

# The Blessed Virgin as Mother of God: the meaning of the title Theotokos

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‘If anyone does not confess the Holy Virgin to be *Theotokos*’, states St Gregory of Nazianzus (329-89), ‘he is estranged from God.’<sup>1</sup> John of Damascus (d.c.749) speaks with equal emphasis: ‘The title *Theotokos* expresses the entire mystery of God’s saving dispensation.’<sup>2</sup> For these two writers, and indeed for the Greek Patristic tradition as a whole, the term *Theotokos* is an essential element in the Christian confession of faith. It is not merely an optional expression of devotion, but possesses a deeply doctrinal significance; and its purpose is not only to honour the Blessed Virgin Mary but to ensure the true understanding of Christ’s Incarnation. Why is this designation *Theotokos* of such fundamental significance?

At the outset, let us consider how the word *Theotokos* may best be translated. It can be rendered literally ‘God-Birthgiver’; yet this, while exact, is scarcely elegant. Since a ‘Birthgiver’, one who bears a child, is none other than the mother of that child, *Theotokos* can legitimately be translated ‘Mother of God’. It is true that the phrase ‘Mother of God’ (in Greek, *Mētēr tou Theou*) is in fact a distinct appellation that can be found in Christian writers at least from the early fourth century; nevertheless it also represents an exact equivalent to the word *Theotokos*. Sometimes *Theotokos* is translated ‘God-bearer’, but this is ambiguous; for this could also be a translation of the Greek word *Theophoros*, a title applied not to the Virgin Mary but to the saints in general, meaning ‘one who carries God in his/her heart’. So our best course is to keep to the form ‘Mother of God’.

What is the origin and history of the title *Theotokos*? It is not to be found in Scripture; but here, as on other occasions, the Church has found it wise to employ a non-Scriptural word in order to safeguard the Scriptural message. An outstanding example of this is the adoption by the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) of

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<sup>1</sup> Letter 101

<sup>2</sup> On the Orthodox Faith 3.12

the non-Scriptural term *homoousios*, 'of one essence' or 'consubstantial', used to define the Son's relation to the Father. The Arians quoted Scripture, but understood it in their own way; and so, to exclude Arian misinterpretations, the bishops of Nicaea resorted to a word that does not actually occur in the New Testament. So it is also with the word *Theotokos*. While not occurring in Scripture, it is directly implied by the prologue of St John's Gospel: 'The Word was God. . . . The Word became flesh' (John 1.1,14). Again, without using the actual term *Theotokos*, St Ignatius of Antioch (d.c.107) expresses precisely what that term signifies when he states: 'Our God Jesus Christ was conceived by Mary according to the economy.'<sup>3</sup>

The specific word *Theotokos* is found in one of the most ancient prayers to Mary, *Sub tuum praesidium*, familiar to both Eastern and Western Christians: 'Beneath your compassion we take refuge, *Theotokos*; do not despise our supplication in distress, but deliver us from danger.' This is found in a papyrus fragment dating from the third or more probably the fourth century.<sup>4</sup> The earliest certain use by a Christian author is in the works of that great pioneer Origen (d.c.254), who employed it several times. Possibly it was also used by Hippolytus (d.c.236). Thereafter it became a standard term, to be found in a whole series of fourth century authors: St Alexander of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, St Athanasius, St Cyril of Jerusalem, St Gregory of Nazianzus and St Gregory of Nyssa. Sarcastically the Emperor Julian the Apostate exclaimed, 'You Christians never stop calling Mary *Theotokos*.'<sup>5</sup> The term *Theotokos* became definitively established in the dogmatic teaching of the Church when it was solemnly endorsed by the Council of Ephesus, the Third Ecumenical Council, in 431.

To appreciate the full significance of the decision at Ephesus, it is necessary to consider the dispute that immediately preceded the Council in the years 429-31, between St Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria (d.444) and Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople (d.c.451). In discussing this conflict, I need to proceed with caution, for I recall vividly a dream that I had many years ago while teaching at Oxford. I had prepared a lecture on Nestorius in which, while pointing out the defects in his Christology, I also tried to explain, in all fairness, why he had come to embrace the

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<sup>3</sup> To the Ephesians 18.2

<sup>4</sup> John Rylands Library, papyrus 470

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in St Cyril of Alexandria, *Against Julian* 8 (PG 76: 901C)

position that he held, and what might reasonably be said in his favour. On the night before I was to give the lecture, I dreamt that I was in the Egyptian desert, running through the sand. Hot in pursuit behind me was St Cyril, and he was extremely angry. At each step I sank more deeply into the sand, and inexorably Cyril drew ever more and more close. Just as he was about to catch me up, I awoke. Severely shaken, I wondered whether I should rewrite my lecture; but eventually I delivered it in the original form. Yet all the time I felt uneasy lest a mysterious figure might emerge behind me and tap me on the shoulder.

The heart of the theological controversy between Cyril and Nestorius concerned the title *Theotokos*. While disagreeing with Cyril over the use of the term, Nestorius did not altogether repudiate it. 'I have already said many times,' he stated, 'that if any of you or anyone else takes pleasure in the title *Theotokos*, I do not object to the word in itself; only let him not make the Virgin into a goddess.'<sup>6</sup> Nestorius's words are understandable when we bear in mind that during the early decades of the fifth century there had been a marked increase in devotion to the Virgin Mary, and this caused him disquiet. At the same time it would be wrong to turn Nestorius into a proto-Protestant. The point at issue between him and the Bishop of Alexandria involved not the limits of Marian devotion but the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Nestorius feared that the term *Theotokos* would undermine the full integrity of our Lord's humanness. If Mary were called 'Mother of God', so he believed, this would make the Incarnate Saviour less than true man. He saw in the title *Theotokos* what he called the 'hidden danger' of Apollinarianism;<sup>7</sup> Apollinarius of Laodicea had denied Christ a human soul. More fundamentally, he considered that the term would lead to a confusion between the two natures of Christ, between his Godhead and his manhood. In a manner typical of the theological tradition of Antioch, Nestorius drew a sharp distinction between what can be attributed to the divinity of Christ and what can be attributed to his humanity. 'He suffered all human things in the humanity', he insisted, 'and all divine things in the divinity. For birth from a woman is human, but birth from the Father is without beginning. . . The one is eternal while the other is temporal'.<sup>8</sup> Making his point in a somewhat

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<sup>6</sup> F. Loofs, *Nestoriana* (Halle, 1905), p. 353

<sup>7</sup> Loofs, *Nestoriana*, p. 273

<sup>8</sup> *The Bazaar of Heracleides*, tr. G.R. Driver and L.Hodgson (Oxford, 1925), p. 138

provocative way, he objected: 'I cannot worship a God who was born, died and was buried'.<sup>9</sup>

Such is the Nestorian standpoint. Mary is mother of the human nature that was united to God the Word, but she cannot in the strict and proper sense be regarded as Mother of God the Word himself. Nestorius conceded that neither those who say 'Mother of God' (*Theotokos*) nor those who say 'Mother of man' (*anthropotokos*) are necessarily to be condemned as heretics; but he concluded that it is better to say 'Mother of Christ' (*Christotokos*). As he pointed out, this last designation possesses firm Scriptural support. For the Bible says, not 'God was born', but 'Christ was born' (Matthew 1:16).<sup>10</sup>

All of this left Cyril deeply dissatisfied. Christ is true God, he retorted. If, therefore, Mary is Mother of Christ, then she must necessarily be Mother of God; *Christotokos* implies *Theotokos*. More specifically Nestorius had in Cyril's view confused the levels of nature and person. Mary is not mother of the divine nature, for of course God in his transcendent deity cannot be born; but she is mother of the person or hypostasis of one of the Holy Trinity, God the Word. Motherhood involves a relationship between persons, not between natures; what a mother bears is not a nature but a person.

As Cyril put it, 'When the Fathers dared to call the Holy Virgin *Theotokos*, they did not mean by this that the nature of the Word or his Godhead originated from the Holy Virgin. But, because his holy body, endowed with life and reason, was born from her, and because the Word was hypostatically united to that body, he is said to have been born from her according to the flesh.'<sup>11</sup> Nestorius's basic error was to think in terms of the two natures rather than the one person, and so he failed to realise that the proper subject of attribution in the Incarnate Christ is always the divine Logos.

If we refuse to say that Mary bore God Incarnate according to the flesh, then in Cyril's view the only alternative is to say that she bore an ordinary man. In that case we shall be dividing the single and unique Christ into two sons: on the one

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<sup>9</sup> Loofs, *Nestoriana*, p. 337

<sup>10</sup> *Bazaar*, p. 99

<sup>11</sup> *Second Letter to Nestorius 7*: in Norman P. Tanner (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, p. 44

hand, the divine Son of God; and on the other, the human Son of Mary. As Cyril put it, 'Those who foolishly maintain that the Holy Virgin is not *Theotokos* necessarily fall into the error of affirming two Sons of God. For if the Holy Virgin did not bear, according to the flesh, God Incarnate, then they are obliged to assert, even though they may not wish to do this, that she bore an ordinary man, on an equal footing with us.'<sup>12</sup> Only by confessing *Theotokos* can we avoid dividing the Incarnate Christ into two personal subjects, loosely coexisting in a single body.

Here we come to the vital point at issue, as Cyril understood it. The title *Theotokos* safeguards the unity of Christ's person. In the words of St Athanasius of Alexandria (c.296 – 373) (at all times, Cyril believed that he was doing no more than reaffirm the teaching of Athanasius), 'The Logos became man; he did not enter into a man.'<sup>13</sup> Herein precisely lies the difference, for Athanasius and for Cyril, between Christ and a prophet or saint. In the case of a prophet or a saint, God indwells a human person; there are two personal subjects. Christ, however, is not a human person in whom God dwells; he is the Logos made man, a divine person who has himself become entirely human, and thus there is in his case only one personal subject, the *Theanthropos* or 'God-man'. So Cyril draws what is in his eyes the unavoidable conclusion: 'If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is truly God, and that for this reason the Holy Virgin is *Theotokos*, for according to the flesh she gave birth to God the Word made flesh: let him be anathema.'<sup>14</sup> It is exactly in this sense that the Council of Ephesus endorsed the term *Theotokos*.

Such is the reason why the title *Theotokos* is far more than an optional expression of devotion, and why, in the view of John Damascus, it sums up in one word the essential meaning of the 'entire mystery' of our salvation. What is involved in the dispute between Cyril and Nestorius is not just the status of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the honour due to her, but the true doctrine of the Incarnation and, more particularly, the unity of the Saviour Christ. If we make Mary less than the Mother of God, then we make Christ himself less than God Incarnate. The title *Theotokos*, 'Mother of God', applied to Mary, is strictly correlative with the title *Theanthropos*, 'God-man', applied to Christ. The two stand and fall together. The

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<sup>12</sup> *On the Right Faith, to the Princesses Arcadia and Marina* (ed. P.E. Pusey, VII, I, p. 158; PG 76: 1205 CD)

<sup>13</sup> *Against the Arians* 3.30

<sup>14</sup> *Third Letter to Nestorius*, anathema 1: in Tanner, *Decrees*, vol. I, p.59

doctrine of the hypostatic union – the doctrine that at the Incarnation God and human nature were united in a single person – implies and demands faith in Mary’s divine motherhood. Mariology is a chapter of Christology.

Contained within the title *Theotokos*, then, there is a threefold truth: Christ is totally human; Christ is totally divine; Christ is one and not two. Christ is totally human: there took place at Bethlehem a real human birth, with a real human mother. Christ is totally divine: the child born from Mary in a real human birth is at the same time none other than the second member of the Holy Trinity, God the eternal Word. Christ is one not two: he is not two persons coexisting in the same body, but a single and undivided person who is God and man at once. Such is the reason, we may say in answer to Julian the Apostate, why we Christians never stop calling Mary *Theotokos*.