who enlivens it. Referring to the body as the temple, he states, “I called the temple passible and not God the quickener of the temple which has suffered” (228-29). It is crucial for Nestorius that the suffering of Christ is attributed wholly to the human *prosopon*. He proceeds to vindicate himself by claiming, “For this you have condemned me like the priests for blasphemies, because I have said that God is incorruptible and immortal and the quickener of all” (229). This is a clever defense, for Nestorius claims that he is condemned for defending the deity of God – a worthy task in anyone’s mind. For Nestorius, the subject of the suffering in Hebrews 2:17-18 is clearly human, not divine.

Cyril finds in this very same verse justification for his own views. His line of argument is relatively straightforward: if Christ *became* like us, then at some point he must *not* have been like us. As Cyril succinctly puts it, “For whatever is ‘made like’

certain other things, must of necessity be different from them, unlike them, indeed of a different form or nature to them” (64). Hence the language of becoming in this text implies that the real subject of the suffering spoken of in this passage is the Logos. After quoting this passage, he delineates one of his characteristic lists of paradoxes:

And this likeness in all things has a kind of beginning, or as the inception of the affair, his birth from a woman; his revelation in the flesh, even though in terms of his own nature he is invisible; his abasement in the human condition for the economy of salvation, even though he has the transcendent name; his humbling to manhood, even though he is raised high above the Thrones; and his acceptance of servile limitations, even though he is by nature the Lord (Phil 2:6f). And all this because ‘The Word was God’ (58).

Such a conjunction of opposites is the key to Cyril’s logic. By means of paradox, Cyril aims to affirm both the suffering of the divine Logos in the flesh and the impassibility of God.

Cyril’s use of paradox could be construed as a smokescreen for sloppiness. However, Cyril’s language does not lack precision. Though his focus is on the unity of deity and humanity, he is still careful to make distinctions when necessary. Cyril quotes Hebrews 2:17 in support of this rather precise statement: “Just as we say that the flesh became his very own, in the same way the weakness of that flesh became his very own in an economic appropriation according to the terms of the unification” (107). Cyril has no interest in speaking of divine suffering in general, but rather as a specific economy of the Son in a specific mode of union. So, although Cyril’s appeal to paradox is at the center of his argument, it is no mere rhetoric or an excuse for theological sloppiness.

In their respective treatments of Hebrews 2:17-18, both Nestorius and Cyril show their similar method of dogmatic exegesis. Both extend the referent of the text into their theological dispute. Nestorius sees the passage as referring to human suffering in

distinction from the divine. Cyril sees the divine Logos as the referent of the passage and therefore the subject of the suffering described. Both find support for their opposed doctrinal formulations in the same text.

Comparative Exegesis of Hebrews 5:7-9

Hebrews 5:7-9 is another key passage that describes the suffering of Christ. The debate surrounding this text reveals the classical understanding of suffering as any and all passivity in contrast to activity. It reads:

In the days of his flesh, he offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the one able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his piety. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from the things which he suffered. And having been made perfect, he became to all those who obey him the source of eternal salvation (NASB).

Despite the relatively “high” Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews, this particular passage describes a thoroughly human Jesus.

This is a perfect passage for Nestorius to press the distinction between deity and humanity in Christ. He quotes it often. He links it with Luke 2:52, “Jesus increased in stature and in wisdom” (244). These verses picture Jesus as a man who in his suffering develops and is perfected. It is no wonder that Nestorius had to defend himself against the charge of adoptionism. He blocks this charge by affirming that the Logos was in and with the human Jesus all along (99). Rather than disparage the deity of Christ, Nestorius cites this passage to affirm the full humanity of Christ: “But if thou callest the nature of men in him whole, attribute unto him completeness also in the operations wherein it seems that it exists, that is, that he trusted in God and was made chief priest” (248). In an extended exposition of this text, he takes the opportunity to emphasize the distinction between the Son who has “authority in his sonship,” and the humanity, “which from birth had to

become the Son through the union and which had not authority but obedience” (251). At this point Nestorius is extending the reference of the text to make the necessary complex distinctions for his Christology.

Given that such distinctions are not clearly visible at the surface of the text, one might suspect that Cyril would use this text as one more example of the divine Logos suffering along with us. However, the suggestion that the Logos learned and was perfected understandably troubled Cyril. He acknowledges the challenge that if Christ “could no longer bear his sufferings but was overcome by fear and mastered by weakness, then he assuredly convicts him of not being God” (104). But since he has gone to great lengths to make so many other suffering passages refer to the united Logos incarnate, he does not want to back off at such a crucial text. Cyril here encounters a common problem of dogmatic exegesis: once you have secured the referent of an illuminating passage, another passage emerges to muddy the waters.

What is Cyril’s solution? He adopts a subtle strategy whereby such acts unbecoming of God are borne *for our sake*. Scriptural descriptions of the Logos being tempted or learning obedience are there to “let us look into the profundity of this economy insofar as is possible” (102). In other words, such lowly passions are expressions of the lengths God will go for us. Once again, Cyril uses the language of economy to limit these descriptions to the Logos-made-flesh rather than God in general. Cyril turns the focus away from the challenge to the divine-human unity of Christ and puts the spotlight on what God was doing *for us*.

Cyril extends this strategy by appealing to the logic of moral example. He says, “But insofar as temptation attacks all those who are put in danger because of the love of

God, then it was necessary for us to learn how people ought to behave once they have decided to live an honorable life in exemplary conduct” (102). He goes on to say that “it was also necessary for us to have the beneficial knowledge of how far the limits of obedience should extend” (102). Cyril paints God as a moral exemplar: “And so the Word of God became an example for us in the days of his flesh, but not nakedly or outside the limits of self-emptying” (103). Cyril concludes that this divine pedagogical intention explains the seemingly unbecoming descriptions of Hebrews 5:7-9: “This was why he extended his prayer, and shed a tear, at times even seemed to need a savior himself, and learned obedience, while all the while he was the Son” (103). He reminds us that the “beautiful and helpful example of this action was for our sake” (103). So Cyril avoids an otherwise difficult Christological text by turning the focus away from the constitution of Christ and onto his economic example for us.

As before, both Nestorius and Cyril emerge as dogmatic exegetes of the same portion of Scripture. Nestorius rightfully saw in Hebrew 5:7-9 a great opportunity to develop and defend the full humanity of Christ. Yet he extends the reference of the passage to further explain his distinction between the deity and humanity of Christ. Cyril recognized the challenge this text posed for his position. In light of this, he adopts a strategy that focuses on the external relation of Christ to us as example rather than the internal relation of humanity and deity in Christ. Both Nestorius and Cyril find ground to advance their position in Hebrews 5:7-9.

Comparative Exegesis of Hebrews 10:28-29

One last example will show how even the passing rhetoric of the Epistle to the Hebrews was used by Nestorius and Cyril in their Christological controversy. In one of the parenetic passages of Hebrews, the author warns his audience:

Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace (Heb. 10:28-29 NASB)?

Although a simple call to respect for the work of Christ, the phrase “trampled under foot the Son of God” became a locus of doctrinal controversy.

Nestorius cites this passage in an extended argument from the Eucharist on behalf of his Christology. He applies the text by stating, “[T]o those who thought the body of the Son of God was polluted the Apostle says that they are *trampling underfoot the Son of God* in rejecting him and denying him, against those who confess that the body is of our own nature and who regard it as polluted” (32-33). Here he is not attacking Cyril directly. However, he is taking the opportunity to prove that he can affirm the full humanity of Christ without attributing to him a sinful nature. After an earlier citation of verses 28-29, Nestorius critiques those who say that “the body of the Son of God is the body of a man, whose body and blood he has raised to his own *ousia* and has not let them be upbraided and taunted with a human *ousia* but has [caused them] to be adored in his own *ousia*” (29). Here Nestorius presses the point of distinction between the human body and the divine *ousia*.

Cyril sees this passage making the exact opposite point. After quoting Hebrews 10:28-29, he argues that the trampled body is not the common body of a common man

but the body united with the Logos. He concedes that if Nestorius' Christology were correct, the body would be so common: "Yet if it was not really the precious blood of the true Son made man, but rather of some bastard son different from him, someone who holds the sonship by grace, then how could one fail to conclude that it really was a common thing?" (117). Cyril thinks otherwise. The body is truly owned by the Son of God. Yet, in a typical paradoxical twist, Cyril asserts, "[E]ven if he is said to suffer in the flesh, even so he retains his impassibility insofar as he is understood as God" (117). Cyril wished to block Nestorius' distinctions while at the same time affirm the impassibility of God.

In this last case, one can see how Nestorius and Cyril can take passing rhetoric to have dogmatic import. Nestorius uses the rhetoric of the text to combat his opponents. Cyril uses the same text to assert the unity of Christ. Both squeeze doctrinal content out of a rather simple warning passage.

Conclusion

By means of comparative exegesis, I have shown that Nestorius and Cyril share a dogmatic exegetical method when approaching the Epistle to the Hebrews in the midst of doctrinal debate. The typical characterization of their respective schools are found wanting in this domain. Here, the key difference between them is not an exegetical method, but a theological conviction: how to deal with the impassibility of God in the context of Christology. Nestorius believes he can defend the impassibility of God by stressing the distinction of deity and humanity in Christ. Cyril believes he can paradoxically hold on to both divine impassibility and the divine-human unity of Christ. Both must make clever exegetical moves to defend their positions Scripturally.

Is it possible in our day to appropriate or even appreciate these exegetical techniques? I would recommend a critical appropriation, one that takes into account the difficulty of fixing the theological referent of an ancient text, while affirming the desire to view the Bible as actually talking about God. It is too easy to be dismissive of the exegetical gymnastics of Nestorius and Cyril without appreciating their imaginative piety. If the church wishes to take seriously its theological heritage while tackling contemporary questions, it behooves us at least to reach for an approach to Scripture that acknowledges its divine referent.

What contemporary questions might this method serve? Fittingly, the question of divine suffering is once again on the theological agenda. The radical evil encountered in the 20th Century has raised the question of God's impassibility. Some contend that God's suffering with creation is an essential and affirming notion. Others have reminded us that the power of God over our suffering is a liberating truth. Nestorius and Cyril come to us with wisdom on how to tackle such a problem.

Nestorius' strong defense reminds us that a God who is overwhelmed by suffering is no good for us. Even if we choose to affirm divine passion, we must never forget God's action on our behalf. Cyril affirms our search for the suffering of God, but with a warning to be precise.¹³ There is a lot of loose rhetoric about divine suffering that needs Cyril's careful touch. If God suffers, then we are required to the best of our ability to say how, where, and when this suffering occurs. Otherwise, our sloppiness will dampen our conviction. So Nestorius and Cyril, despite their difference from each other and distance from us, can still speak wisdom in our day.

¹³ For further study on Cyril's contemporary theological significance, see selected articles in Thomas G. Weinandy and Daniel A. Keating, eds., *The Theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria: A Critical Appreciation* (London: T & T Clark, 2003).

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