

A TREATISE OF DIONYSIUS BAR-SALIBHI
ON DIFFERENCES WITH CHALCEDONIANS

(Paul Verghese)

Dionysius Bar-Sleebhi, ^{Nashpilitan} ~~Bar-Salibhi~~ of the Syrian Orthodox Church (†1171 A.D.) was one of the greatest of Syriac writers in any time, ~~second not even to~~ ~~Bar-Hebraeus, his successor~~. His commentaries on Scripture (Genesis to Revelation) have not yet been published in entirety; but what is published reveals the amazing range of his reading, and the penetrating clarity of his mind.

The treatise under discussion, a rare copy of which has been edited and published by A. Mingana in the Woodbrooke studies (Vol. I) (1) is Bar-Sleebhi's response to a Syrian monk with pronounced Melchite (Chalcedonian Orthodox) sympathies, Ramban Yeshu's who very diplomatically asks the learned Dionysius why they should not join the Chalcedonian majority. It quotes Ramban Yeshu's point by point and answers him in detail. Many of the points strike us as trivial, but some are profound. The present writer takes the liberty of distinguishing between the two, and discussing the more significant points in some detail.

The letter of Dionysius opens with deceptive courtesy and good temper.(2)

(1) Cambridge 1927

(2) Quotations are from Mingana's English translation, with some alterations on the basis of the Syriac.

"The servant Dionysius, Servant of God, sends greetings of peace with prayers, O Ramban Yeshu's, may God keep you.

"Any work from which spring good and gain for the souls of both the speaker and the attentive hearer, is not to be hindered or silenced. These words we write at the beginning of our discourse to you, as we have read your conciliatory treatise which stands between truth and falsehood in order not to hurt anybody's feelings. In another place we will deal with the wordly questions that it raises. So far as the spiritual questions which give life to the souls are concerned, it is more advantageous to strive after undiluted truth and avoid ambiguity."

The work contains 10 chapters, the titles of which are given by Mingana as follows:

1. On the sign of the Cross
2. Also on the sign of the Cross
3. On his hidden falsehood that has been exposed and on how he is a Protagonist of the Believers in two Natures.
4. On the wicked Rites and Habits of the Greeks
5. On how tones and melodies do not bring any profit to those who sing them and those who hear them
6. Against the Pride of the Chalcedonians, and on the Building of their Capital
7. On the fact that he made the Greeks the head of all Christians
8. On how ~~the~~ he blames his co-religionists and is proud of the Greeks
9. On the Sign of the Cross
10. On the Trisegion.

The chapter headings themselves reveal, among other things:

- a) that this is not a very ironic treatise
- b) that Ramban Yeshua's treatise was definitely ironic
- and c) that Ramban Yeshu'a wrote as one of the Syrians, though he may have left the Syrian Orthodox Church for the Greek Church soon after writing.

The first two chapters deal with two questions in making the sign of the Cross:

- a) with one finger (Syrian) or two fingers (Greek)
- b) from left to right (Syrian) or right to left (Greek)

The question of the number of fingers to be used in making the sign of the cross is no longer so relevant, since the Syrians now use three fingers (Trinity) and not one (one nature) as they used to. The argument, however, between one finger and two fingers throws out some theological gems rather pertinent to the Chalcedonian debate:

"The Greeks, however, who believe in two natures in Christ say: 'We make the sign of the cross with two fingers because there are two natures in Christ.' Against this we wrote at length in our controversial treatise against them; here it will suffice us to say: If the natures in Christ are as separate from each other as two fingers are, they have no unity, and the Doctors of the Church who say that the Word was united to His flesh as fire is to iron, are in error. Further, two fingers, although separate from each other, are really one in substance (οὐσία), and thus, in the contention of the Greeks, the eternal Son of the Father would be one in substance with the flesh which is created and subject

To time; and this is blasphemy.

"We will further rebut the Greeks as follows: the cross teaches us that Christ, the Son, was attached to it in the flesh, while in His divinity He was neither extended nor attached; but with two fingers you show that He was extended on the cross and crucified in His two natures. You are thus Theopaschites, because with the human nature you crucify God also. As to us, we believe that as Christ is one, and the cross is one, the sign of the cross is to be made with one finger; only, and this we have learned from both nature and book" (p.21)

The debate of left ~~to~~ right versus right to left, though technically brilliant, is theologically not too pertinent. Yet, the difference in practice remains to this day. The twelfth century at least looked upon this difference as significant. Can we today really accept each other's practices, since it is very unlikely that either side will be willing to change?

The two fingers debate is resumed in the second chapter and it is difficult to say what Ramban Yeshu's's real position is, for he is quoted as saying

"We who make the sign of the cross with two fingers, do we believe in two natures in Christ? God forbid that this should ever happen".

In fact Dionysius insinuates that the Melchites are inconsistent:

"How can you mix up two incompatible propositions in saying, 'We believe like the Orthodox Syrians, and we make the sign of the cross like the Greeks'?"

Dionysius objects to Roman Yeshu's easy irrenicism, and vents his biting sarcasm on the latter's statement:

"We should not reject the Greeks because they believe in two natures, since apart from us and the Armenians, and a few Franks (who are they?) all Christians believe in two natures in Christ."

Besides attacking the principle that the majority is right or that one should change one's faith with every rising king, Dionysius also challenges the provenance of the one-nature faith being limited to Syrians, Armenians and few Franks.

"How did you assert that all Christians believe in two natures except us and the Armenians, while the Egyptians, Nubiens, Abyssinians, the majority of the Indians, and the country of Libya which in the time of Discorus was composed of one thousand and five hundred parishes, accept the faith of St. Cyril and St. Discorus and of the great Severus.

"Even the Greeks when brought face to face with the words of Athanasius the Great and Cyril the Wise are put to shame and believe like them in one nature of the Word who became flesh; this is written in their books and they believe in it like ourselves, but they explain away the expression 'one nature' and say afterwards 'two natures' contrary to the teaching of the Doctors, and give a meaning of their own to the words used by Cyril the Great, and pretend that he really meant two natures, and this in spite of the fact that those Arabs and Persians of the East and

the So th who are Christians understand like us the doctrine of one nature in the Word who became flesh, and they are known to be Arabs or Persians by the fact that they are not versed in any other language but Arabic and Persian." (pp. 26-27)

It is of some importance to our current discussions that Bar-Sleebhi found the two doctrines theoretically irreconcilable:

"I will now ask you a question: Are the Syrians right or are they wrong? If they are wrong, why do you not reject them completely? And if they are right, why do you not reject the Chalcedonians? If you refuse to believe in two natures, you should reject also the truth of the Orthodox Syrians. As light is opposed to darkness, and good health to illness, so that they are mutually repellent and cannot remain concomitantly in one place, so also the one who believes in two natures in Christ after the union is opposed to the one who believes in one nature in the Word who became flesh. You will not contradict that the two are opposed to each other, how then do you pretend that you do not believe in two natures like them, and at the same time not reject them? You are like the one who holds the two ends of a rope and is unable to climb up with any of them". (pp. 27-28)

But still Dionysius seems willing to accept the Greeks, if only the latter behaved better.

"You write: 'Why should we not accept them?

The Apostle said: "Who art thou that judgest the servant of another? To his own lord he standeth or falleth". He also said: "Pray for one another" and he did not say "anathematize".

"Your words would have been very true, if only the Chaldeonians would listen to you. For your sake we shall compromise and accept them; but come now to Melitene which is not under their power and see how they tear at our people like wolves. Anyone who through his instability and weakness falls (and joins them), they baptize again, and they openly call us heretics and untruthful, and out of their own free will they do not allow anyone to enter their churches. I remonstrated several times with them, but because of their arrogance they did not desist. Were it not for a reason that I will not disclose, and for the fact that they would have been sneered at by outsiders, I would have revealed their falsehood, and they would have been despised by all; but mendacity often succeeds.

"Now repair in your imagination to the city of their pride. You will see that it contains a mosque for the Mohammedans, but it has no church for the Syrians and the Armenians. Do they do this out of their good nature or out of their wickedness? By their actions they show that the faith of the Mohammedans is better than the Orthodox faith of ours.

"About a hundred years ago, in the time of Ignatius of Melitene, we had a church in Constantinople, but impelled by Satan they took possession of it, and their Patriarch of that time ordered our books that were in it, and the church vestry, and the holy chrism, to be burnt in the middle of the bazaars. In that very night that Patriarch was struck by a sudden illness and lost his life. What do you say about these? Glory be to the one who deprived them of their power! If they had the power they would not have left a single Christian alive, as their fathers did in the times of yore." (p.28)

But he goes on to justify the anathema against the two-nature formulation.

The discussion on the comparative merits of Greek and Syrian hymnody, music and offices reads rather childish and we will not devote much space to it here, except to say that this document is of extreme interest for the historians of Syrian or Greek liturgies in the wider sense. Dionysius seems to have a definite anti-musical bias and disparages the "lustful quality" of Greek music to which he prefers readings from the Old and New Testaments and the fathers. He seems a bit carried away when he makes an absolute statement like

"To pagans belong festivities, songs, dances, banquets and drink and to Christians fasting, prayer and reading of scripture." (p. 37)

There is also a very unympathetic refutation of the claims of Constantinople to glory, including reported relics preserved in that city.

The discussion on the number of bishops present in person or by proxy at Chalcedon is discussed in Chapter VII:

"You write: 'That Council (of Chalcedon) which had six hundred and thirty-six Fathers, and from which two were driven out'.

"I am amazed at the way you have accepted as true the falsehood of liars. Who saw (the Fathers of that Council) and counted them as amounting to such a number? Who read their unofficial proceedings and deliberations? As for us we read everything in books and we know what was done and spoken there, and how long the Council lasted; we have also written with us the names of all the bishops who assembled in it, and those who subscribed to it by proxy, and the number of all them amounts only to three hundred and sixty-three. To what extent can the deceiver lie! They believe that it is by the magnitude of the number of the Fathers that truth is made manifest. Three hundred and seventy bishops assembled in the town of Madecolinus subscribed to the wickedness of Arius, and wished to throw away Athanasius the Great, because he did not agree with them." (p.47)

The discussion on the Trisagion is of some relevance, and some logical strength. We quote in full:

"You also discuss with the trisagion in which you have written that the Greeks say: Sanctus es Deus, Sanctus es Peter omnipotens.

"Let it be known to you that the Chalcedonians do not refer all the trissagion to the Father, as you write, but to the Trinity, because they say: 'Sanctus es Deus Pater, Sanctus es omnipotens Filius, Sanctus es immortalis Spiritus Sanctus, miserere nobis'. We Syrians with the Armenians, the Egyptians, the Abyssinians, the Nubians, and the Indians, refer the trissagion to the Son.

"There are some who say that when Joseph brought down the body of our Lord from the Cross, people saw that angels had set up three choirs, the first of which saying: 'Sanctus es Deus', and the second: 'Sanctus es omnipotens', and the third: 'Sanctus es immortalis'; then Joseph and Nicodemus were moved by the Spirit and said: 'Qui crucifixus es pro nobis - i.e. for mankind - miserere nobis'. This was immediately received in the Churches, and Ignatius the fiery, the disciple of John, established it in the Churches. Some others, however, say that it has been established after Nestorius had been rejected from the Church, but they were wrong.

"The Chalcedonians say that the trissagion is derived from the Sanctus found in Isaiah. As the Seraphim glorify the three persons of the Trinity with the thrice repeated Sanctus, so we also should refer the trissagion to the Trinity. Against them we will write as follows:

"The One whom Isaiah saw on a high throne and the seraphim round him is the Son. This we knew from John the Evangelist who says: 'These things said Isaiah about

Him when he saw His glory' Cyril, John Chrysostom, and other Doctors teach us that it was the Son, the Word, that Isaiah saw on the throne and not the Father. We also believe that it is He who is the door and that it is through Him that we go to the Father. He says: "I am the door; by me if any man enter in, he shall find life". In the fact that we refer the trinitation to the Son we may go up to the Father and say: 'Our Father who art in heaven'. And in referring the glory to the Son we speak in the Holy Spirit: 'No man can say: "Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit"'.

"We say further that the Seraphim said: 'Holy, Holy, Holy, heaven and earth are full of His glory', and they did not say: 'Thou art holy O God, Thou art holy, O Omnipotent, Thou art holy O Immortal'. If the Doctors have explained the thrice repeated 'holy' as referring to the three persons (of the Trinity), and if the Sanctus of the liturgy also: "Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus Dominus Dominotens, pleni sunt", etc. refers to the three persons, although addressed to one of them only, let them show us from where they learned that the trinitation of 'Sanctus es Deus' refers to the Trinity. The prophet says only: 'Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus', and the words 'Deus, Omnipotens, Immortalis' have been added afterwards.

That this trinitation refers to the Son to whom it is appropriate is known by the following: we say 'Holy art Thou O God the Son', because He became flesh although

remaining God; and we say: 'Holy art Thou O Omnipotent,' because He put on our weak body although remaining omnipotent in His divinity; and we say: 'Holy art Thou O Immortal', because He died in the flesh although remaining immortal like God. What passage is it of the heretic Macedonius or of any other who attributed mortality to the Holy Spirit that the Chalcedonians want to refute when they say: 'Holy Thou art O immortal Holy Spirit?' They have really no apology to offer. The words of the trissagion have been attributed by the Doctors to the Son because He became flesh, put on the weak and mortal human body and was addressed by them as 'God', 'omnipotent', 'immortal' and 'who hast been crucified for us' in the flesh.

If they refuse this and say that the trissagion refers to the Trinity, let them only say: 'Holy, holy, holy' and not: 'Holy art Thou O God', and the remaining 'Omnipotent' and 'Immortal'. The Nestorians and the Chalcedonians, in order to take from the middle the question of the crucifixion, and to introduce the division of nature and natures, and count in Christ two attributes, powers, and wills, and in order not to admit that we crucify the Son in the flesh, avoided the reference of the trissagion to the Son and attributed it to the Trinity, not paying sufficient attention to what Paul said: 'God forbid that I should glory save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ'. John the evangelist also said: 'Glory to the cross'.

"The theologian said in his discourse on the passover: 'We had need of a God becoming flesh and dying in order that we may live with Him. We died that we may be purified and we rose with Him. Many miracles occurred at that time: God was crucified, the sun suffered eclipse and then shone again. It was necessary that the creatures should suffer with the Creator'. Now where does this Doctor put division in Christ? He openly declared that God became flesh, died and was crucified."

Some General Conclusions

While it is obvious that for Dionysius the theological issue is important, the overriding factors in his mind seem to be an ethnic bias of Syria against Greece, which was one of the decisive factors in the background of Chalcedon. Have we not come to the stage where we can be mature enough to transcend this - keeping in mind that in the Church there is neither Jew nor Greek?

Perhaps the class of Dionysius's treatise sets the right tone for our own discussion among the Oriental churches.

"We do not hate the Greeks, but the schisms which they brought into the midst and the divisions which they introduced into the Church. For a certain number of years I only disclosed the trouble caused by five of their innovations in five points of faith; had I disclosed at length all the disturbances they had caused, they would have been ashamed of themselves, because not all of them are aware of what happened to them. I warned them several times to let everyone go his own way

without recrimination against his neighbour of another creed, but they showed no desire to heed our advice. I wrote chapters concerning their habits, and also on the fact that we should be permitted to enter their churches, and be allowed to pray for them and they for us; I also wrote many other chapters to rebuke them and point to the disturbance that they would be causing in the Church if they did not desire to live in peace and concord. For several reasons, however, among which is the fact that they have no responsible director and head, I kept my tongue and did not disclose what we are now aiming at.

"Because, if God gives me life, I have the intention of exposing little by little all their teaching and comparing it with the interpretation of the holy Doctors, and of outlining afterwards our own teaching and interpretation and those of the Doctors. We have written the present pages in haste, but we have confidence that we shall not find ourselves in need to write to you again on the same subject, and that you will rather constitute yourself a preacher of truth, and thus possess your own soul and that of the many who fell like you. In case you remain stubborn in your old ideas, and in case light and darkness are on the same footing with you, it is your own business, but there is a great day which will make manifest all the hidden secrets of mankind.

"Let it be also known to you that it is very pleasing and agreeable to God that there should be no divisions in the Churches of Christians; it would have been also more just that the Greeks should have torn and pulled

at their own flesh, but they are so steeped in iniquity as to say that there are no other Christians but themselves, and they inflict more harm on our community and on that of the Armenians than the Turks. As I said above, I warned several times the Greeks of Melitene that they and the Syrians and Armenians should love one another and not to growl at one another like wolves and lions, but their madness reached such a pitch as to say like their fathers: 'You are not Christians' and other similar ugly offensive words which are in keeping with their iniquity.

"I wished to sow peace in the camp of the hostile parties, and to convince them from the books of the Apostles and Doctors that it is not good that they should contend with one another, but that they should enter one another's Churches, and pray with love, and if necessary to come nearer to one another and remember one another in prayers, with the understanding that each one may follow his own theological convictions; but they did not condescend to reconciliation.

"When I examined their madness and noticed that it was that of insolent people, I retorted and said to them: since you are so incurable, and believe that truth, which you do not know, is with you, bring first the testimony and the signature of your bishop, priests and notables, and I on my part shall also bring those of our Patriarch, our bishops, priests and notables, to the effect that (in a public discussion which we will hold on religious questions) either party shall be pleased with the truth which shall there be revealed, and that either of them shall embrace it when revealed; that in the discussion no party shall

abuse the other, or rebuke him and refer to extraneous subjects. By the help of God, I shall on that day disclose everything to the sun with justice and equity, in spite of the fact that the affair requires labour, time, helpers and promoters. (pp 61,62,63)