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978-1-107-43298-7 - Nestorius and his Teaching: A Fresh Examination
of the Evidence

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a fresh examination of the evidence

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by

J. F. BETHUNE-BAKER, B.D.

With special reference to the newly recovered
Apology of Nestorius
(*The Bazaar of Heraclides*)

CAMBRIDGE :
at the University Press
1908

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32 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10013-2473, USA

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education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107432987

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First published 1908

First paperback edition 2014

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-43298-7 Paperback

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NESTORIO

ILLI VERITATIS DIVINAE INDAGATORI

SIVE VICTORI SEV PARVM FELICI

VIRO PROPOSITI PRAE CETEROS TENACI

MONACHO EPISCOPO EXVLI

NEC NON ECCLESIAE NESTORIANAE

RERVM SACRARVM OLIM FAVTRICI INSIGNI

SERAS IN VLTIMOS NOMINIS CHRISTI PRAECONI

ANTIQVA PRO FIDE QVAM DIV INFANDA PERPESSAE

NON SINE DEO SVPERSTITI

OMNIVM CHRISTIANORVM PRECIBVS OPIBVS RESTITVENDAE

STVDIA HAEC QVALIACVMQVE

VTINAM SANAE DOCTRINAE ET IPSA ADFVTVRA

NOTIS IGNOTVS

DEDICO

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Donec spiro, sano dogmati adsum. (Nestorius *apud* Marium Mercatorem.)

ὁ θεὸς δὲ οὐδεμίαν ἔχει πρὸς ἡμᾶς φυσικὴν σχέσιν, ὡς οἱ τῶν αἰρέσεων κτισταὶ θέλουσιν... εἰ μὴ τις μέρος αὐτοῦ καὶ ὁμοουσίους ἡμᾶς τῷ θεῷ τολμήσει λέγειν· καὶ οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως ἀνέξεται τις ἐπαῖων τούτου θεὸν ἐγνωκῶς, ἀπιδῶν εἰς τὸν βίον τὸν ἡμέτερον, ἐν ὅσοις φυρόμεθα κακοῖς.

(Clem. Al. *Strom.* II xvi)

O GOD, Who didst put it into the heart of Ezra the priest to bring again Thy people from their captivity, teaching them Thy Holy Scripture and renewing among them Thy godly discipline; mercifully grant that we who desire to restore this church and repair the desolations thereof, may be blessed in our endeavour, and strengthened for the work Thou wouldst have done; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

(Memorial of the English Mission to the Assyrian Christians,
composed by Archbishop Benson.)

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PREFACE

THE following pages are an attempt to reexamine the teaching of Nestorius, and the conclusion to which they lead is that Nestorius was not “Nestorian”.

I am aware that to some, for whose point of view I have a deep respect, a question which has been the subject of consideration and decision by a General Council of the Church is a *chose jugée*, and any attempt to reopen it is idle and on the part of a Churchman even disloyal. I have given further on some of the reasons why I think that this general demurrer does not apply to the case of Nestorius. But I desire at once to express my conviction, apart from any ecclesiastical theories, that the doctrinal decisions of a General Council of the Church, properly conducted, are infinitely more likely to embody, as nearly as it can be embodied in words, a true interpretation of the facts of human life—to give us a true theory of the relation between God and man—than are the reflexions of any individual thinker or school of theologians. That the General Council which condemned the teaching of Nestorius erred in matters of faith might be a conclusion to which we should be very unwilling to come. But we are not called upon to enter on this question. Councils come into existence to express the *communis sensus fidelium*, which sums up a vast range of religious experience; and their decisions need to be confirmed by subsequent acceptance by the Church as a whole. This “consensus of the faithful” has ratified the doctrinal decisions

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of the Council of Ephesus, and the question immediately before us is only, Did Nestorius mean what the Council thought he meant?

To others such a question as is considered here is one of merely antiquarian interest and may be left to “scholars” who are condemned by unfortunate circumstances, or their own misguided choice of a vocation, to trivial details which cannot claim attention from any one who is in touch with the realities of life. The great doctrinal controversies of the past are described as “dead battlefields” and the deeper the oblivion in which they are buried the better.

This is a view with which no student of doctrine can sympathise. There is no past controversy in which he does not detect tendencies of thought which have their representatives in his own times. He could easily label opinions within and without the various Christian Societies with the names of famous heresies, which had their champions—their parties, their “schools”—of old as they have today. Always in the past he sees the *communis sensus fidelium*, the great Catholic Church of Christ in the larger sense of the title, refusing to accept definitions of the Faith which would ignore the religious experience of the past in favour of a temporary phase of opinion and a narrower range of experience; and though he sees it also sometimes refusing adequate recognition of new experience, as long as it is new and limited to the few, he sees the new interpretations winning their way into the body of Christian doctrine and forming part of the floating stream of the river of truth, though the Creeds themselves remain inviolate, just because the new interpretations, so far as they are true to the real facts of life, are found to conflict with none of the definitions of the Church. And just because he is always surrounded by heretics in mind who are Christians at heart, he finds the study of the history of the development of Christian doctrine so full of living interest, and at the same time so instructive, so necessary for any one who would form

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a true appreciation of the movements of thought and tendencies of his own times.

It disturbs him less to see an Ebionite or a Gnostic, an Arian or an Apollinarian, occupying perhaps a prominent pulpit in a Christian Church in the twentieth century, as an accredited teacher of the Christian faith, when he realizes how often partial and onesided and positively erroneous views of Christian doctrine have been preached in the past, in defiance of the definitions of the Church; and he is emboldened to believe that the primitive faith in Jesus as at once both God and man, the revealer of God and the Saviour of men, will survive all attempts to interpret Him exclusively in the terms of this or that age, this or that partial and limited mode of thought or expression.

The primitive faith in Jesus as at once both God and man:—it was just this faith for which Nestorius contended, the faith which he found expressed in the Gospels and believed to have been always the faith of the Church, faith in a Person who was both God and man, very God incarnate. For this faith he felt himself called to do battle against new teaching which seemed to him to be a denial of the doctrine of the Incarnation, inasmuch as it seemed to do away with the real manhood of the Lord. In days like our own, when a merely naturalistic conception of the Person of Jesus is gaining ground in unexpected quarters, however much for the moment it may be disguised, even for some of its chief exponents, by a religious haze which is the product of the old belief, it would not have been the manhood of the Saviour of men that Nestorius would have been constrained to defend. He would have entered the lists against all who denied the reality either of His Godhead or of His manhood. The champion of a *kenotic* theory that eliminates the Divine consciousness of the incarnate Son of God; the emotional preacher who confuses the Divine and the human and gets rid of God or of man (we cannot tell which); the mystic whose doctrine of the

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immanence of God threatens to crowd out the recognition of His transcendence, imperatively demanded as it is by the deepest religious instincts and experience of the Saint of every age; the thinker of any school who thinks that the facts of human life and history “don’t matter”, or that the only criterion of truth is its working value at the moment:—all these, no less than those who frankly denied the Godhead of Jesus, would have found in Nestorius a formidable opponent. For the question which underlies the whole of the controversy is just the question of the relation between God and man, between Godhead and manhood. Is there, or is there not, a real distinction between them? Crude assertions of the humanity of God or of the Divinity of man would have seemed to the school of thinkers to whom Nestorius was opposed as ill-considered and unmeaning as to Nestorius himself. But the Christian philosophy of life, metaphysical and ethical, is summed up in the doctrine of the Incarnation; and for Christians their theory of the Person of Jesus is their statement of the relations between God and man, and in every age their theory must be consistent with the actual facts of His life in the world as well as with their own individual religious experience and the religious experience of Christians of earlier times. The authors of our first three Gospels, in giving, or at all events professing to give, a simple narrative of incident and teaching, and reporting the impression which Jesus made on the first generations of disciples, shew us a Person with a double consciousness; to whom the Divine communion He enjoyed was as real as the human life He lived. It is a Person who has a unique sense of His own relation to God in the midst of all the activities of His life on earth, that they exhibit to us:—if technical terms must be used, a Person whose uniqueness is quite as much a metaphysical as an ethical or a psychological problem¹. And later reporters

¹ I am aware that many modern scholars would not allow these statements to pass unchallenged. I can only say here that they are made after

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of their own experience, and interpreters of the early record, when they came to formulate their theory of this Person, in the terms of contemporary philosophical conceptions (only the terms, not the theory, being new), spoke of Him as having two “substances”, two “natures”, the one “Divine”, the other “human”. That Godhead and manhood were two distinct realities no one doubted: but no more did any one know how two distinct realities could be combined in a single Person. And almost all the “heresies” as to the Person of our Lord are connected with different attempts to solve or to evade this problem. In circles of Christians in which the conception of the transcendence of God in the strictest monotheistic (“Deistic”) sense was dominant, either the Godhead of Jesus was conceived as a mere power not really His own, or the manhood was regarded as a delusion: He was thought of as a man, miraculously endowed with Divine attributes, or else either as a Divine Person who only seemed to have a human form and live a human life, or as a Spirit who simply used the person of a man as a medium through whom to make His revelation. And later on Arius and Apollinarius were at one in the conception of Him as a kind of demi-God,

careful study, to the best of my opportunities, of recent work on the sources and historical character of the Gospels, and express my conviction that no fresh investigations of this kind have in any way invalidated the traditional belief of the Church that our Lord made claims on the allegiance of His followers to Himself personally which are inconceivable on the part of one who was not conscious of possessing authority and power which were at once Divine and His own. No fresh knowledge which results from the literary and historical criticism of the Gospels, in my judgement, affects the evidence that the historical Jesus based His teaching on Himself. The more reason we see to doubt the historical accuracy of some of the narratives and some of the readings of incidents given in our Gospels, the more irresistibly are we forced back upon the old “apologetic” position as to the personal claims which our Lord made as the only available explanation, the necessary presupposition, not only of the beliefs about Him of St Paul and the author of the Fourth Gospel, but also of the early history of the Christian Church as a whole.

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either not truly Divine, or not really human. When all these views had been decisively excluded from the Church, as incompatible with the plain facts of the Gospel history and the experience and institutions of the Church, the problem still remained. The faith of the Church demanded the recognition of the full Godhead and the full manhood of her Lord. But what was the nature of the union? where, so to speak, was its centre to be found? In what sense was the "one Christ" both God and man? Was it that the distinction between Godhead and manhood was done away with, so that the two became one? or was the one-ness to be sought elsewhere, the two remaining still distinct? These were latent questions which the controversy between Nestorius and Cyril brought to the fore. The Church agreed upon a form of sound words by way of answer, which had at least the merit of recognizing all the facts that had to be explained. But the questions are perennial. If there is still among us some professedly Christian thought that practically annihilates the manhood of our Lord, there is also much that tends to eliminate His Godhead, and Christians of the twentieth century who have the patience to review this ancient battlefield may find themselves repaid¹. Nestorius and Cyril are with us still: though dead, their spirits yet speak. Only with one voice they would cry out against "solutions" of the problem which, professing to recognize the spiritual or religious "uniqueness" of the Lord, reduce Him to the level of the first of "Christian" saints, and therefore only push the problem farther back. Nestorius at all events would have made short work of "solutions" such as this—a Christian saint without a Christ. And both of them would have repudiated any teaching to the effect that man is "consubstantial" with God.

The only question that I have set myself to consider is the

¹ The subject is in part incurably technical, but I would venture to invite particular attention to the more general considerations which are set out in the concluding chapter of this study.

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question whether the teaching of Nestorius was “orthodox” or not; but it is clear that in determining this question we shall be implicitly passing judgement on the claims of many schools of thought to rank as orthodox. The further question, whether teaching may be Catholic or orthodox and yet unchristian and untrue, I leave to others.

But the study of the Nestorian controversy brings before us also another question which is of immediate moment. We are able today to read the past history of the Church with less prejudice than was possible in former times. We can see that the “heretic” and the “schismatic” often had scant justice done them, and that free enough play for differences of temperament and individual and racial environment was not allowed in the Church. And the question is forced upon us whether any society of Christians has the right to perpetuate divisions among Christians which had their origin in circumstances and conditions alien from those that prevail today. The reunion of the separated Churches of Christendom is, doubtless, for ecclesiastical statesmen a delicate problem, for the solution of which the time is not yet ripe. To those who have no sympathy with any Church, be they Christian at heart or “enemies of the cross of Christ”, the divisions of Christendom are the strongest argument against cooperation or belief. But to the moral consciousness of every Christian they are an outrage. *Μεμέρισται ὁ Χριστός*:—it is Christ Himself who is divided, Christ who is torn asunder in the schisms of His Body.

With one of the members of this Body, one of these separated Churches, commonly known as “Nestorian”, the Church of England, not of her own seeking, has been brought into exceptionally close relations. A reconsideration of the teaching of Nestorius and the circumstances in which he was banished from the Church of his day may perhaps help to determine the nature of those relations in the future.

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The main lines of the enquiry were laid down before I was able to make any use of a new and as yet unpublished source of information—the Syriac version (under the title of the *Bazaar of Heraclides*) of an account of the whole controversy written in Greek by Nestorius himself. This comprehensive and interesting account fully confirms the conclusions to which I had come from a fresh study of the documents which are independent of it, while it is invaluable as a revelation of the mind and character of Nestorius himself, and of the highest importance in determining several of the historical and doctrinal questions connected with the controversy, to which, without its help, we could give no certain answer. I have used it freely for this purpose.

The first public announcement of the discovery of the Syriac MS containing this work was made by a German scholar, Dr H. Goussen, in an incidental allusion in a book which escaped general notice (*Martyrius Sahdona's Leben und Werke*, Leipzig, 1897). It was again referred to by another German oriental scholar, Dr Braun, a few years later (*Das Buch der Synhados*, Stuttgart, 1900); but students of the history of doctrine seem to have remained unaware of the discovery till Dr Loofs (*Nestoriana*, Halle, 1905) drew attention to it and published a short note from Dr Goussen on the contents of the MS. It is to Dr Loofs that I owe my own first knowledge of the existence of the book.

From Dr Goussen I ascertained that the preparation of an edition of the text with a French translation had been entrusted to Father V. Ermoni of Paris, who in reply to my enquiry informed me that he had been at work on the MS some time but could not name a date at which his edition would be ready for publication.

Meanwhile, however, I learnt from Mr O. H. Parry, the head of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission to the Assyrian Christians at Urmi (to whom I am much indebted for other information as well), that the members of the Mission had long been acquainted with the book, and that several

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copies of it had been made. Mr D. Jenks, a former member of the Mission (1892—1899), was the first to learn of the MS and to procure a copy of it. A copy was also obtained by Dr Rendel Harris in 1899. (This copy is now, I understand, at Harvard.) Mr Parry himself has had a copy by him for the last seven years, and has made a translation of part of it. All three recognized the importance of the discovery, but have been prevented by other duties and engagements from making any public use of the book or preparing an edition of it. Mr Jenks, now a member of the House of the Sacred Mission, who was the first to have a copy made, brought it back with him to England in 1899 and has kindly placed his copy at my disposal for use in this fresh examination of the teaching of Nestorius.

A friend, who is an expert Syriac scholar, has been good enough to make a translation of it for me, and it is his translation which I have used whenever the book is referred to or quoted. He has also supplied the very valuable Appendix on the history of the use of the Syriac terms, about the meaning of which there cannot, in future, be any doubt. I cannot express too strongly my sense of gratitude to him for the time and pains which he has bestowed on the work of reading and translating the MS, the text and the language of which are often obscure, and for all I have learnt from his wide knowledge of early Syriac literature. So much of any fresh interest that the subject may have is dependent on his work that I should have wished his name to appear on the title-page. But his standpoint in matters concerning the Church and the history of Christian Doctrine is not the same as mine. He would not treat the subject as a whole as I have treated it, nor would he wish to associate himself with all the inferences which I have drawn from the fresh evidence which is now available. As, therefore, his share in the book is strictly limited to the translation of the *Bazaar of Heraclides* and the Appendix on Syriac terms, and he has no responsibility for

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anything else that is contained in it, I can only make this general acknowledgement of what is due to him here. The choice of extracts too has been my own, though he allows me to say that he thinks the selection fairly represents Nestorius's presentation of his case. I must add on my own account that my endeavour has been to make it as thoroughly representative as possible of Nestorius's whole position, and that I believe I have quoted his most typical and hardest sayings. I can indeed conceive that some readers of the passages which are cited will find in them abundant justification of the judgement which the Council of Ephesus passed on Nestorius.

I regret that the circumstances which I have named above (p. xiv) seem to preclude us, for the present at all events, from publishing the whole of the English translation, and that we can only herald the complete edition of the text which we hope will be given us as soon as possible by Father Ermoni.

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CAMBRIDGE

23 August 1907

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