

INTRODUCTION

While I was at university, I remember telling a friend, ‘I’m definitely a Christian, and I definitely believe in God. But I don’t know where Jesus fits in it all anymore.’ Although I was probably being a little dramatic, I was sincerely asking questions about the evangelical faith in which I’d been raised. Who is God? What is He like and how do we come to know Him? What does it mean for a person when they become a Christian?

We may be tempted to think that these questions belong in a children’s Sunday School class or in the first few weeks of an evangelistic course. They are the basics: the ABCs of the faith. Dare we say it, they’re the *simple* questions. Many of us – especially those who like to read and talk theology – would tend to leave these behind and wade into the ‘deeper waters’ of other doctrines or practices. Controversy, curiosity, and complexity beckon!

Strange, then, that these foundational questions should occupy the life and work of one of the early church’s most influential and important figures. Cyril of Alexandria, a fifth century bishop with global influence and significant theological

ability, devoted his ministry not to ivory tower navel-gazing, nor to academic showboating, but to the basics. Through just the sort of controversy, curiosity, and complexity that some hanker after, Cyril's focus was undivided on these fundamentals. The reason was that he could see that some of the Church's best-known preachers and writers were giving the wrong answers to these questions. Cyril would see a looming danger when popular pastors, clever writers, and smart political operators drew everyday Christians away from scriptural clarity on the identity and nature of God and the salvation He has given. For Cyril, nothing was more important than safeguarding the truth that had been passed down from ancient times.

The Only Answer

There is a well-known joke about the children's Sunday School teacher who asks her class: 'What is grey, has a bushy tail, eats nuts, and lives in trees?' The story goes that one child responds, 'I know the answer is meant to be "Jesus", but it sounds like a squirrel to me.' Even little children can become over-familiar with the routine and perhaps roll their eyes when the answer, once again, is 'Jesus'. Some readers will have sung almost to death the line, 'It's all about you, Jesus'. But Cyril would assure us that it is neither twee nor glib to affirm that these familiar instincts are theologically spot on.

The controversy that came to be the headline over Cyril's life centred on the identity of Jesus Christ. Cyril's contemporary in Constantinople, Nestorius, spoke about the Lord in a way that virtually nobody else in the Church at the time could recognise in Scripture or the Christian tradition. He saw Jesus as a man like us but 'assumed' by, and given a special relationship *with*, the eternal Son. Although Christ *appeared as one person*, there were *two* behind the scenes: Mary's son and God the Son. Cyril's response to Nestorius was to defend the truth that the Church had always taught. The man Jesus was none other than God the Son Himself, personally stepping into our humanity to save us

and bring us into fellowship with His Father. When Cyril came up against Nestorius, he could see that what a person thinks of Jesus Christ truly changes *everything*. If God and humanity do not really come together in this one person, then God and humanity cannot come together in *salvation* either. If God has not come into the world in the incarnation, then God has never really been near to us. In other words, Cyril saw that Jesus truly is the answer to all our questions about God, salvation, and everything – and that to have the wrong Jesus is to risk all. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, ‘another Jesus’ means ‘a different gospel’ (2 Cor. 11:4).

Cyril’s tenacious Christ-centeredness shaped the faith of the Church, especially at the Council of Ephesus (431) and the landmark Council of Chalcedon (451). His theological efforts have made their mark on us whenever we speak of Christ’s ‘two natures’ or the ‘hypostatic union’; or perhaps more commonly when we sing, ‘Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast / save in *the death of Christ my God*’ and ‘Amazing love! how can it be / that *thou, my God, should die for me?*’ Cyril stood for truth of ‘one Lord Jesus Christ’, a single person who is true God and true man. The same one who was with the Father in the beginning before all ages has taken humanity, suffered and died, and risen to life – all *for us*, and *for our salvation*. Cyril’s heart was that believers would consciously and joyfully place Jesus Christ front and centre in their understanding of God and their salvation. He was, before anything else, a pastor taking care of a flock who needed to know assurance, grow in intimacy with God, and worship Him in spirit and truth. For all this, he knew, they needed to see and enjoy the *real* Jesus.

Meeting Cyril

I first met Cyril in 2009 as I began postgraduate theological study in Oxford and have been fascinated with him ever since. I have my friend Michael Reeves to thank for making the introduction

and for showing me the significance of Cyril's theology. Since then, Donald Fairbairn and John Behr have been especially generous in giving me their time, as well as writing some of the best material available on Cyril and his theology. With their help, and with books by John McGuckin, Thomas Weinandy and Daniel Keating, Norman Russell, and others, I set out on master's research in Oxford under Mark Edwards and, later, a PhD at the VU Amsterdam with Cornelis van der Kooi, Matthias Smalbrugge, and Katya Tolstoj – both with Cyril's thought as a central focus.

When approaching Cyril for the first time, people tend to bump into certain roadblocks that have accumulated over time, and often cause them to set out with a fairly negative picture of the man. These are not always easy to shift. People hear that he is an 'Alexandrian' and so prone to fits of ridiculous allegorical interpretation of Scripture (unlike the sensible and literal 'Antiochenes'). We read in popular textbooks that he was a nasty and manipulative bully, demolishing churches, bribing officials, and commanding vast armies of militant monks. It is sometimes said that Nestorius was no Nestorian and wasn't saying anything nearly as dangerous as Cyril claimed, and that Cyril simply wanted a fight. And there is the rumour that Cyril murdered the philosopher Hypatia. With the wisdom of the real experts named above, I have tried to address and challenge all these things in this book. I hope my efforts will help people still getting to know Cyril to have a much clearer picture of him and of his theology. With some of these misunderstandings (and some outright lies) cleared up, Cyril is a theologian well worth spending time with. Some of his writings are still not available in English, but many are – and in good, contemporary translations too. His little book, *On the Unity of Christ*, translated by John McGuckin for SVS Press (1995) is a good place to begin. His *Commentary on John* translated by David Maxwell in IVP's Ancient Christian Texts series (2013, 2015) is a weightier, two-

volume read. Cyril's two most important letters to Nestorius can be read easily for free online, including at www.unionpublishing.org. As far as secondary literature goes, John McGuckin's *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* is a superb in-depth study, and Donald Fairbairn's *Grace and Christology in the Early Church* is the must-read analysis of Cyril's theology.

As well as the people named above, I want to thank Ben Lloyd who acted as my research assistant one summer as I wrote, Timothy Ezat, and a handful of students at Union School of Theology, whose dissertations on Cyril have sharpened my understanding over the years: Sam Cotten, Pete Gower, Chris Murphy, and Ben Welchman. I am thankful, too, for the wise and kind editorial guidance of Michael Haykin and Shawn Wilhite.

About this Book

This book begins with some history and biography of Cyril and then a brief chapter setting up the dynamics of the controversy with Nestorius. The chapters on Jesus, God, and salvation are a look into Cyril's theology, especially in the light of the theological battles he was fighting. The final chapter and afterword survey his influence on the church immediately after his lifetime and highlight some of the ways we might turn to Cyril today as we navigate the questions and debates of our own time. I hope you will enjoy meeting Cyril as you read this book. He is controversial, daring, amusing, and a brilliant reader of Scripture. More, though, I hope you will be delighted afresh at the glory and goodness of Jesus Christ. Cyril has helped me answer my naïve question at university about where Jesus fits more than most.

Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the creator and sustainer of all things. He is the head of the church, the firstborn from the dead, and in Him - in His human flesh and blood - the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, right from the moment He was conceived by the Holy

Spirit in the Virgin Mary. And when our incarnate Lord and God suffered and died on the cross, He not only cleansed us from sin, but brought us peace and reconciliation with God (Col 1:15-20). Jesus *really* is the Alpha and Omega: the first and last word on knowing God, on living the Christian life, on our future eternal hope. He is God *with* us and God *for* us. What better or truer answer could we give to the most important questions that define and disturb us?

Daniel Hames

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Feast of Cyril of Alexandria, 27 June 2023

THE MAN FROM ALEXANDRIA

Alexandria began its life as Rhacotis, a sleepy port town, standing proud on a limestone ridge amid the marshes where the Mediterranean meets the freshwater Lake Mareotis.¹ Alexander the Great had arrived (c. 331 BC) and founded a city there – named, of course, after himself – as a Greek outpost in Egypt, with the hope it would become a centre for commerce.² Although Alexander immediately left Egypt, never to return, his dreams for the place certainly came true.

The city grew into a heaving metropolis and a hotspot for international trade. For almost three centuries after Alexander, the Ptolemies ruled over their empire from the city, quickly swelling its population with eager migrants.³ The famous lighthouse was finished in 247 BC and, standing over 100 metres high on the island of Pharos at the mouth of the harbour, cast the light of a giant furnace over the ocean at night and

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1. Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo: Book 17*, vol. VIII, trans. Horace Leonard Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 31 (17.1.8).
 2. Arrian, *The Anabasis of Alexander*, trans. E. J. Chinnock (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1884), 140ff (Book III, Chapter I).
 3. Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.8.

mirrored the sun's light by day.⁴ Set along the shoreline in the Royal Quarter, was the Museum, a huge complex not unlike a university campus, dedicated to illumination of the academic kind. Here, literary scholars and scientific researchers exchanged the latest ideas while milling around ornamental colonnades and extensive gardens. Their food and lodgings were provided by the administrator, a priest of Serapis, the Alexandrians' favourite sun god.⁵ At the heart of the Museum was the Great Library, a collection reputed to contain hundreds of thousands of scrolls, ranging from the works of Aristotle to a portion of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament, originally compiled in the city).⁶ Alexandria's reputation for learning was celebrated. It could count among its famous sons Euclid, considered the father of geometry and active there around 300 BC;⁷ a chief librarian, Eratosthenes (c. 276–195 BC), who was the first to calculate the circumference of the earth and the tilt of its axis,⁸ and the renowned Jewish philosopher, Philo (c. 20 BC–AD 50), who was born and lived in the city.⁹

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4. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 36.18; Strabo, *Geography*, 17.6. See also, L. Sprague de Camp, 'The "Darkhouse" of Alexandria' in *Technology and Culture* 6, no. 3 [1965], 423–427).
 5. Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.8. See also Mostafa El-Abadi, *The Life and Fate of the Ancient Library of Alexandria* (Paris: UNESCO/UNDP, 1990) and P. M. Fraser, *Ptolomaic Alexandria*, 3 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). The Museum is sometimes known as the Mouseion.
 6. Aristeas, *The Letter of Aristeas*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (London: SPCK, 1918); Roger S. Bagnall, 'Alexandria: Library of Dreams' in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 146, no. 4 (2002), 348–62; William W. Fortenbaugh and Eckart Schütrumpf (eds.), *Demetrius of Phalerum: Text, Translation, and Discussion* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 331–45. The exact connection between the Museum and the Library is not totally clear.
 7. William Trollope, *First Book of Euclid's Elements* (London: William Foster, 1847).
 8. Duane W. Roller, *Eratosthenes' Geography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
 9. Jean Daniélou, *Philo of Alexandria*, trans. James G. Colbert (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2014).

Cyril's Alexandria

By the fifth century AD, Alexandria was a distinctly Christian place. Tradition has it that Mark, the disciple of Jesus and writer of the second Gospel, had visited the city twice. The first trip was a successful missionary endeavour, winning converts and even ordaining a bishop to oversee the new church there. The second was to end in his martyrdom. Presiding at Holy Communion on Easter Day in AD 68, he was captured by enraged pagan citizens. He had been worshipping Christ on what happened to be the feast day of Serapis, so a rope was tied around his neck, and he was dragged through the streets until he was dead.¹⁰ Yet, Alexandria had seen the slowly growing influence of Christianity on its culture and politics. The conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in AD 312 meant that Alexandria, like other major cities in the empire, soon filled with converts, more than a dozen churches, and even Christian businesses.¹¹ Although the Library and Museum had long since been left to deteriorate by this time, the Alexandrian tradition of scholarship was still alive and well.¹² There was an influential theological college (possibly founded at Mark's first visit) which taught Christian doctrine for nearly 400 years, stretching to the time of Didymus the Blind in 398.¹³

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10. See B. Evetts, *Patrologia Orientalis* 1 (Paris: Librairie de Paris, 1907), 142–148.
 11. Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 173–206; Norman Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria* (London: Routledge, 2006), 4–5.
 12. It is worth noting that the Library (which may, in fact, have been multiple libraries) was never destroyed in one cataclysmic event, as is sometimes imagined. Over decades, it was damaged at various times, including during Julius Caesar's siege in 48BC, and by fires. But its downfall was almost certainly due more to declining membership and underfunding than disaster. The last recorded members of the Museum are in the AD 260s, and it likely ceased its business in the 270s. See Bagnall, *Library of Dreams*, 356–60, and El-Abbadi, *The Life and Fate of the Ancient Library of Alexandria*, 167–72. See also, Roy Macleod (ed.) *The Library of Alexandria: Centre of Learning in the Ancient World* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), Jean-Arcady Meyer, *The Rise and Fall of the Library of Alexandria* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023).
 13. See W. H. Oliver, 'The Heads of the Catechetical School in Alexandria', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36, no. 1 (2015), and 'The catechetical school in Alexandria', *Verbum et*

Alexandria's bishops or 'popes' oversaw not only the churches and congregations of that city, but also acted as the lynchpin and archbishop ('patriarch') of all the other bishops of Egypt. This meant that they appointed the other local bishops and supervised their ministries. These men also wielded increasingly significant civic and political firepower as years went by.¹⁴ What was once a deeply pagan city they now called 'the most glorious and Christ-loving city of the Alexandrians.'¹⁵

The Christian population was apparently the majority by Cyril's time, but the city was nevertheless a diverse, bustling melting-pot.¹⁶ Prosperous and productive, it was known for its manufacture of papyrus, luxury goods (whether blown glass or confectionary), and medicines from doctors as famous as Egyptian linen.¹⁷ Lively trades like these, along with its impressive academic heritage, meant the continual convergence of people from all over the world. The population had to absorb cultural and religious differences as Jewish, pagan, and Christian communities lived side-by-side. This was rarely a peaceful co-existence and the tensions played out in very public ways. Alexandrians of all backgrounds loved to gather at the theatre, for live music, in bath houses, and in taverns. They were especially fond of large-scale sporting spectacles like the horseracing in the hippodrome. Two teams clashed at these events, the Blues (*Venetoï*) and the Greens (*Prasinoï*), and the population divided themselves between them. Allegiance to the Blues or the Greens seemed to mean something more than sports fandom, but also embraced political and social identity. As large and diverse crowds gathered for these events, the city

Ecclesia 36, no. 1 (2015); Norman Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria* (London: Routledge, 2000), 10.

14. See Norman Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria*, 3-44.

15. Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity*, 14.

16. Norman Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria* (London: Routledge, 2006), 4-5.

17. Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity*, 33-36.

authorities took the opportunity to communicate messages and to carry out the public punishment of criminals.¹⁸ In such a febrile atmosphere, it was very common for street fighting and looting to break out. Socrates Scholasticus (380–439) wrote that,

The Alexandrians are more delighted with tumult than any other people: and if they can find a pretext, they will break forth into the most intolerable excesses; nor is it scarcely possible to check their impetuosity until there has been much bloodshed.¹⁹

The description is perhaps a touch over-dramatic, but there is no question that Alexandria had a well-deserved reputation for rioting.²⁰

Heat and Light

Alexandria was a cauldron of both heat and light. Political power blended with social unease; great learning mingled with violence and strife. It is not surprising that, from such an explosive environment, a figure like Cyril would emerge. A man of substantial intellect and force of will, a fighter of heresy and unafraid of controversy – yet a local pastor, biblical scholar, and lover of Christ all the same. He has been described as a ‘Marmite’ figure, dividing opinion: ‘people either love him or hate him’.²¹ It is true. On the one hand, in the seventh century,

18. Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity*, 63–69.

19. Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.13, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.) *Socrates, Sozomenus: Church Histories* (trans. A. C. Zenos) vol. 2, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890), 159.

20. Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity*, 10–14. See also, Lauren Kaplow, ‘Religious and Intercommunal Violence in Alexandria in the 4th and 5th centuries CE’ in *Hirundo: The McGill Journal of Classical Studies* vol. IV, 2–26 (2006) and Edward J. Watts, *Riot in Alexandria: Tradition and Group Dynamics in Late Antique Pagan and Christian Communities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

21. Anthony N. S. Lane, ‘Review of *The Theology of St Cyril of Alexandria: A Critical Appreciation* by Thomas G. Weinandy and Daniel A. Keating,’ *Journal of Theological Studies*, 56, no. 2 (2005): 695.