

CYRIL
OF
ALEXANDRIA

Norman Russell



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CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA

As ruler of the Church of Alexandria and president of the Third Ecumenical Council of 431, Cyril was one of the most powerful men of the fifth century and played a decisive role in the history of his times. He was an important thinker who defined the concept of christological orthodoxy for the next two centuries. Cyril is also often regarded as an unscrupulous and power-hungry cleric who was responsible for the murder of the female philosopher Hypatia and for the overthrow of the archbishop Nestorius.

Cyril of Alexandria presents key selections of Cyril's writings in order to make his thought accessible to students. The writings are all freshly translated and an extended introduction outlines Cyril's life and times, his scholastic method, his christology, his ecclesiology, his eucharistic doctrine, his spirituality and his influence on the Christian tradition. Brief introductions and notes to the individual selections provide valuable contextualization and elucidation of the ideas contained in them.

Norman Russell is a freelance lecturer and translator. He is the author, with Benedicta Ward, of *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (1980).

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PREFACE

Cyril of Alexandria (c. 378–444) has been a controversial figure from the fifth century to the present day. In the English-speaking world our perception of him, moreover, has been coloured by Gibbon's damning portrait of him in the forty-seventh chapter of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, where he is represented as the murderer of Hypatia and the bully of the Council of Ephesus. His writings, described by Gibbon as 'works of allegory and metaphysics, whose remains, in seven verbose folios, now peaceably slumber by the side of their rivals', are little read.

Cyril, however, deserves better. He was certainly a man of iron will and a consummate ecclesiastical politician. But he was also a theologian of the first rank and a biblical commentator whose insights can still be illuminating today. Within the last five years several important books on Cyril have appeared. The first of these was M.-O.Boulnois' magisterial *Le paradoxe trinitaire chez Cyrille d'Alexandrie*. The same year (1994) saw the publication of J.M. McGuckin's *St Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy*, and L.J.Welch's *Christology and Eucharist in the Early Thought of Cyril of Alexandria*. Just recently there have been two further fine studies of Cyril's christology: B.Meunier's *Le Christ de Cyrille d'Alexandrie*, and A.H.A.Fernández Lois' *La cristología en los comentarios a Isaías de Cirilo de Alexandria y Teodoro de Ciro*. Cyril is less well served with translations. Although his complete letters have been translated by J.I.McEnerney in the Fathers of the Church series, and valuable selections of letters and shorter texts may be found in L.R. Wickham's *Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters* and in McGuckin's book mentioned above, of the longer works only *On the Unity of Christ* is available in a modern English translation (by McGuckin). The aim of the present volume is to make some of Cyril's longer works more accessible. Selections are offered from

PREFACE

two works not previously translated into English, the *Commentary on Isaiah* and *Against Julian*, and from two available only in Victorian versions, the *Commentary on John* and the *Five Tomes Against Nestorius*. The *Explanation of the Twelve Chapters* is added to these as a key text from the immediate aftermath of the Council of Ephesus.

The quotations from L.R. Wickham's *Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters* (Oxford, 1983) are reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press.

I should like to thank Sebastian Brock, who gave me expert advice on some of the relevant Syriac literature, Lawrence Welch, who furnished me with a proof copy of his book when it was otherwise unobtainable, and Mina Goritsa, who sent me several important publications from Greece. I am also most grateful to Abel Fernández Lois for answering my enquiry concerning Jerome's influence on Cyril, and to Andrew Louth, who read the entire manuscript and made many valuable suggestions. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Carol Harrison, the General Editor of the series, for her helpful advice and encouragement. The errors and infelicities of language that remain are, of course, my own.

Norman Russell

27 June 1999

Feast of St Cyril of Alexandria

ABBREVIATIONS

ACO	<i>Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum</i> , ed. E.Schwartz, Berlin
ANF	<i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> , eds A.Roberts and J.Donaldson, Edinburgh
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i> , Manchester
BLE	<i>Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique</i> , Toulouse
CCL	<i>Corpus Christianorum</i> , Series Latina, Turnhout/Paris
CHR	<i>The Catholic Historical Review</i> , Washington
Chr. Un.	Cyril, <i>Quod Unus sit Christus</i>
C. Jul.	Cyril, <i>Contra Julianum</i>
C. Nest	Cyril, <i>Libri quinque contra Nestorium</i>
C. Thdt.	Cyril, <i>Contra Theodoretum</i>
Cod. Theod.	<i>Codex Theodosianus</i>
Cr. St.	<i>Cristianesimo nella storia</i> , Bologna
CSCO	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium</i> , Louvain
DACL	<i>Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie</i> , eds F.Cabrol and H.Leclercq, Paris
DHGE	<i>Dictionnaire d'Histoire et de Géographie Ecclésiastiques</i> , eds A.Baudrillart, A.de Meyer and E.Van Cauwenbergh, Paris
Dial. Inc.	Cyril, <i>Dialogue on the Incarnation</i>
Dial. Trin.	Cyril, <i>Dialogues on the Trinity</i>
DOP	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i> , Washington
DR	<i>Downside Review</i> , Bath
DTC	<i>Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique</i> , eds E.Mangenot and E.Amann, Paris
A.Vacant,	
Eccl. Hist.	<i>Ecclesiastical History</i>
Ep.	<i>Epistula</i>
Epht. Th. Lov.	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i> , Louvain

ABBREVIATIONS

Expl. xii cap.	Cyril, <i>Explanatio duodecim capitum</i>
GCS	<i>Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller</i> , Leipzig/Berlin
In Is.	Cyril, <i>Commentary on Isaiah</i>
In Jo.	Cyril, <i>Commentary on John</i>
In Lc.	Cyril, <i>Commentary on Luke</i>
In Ps.	Cyril, <i>Explanation of the Psalms</i>
In Zach.	Cyril, <i>Commentary on Zechariah</i>
JEH	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i> , London
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i> , London
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i> , Oxford
LXX	Septuagint version
Med. Stud.	<i>Medieval Studies</i> , Toronto
MSR	<i>Mélanges de Science Religieuse</i> , Lille
NPNF	<i>A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> , eds P.Schaff and H.Wace, Edinburgh
ODCC ³	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church</i> , 3rd edn., ed. E.A.Livingstone, Oxford
PG	Migne, <i>Patrologia</i> , series Graeco-Latina
PGL	<i>Patristic Greek Lexicon</i> , ed. G.W.H.Lampe, Oxford
PL	Migne, <i>Patrologia</i> , series Latina
PO	<i>Patrologia Orientalis</i> , Paris
Rev. Thom.	<i>Revue Thomiste</i> , Paris
REA	<i>Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes</i> , Paris
RHE	<i>Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique</i> , Louvain
RSR	<i>Recherches de Science Religieuse</i> , Paris
RTL	<i>Revue théologique de Louvain</i> , Louvain
SC	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i> , eds H.de Lubac and J.Daniélou, Paris
Stud. Pat.	<i>Studia Patristica</i> . Papers presented to the International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford, successively Berlin, Oxford, Kalamazoo, Louvain
Thes.	Cyril, <i>Thesaurus de sancta et consubstantiali Trinitate</i>
Vet. Chr.	<i>Vetera Christianorum</i> , Bari
VLAGLB	<i>Vetus Latina. Aus der Geschichte der lateinischen Bibel</i> , Freiburg im Breisgau
ZKG	<i>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</i> , Gotha, then Stuttgart

Part I

INTRODUCTION

1

THE MAKING OF A BISHOP

EARLY LIFE

When Cyril died in 444, he and his uncle Theophilus, whom he had succeeded on the throne of Alexandria in 412, had ruled the Alexandrian Church for a total of fifty-nine years. For as long as anyone could remember they had dominated the ecclesiastical politics of the East Roman world. Between them they had deposed two archbishops of Constantinople, declared leading teachers of the Antiochene tradition heretical, and pursued ecclesiastical and theological courses of action, the one against Origenism, the other against Antiochene christology, which made them enemies throughout the East. It does not come as a surprise that someone should have written to a friend on the occasion of Cyril's death:

At last with a final struggle the villain has passed away. ...His departure delights the survivors, but possibly disheartens the dead; there is some fear that under the provocation of his company they may send him back again to us.... Care must therefore be taken to order the guild of undertakers to place a very big and heavy stone on his grave to stop him coming back here.¹

Cyril and his uncle Theophilus belong to the new era inaugurated by Theodosius I's laws against polytheism, an era characterized by Christian violence not only towards pagans and Jews but also towards dissident fellow-believers.² Christians today are repelled by many aspects of the careers of Theophilus and Cyril. Their determined campaigns against their opponents attracted adverse comment even in their lifetime.³ But what differentiates them from their episcopal contemporaries is not so much their aggressive power

politics as the scale of the resources, both material and intellectual, available to them.

Cyril was born in about 378 at Theodosiou in Lower Egypt, which was his father's hometown.⁴ His mother came from Memphis, the ancient capital, at that time still a stronghold of polytheism. We know nothing of his father's family, but John of Nikiu informs us that Cyril's maternal grandparents were Christians.⁵ They died comparatively young, leaving an adolescent son, Theophilus, and a daughter scarcely out of infancy. Shortly afterwards, perhaps during the resurgence of paganism under the emperor Julian in 362–3, Theophilus, who was then sixteen or seventeen, left Memphis for Alexandria, taking his little sister with him. There he enrolled himself in the catechumenate and thus came to the attention of the bishop, Athanasius. After baptizing the orphans, Athanasius took them under this wing. He placed the girl in the care of a community of virgins, where she remained until she was given in marriage to Cyril's father. The boy was marked out for higher things. Athanasius took him into his household and arranged for him to complete his studies under his supervision. As a highly intelligent Christian with no family ties, Theophilus could evidently be of service to the Church of Alexandria.⁶

Theophilus' early ecclesiastical career has been reconstructed by his biographer, Agostino Favale.⁷ In about 370 he was admitted to the clerical state and for the last three years of Athanasius' life served as his secretary. When Athanasius died, Theophilus was too young to be considered for episcopal office. Five days before his death on 2 May 373 Athanasius designated Peter II as his successor. In 378 Peter was succeeded by his brother Timothy. In the meantime Theophilus was rising up the ecclesiastical ladder. In about 375 he was ordained deacon and began to teach publicly. It was in this period that Rufinus, who spent six years at Alexandria studying at the catechetical school under Didymus the Blind, attended lectures given by Theophilus and was impressed by him.⁸ When Timothy died in 385, Theophilus was about forty years old and as archdeacon of Alexandria well positioned to take over the episcopate.

Theophilus succeeded to the throne of St Mark on 20 July 385. Cyril was then about seven years old, the age at which a child was first sent to school. As the only son of the family, it is possible that his uncle supervised his education.⁹ His studies up to the age of sixteen or so would have been typical of those followed by any boy, whether pagan or Christian, from a reasonably well-off background.¹⁰ After receiving a thorough grounding in reading, writing and arithmetic at primary

school, he would have gone to a grammarian, a *grammatikos*, for his secondary education. This would have consisted of a detailed study of classical literature, the principal pillars of which were Homer, Euripides, Menander and Demosthenes, together with a much more superficial treatment of mathematics, music and astronomy. After secondary school Cyril no doubt went to study with a rhetor, for the evidence of his writings shows that he pursued linguistic studies at a high level. He writes an elaborate Attic Greek, remarkable for its revival of obsolete words and its many neologisms, yet precise and well suited to his purposes.¹¹ He is also a master of the rhetorician's techniques of controversy.

Whether Cyril pursued formal philosophical studies is more difficult to determine. It is generally accepted that Cyril was not a philosopher. He works with images and metaphorical language rather than with the systematic development of ideas.¹² On the other hand it has been established that Cyril had a good knowledge of Aristotelian and Porphyrian logic.¹³ Aristotle's *Organon*, *Topics* and *Categories* and Porphyry's *Isagoge* have all left their mark on his early writings. He handles technical Aristotelian terms in a confident manner, exploiting the relationship between substance and accidents and making extensive use of syllogistic reasoning. All this suggests a close acquaintance with the lecture rooms, especially as at this period the Alexandrian philosophical school was particularly noted for its work on Aristotle.¹⁴ Marie-Odile Boulnois believes that besides acquiring an expertise in Aristotelian logic, Cyril also became acquainted with the exegetical methods of Platonism, but that he then distanced himself from a philosophical culture that had set itself the task of defending paganism.¹⁵ Certainly in later life Cyril presented himself as an anti-Hellenist: 'Hellenic learning is vain and pointless,' he said, 'and requires much effort for no reward.'¹⁶ When he was preparing his materials for *Against Julian* he read widely in such works as Porphyry's *History of Philosophy*, the Hermetic Corpus, and a treatise of Alexander of Aphrodisias on providence. He first went to Christian authors, however, as guides to help him find what he needed.¹⁷ And at Ephesus in 431, when he found his orthodoxy under attack, it was the ecclesiastical side of his education that he chose to emphasize: 'We have never entertained the ideas of Apollinarius or Arius or Eunomius, but from an early age we have studied the holy scriptures and have been nurtured at the hands of holy and orthodox fathers.'¹⁸ These holy and orthodox fathers would have been Didymus the Blind, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea and, above all, Athanasius, echoes of whose works

are found throughout his writings. The secular authors who would have nourished his early education are rarely mentioned.

The first secure date we have for Cyril is 403, when he accompanied his uncle to the Synod of the Oak, the council that deposed John Chrysostom.¹⁹ By then he would have been at least a lector and perhaps also secretary to his uncle, as Theophilus had been to Athanasius. By the time Theophilus died on 15 October 412, Cyril had therefore had at least nine years' experience at the centre of power. Such experience was to stand him in good stead from the outset. The secular authorities had evidently had enough of the disturbances caused by the 'Egyptian Pharaoh', as one of his contemporaries called Theophilus,²⁰ and fearing a continuation of his policies under his nephew, supported the candidature of the archdeacon, Timothy. Cyril, however, had already built up a strong power base, which no doubt included the *parabalani*, the members of the guild of hospital porters, who were later to serve him as a private militia.²¹ In spite of military support for Timothy, Cyril's faction, after three days of rioting, gained the upper hand. On 18 October Cyril was installed on the throne of St Mark.²²

THE POWER STRUGGLE WITH THE PREFECT

Cyril's episcopate shows a remarkable continuity of policy with that of Theophilus. The lynchpins of this policy were first, maintaining a relentless pressure on pagans, heretics and Jews; second, cultivating a close alliance with Rome (though his unwillingness to revise Theophilus' condemnation of John Chrysostom kept relations cool for the early part of his episcopate); third, resisting the expansion of the episcopal authority of Constantinople; and fourth, retaining the support of the monks. There are also continuities of style. Like his uncle, Cyril knew how to mobilize popular forces in the pursuit of his aims.²³ The excesses of the Christian mob were to be the subject of several reports to Constantinople. And as his conduct at Ephesus was to show, he had fully absorbed from Theophilus how to manipulate ecclesiastical politics to his advantage. We see him using unscrupulous tactics to present a *fait accompli* to the Antiochenes and then buying support in Constantinople to have his actions confirmed by the emperor—all from the highest motives. Furthermore, in loyalty to his uncle he opposed the rehabilitation of John Chrysostom for as long as he decently could and also maintained a public stance

against Origenism even though he had no time for anthropomorphic views.²⁴ Of course, there were discontinuities too, but these are more in the sphere of personal morality. Cyril did not emulate the theological opportunism of his uncle, who had attacked anthropomorphism but had then become an anti-Origenist when he saw that such a move would enhance his power base by ensuring the support of the simpler monks. Nor did he adopt his uncle's cynical approach to dealing with recalcitrant clergy by persecuting them on trumped up charges. It is the continuities in the public sphere, however, that leave the stronger impression.²⁵ In Cyril's own time he was regarded as 'his uncle's nephew'²⁶ and in the later Coptic tradition as 'the new Theophilus'.²⁷

According to Socrates, the Church historian, Cyril's first action as bishop was to eject the Novatianists and seize their churches and other property.²⁸ His next move was against the Jews. In Socrates' account (his informant was an Alexandrian Jewish doctor who subsequently became a Christian) the Jewish community had gathered in the theatre to hear the publication of an edict by Orestes, the prefect of Alexandria, on theatrical shows, which the Jews liked to attend as part of their Sabbath recreation but which the prefect wanted to control as a source of public disorder. In the audience were some members of the bishop's party who had come to take note of the proceedings. Among these was a primary school master called Hierax, who used to lead the applause at Cyril's sermons and was regarded by the Jews as a trouble-maker. When his presence was observed, it was reported to Orestes, who had him arrested and interrogated under torture. As soon as Cyril was informed of this, he summoned the Jewish leaders and threatened them with reprisals if they took an aggressive line against the Christians. The immediate sequel to this was the outbreak of intercommunal violence in the neighbourhood of a church called Alexander's. The Jews raised an outcry in the streets one night that the church was on fire. When the Christians ran out to save the building, the Jews ambushed them and killed a number. Cyril, true to his word, took immediate countermeasures. At daybreak he made a tour of the Jewish quarter in person at the head of a large crowd and seized the synagogues in the name of the Church. Jews were driven out of their homes and their property plundered by the mob.²⁹

John of Nikiu adds a significant detail. The Jews were wholly despoiled, he says, 'and Orestes the prefect was unable to render them any help'.³⁰ The Jews, it appears, were victims of a power struggle between the bishop and the prefect. In the disturbances that

accompanied the imposition of Arian bishops in the fourth century the Jews had always sided with the authorities. Athanasius represents them as enthusiastic participants in the sacking of the cathedral and the harrying of the orthodox when Gregory the Cappadocian made his entry into the city in 339.³¹ Fifty years later ‘a mob of Greeks and Jews’, according to Theodoret of Cyrillus, drove out Athanasius’ successor, Peter II, with the blessing of the prefect.³² We may surmise that in the riots preceding Cyril’s election the Jews had assisted the troops deployed by the authorities in support of his rival, Timothy.³³ Now Cyril, on the pretext of the Alexander’s church incident, had turned the tables on them. His actions must have infuriated Orestes. They were clearly against the law, which required the authorities to ‘repress with due severity the excess of those who presume to commit illegal deeds under the name of the Christian religion and attempt to destroy or despoil synagogues’.³⁴ Moreover, the Jews were vital to the city’s economy. They played an important part in the shipping business, and it was one of the prime responsibilities of the prefect to see that the annual grain fleet was despatched to Constantinople.³⁵ Cyril’s attempt at reconciliation—holding out the book of the Gospels for Orestes to kiss—was rejected. A public display of submission to Christ, and by implication to his minister, was not calculated to enhance the prefect’s authority. Orestes submitted a report of the whole affair to Constantinople. Cyril sent in a counter-report claiming that the Christians had been provoked.³⁶

During the next few months the rift between bishop and prefect deepened. Orestes, although a Christian, began to lean more heavily on pagan advisers to counterbalance the overbearing authority of the Christian bishop. After the fall of the Serapeum in 391 many pagan intellectuals had left Alexandria. One who remained was the philosopher Hypatia, the daughter of the mathematician Theon.³⁷ She was highly respected by Christians as well as pagans. It was she and not the bishop who was granted the right of *parrhesia*.³⁸

Hypatia was not a militant pagan but her privileged access to Orestes was a snub which Cyril could not endure. The campaign of intimidation he began to bring to bear on Orestes is illustrated by two incidents. In the first the monks were called in from Nitria. Five hundred of them, ‘resolved to fight on behalf of Cyril’,³⁹ descended on the city. They waylaid the prefect in his carriage and shouted out abuse, accusing him of being a pagan. Orestes remonstrated with them but stones began to fly, one of them striking him on the head and covering his face with blood.⁴⁰ The perpetrator, a monk called

THE MAKING OF A BISHOP

Ammonius, was arrested and interrogated so severely that he died. Rival reports from the prefect and the bishop were again sent to the emperor. Cyril attempted to score a propaganda victory by exposing Ammonius' body in a church and declaring him a martyr. But the more sober-minded element of the Christian population saw this as a cheap attempt to put further pressure on the prefect.⁴¹

In the second incident a Christian mob led by a cleric, a lector called Peter, attacked Hypatia as she was being driven through the city. She was seized from her carriage and dragged into the Caesareum, the former temple of the imperial cult, which was now the cathedral. There she was stripped and stoned to death with broken roof tiles.⁴² Her body was then hacked to pieces and burned. John of Nikiu claims that afterwards 'all the people surrounded the patriarch Cyril and named him "the new Theophilus", for he had destroyed the last remains of idolatry in the city'.⁴³ Hypatia's body had indeed been treated like the cult images of the pagan temples, which had been broken up and burned as dwelling-places of the demons.⁴⁴

The murder of Hypatia took place in March 415.⁴⁵ In the following year the imperial government responded with an edict reprimanding the bishop indirectly for exceeding his authority ('It pleases our Clemency that clerics should have nothing in common with public affairs or matters pertaining to a municipal senate') and regulating the affairs of the *parabalani*. Their number was reduced to 500, the names to be approved by the prefect of Alexandria, who was also to vet new members when vacancies occurred.⁴⁶ Although the number was increased to 600 and control was restored to the bishop seventeen months later,⁴⁷ honour seems to have been satisfied. We hear of no further difficulties with the prefect of Alexandria for the rest of Cyril's episcopate.

THE YEARS OF CONSOLIDATION

For the next twenty-eight years Cyril directed one of the greatest institutions of the Roman world.⁴⁸ The term 'patriarch' does not appear until after his death,⁴⁹ but the reality of patriarchal power had been exercised by the bishops of Alexandria since the beginning of the fourth century. Canon 6 of the Council of Nicaea (325) had confirmed the jurisdiction of Alexandria over the bishops of Egypt, Libya and the Pentapolis (i.e. Cyrenaica), some seventy-five in all. Each of them looked to the incumbent of the Alexandrian throne as his direct superior. Only the bishop of Alexandria had the right to perform