



## What Nestorius Really Wrote: Bethune-Baker's *Nestorius & His Teaching*: the Hypostatic Union: History of the Term; Nestorius Challenges Cyril's Theology

### IX. What Nestorius Really Wrote

1. Before concluding our study of the Nestorian controversy we should allow Nestorius to personally defend his position on the hypostatic union.
2. The correct definition of this doctrine is stated as follows:

**The Hypostatic Union:** In the Person of Christ are two beings, inseparably united, without mixture or loss of separate identity, without loss or transfer of properties or attributes, the union being personal and eternal.

Beginning with the incarnation of Jesus Christ, a human nature was inseparably united forever with the divine nature of Jesus Christ. Yet the two natures remain distinct, whole, unchanged, without mixture or confusion, so that Jesus Christ is true humanity and undiminished deity in one Person forever.

3. Cyril, the leading proponent of the Theotokos cult at Alexandria, was opposed by Nestorius. Nestorius believed the emphasis on the Mary as the "mother of God" caused an over-emphasis on the deity of Christ and a diminishment of the humanity of Christ.
4. Cyril took advantage of the situation by distorting Nestorius's critique into a false doctrine. Cyril accused Nestorius of teaching that Christ was two complete persons, one divine, the other human.
5. As we have noted, this accusation stuck, Nestorius was discredited, and the literal school at Antioch lost its influence.
6. However, we have observed from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1911 edition, that Nestorius's definition of the hypostatic union was accurate, being revealed by his own writings discovered in the area of Ephesus around 1895.
7. The book is entitled *The Bazaar of Heraclides of Damascus*. Pertinent portions were extracted by J. F. Bethune-Baker in his book *Nestorius and His Teaching: A Fresh Examination of the Evidence*.
8. We will note some of these excerpts that quote Nestorius's views regarding the Person of Christ in the Incarnation. But first it is necessary to define terms.
9. The development of the theological term "hypostatic union" goes back to the Nestorian controversy.
10. When Nestorius explains his position in the *Bazaar of Heraclides*, he uses certain Greek words whose definitions are critical to understanding his defense. For the history and meaning of these terms we consult:

**Bethune-Baker, J. F. *Nestorius and His Teaching: A Fresh Examination of the Evidence*. Reprint. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 47-51, 53:**

*The history and meaning of the terms.*

To express any kind of real existence two terms were in common use among Greek thinkers, οὐσία, *ousia* and ὑπόστασις, *hypostasis*; the former the noun of the verb "to be" ("being"), the latter the noun of a verb of similar sense "to subsist" or "to exist" ("substance", "existence"). In practical use they were synonymous, and Greek writers who well knew the values of words declared them to be so. (p. 47)



Their equivalents in Latin were *essential* and *substantia*, “essence” and “substance”: and “substance” is thus the English representative of the original sense of both the Greek terms. We must be on guard against attaching any “materialistic” sense to this word “substance.” (pp. 47-48)

To this “substance” attached all the attributes of characteristics which as a whole were always associated with it; and these were called, by a general term, the “nature” of a thing. Different substances might have attributes in common, and so their natures might be similar; but they themselves remained distinct, and in thought at least could be distinguished from their natures. The reality was always the “substance” to which the nature belonged. (p. 48)

NOTE: Both *ousia* and *hypostasis* are used as synonyms and speak of the attributes or characteristics of one’s nature. There is a divine nature and a human nature. The divine nature may be described by the Essence Box: sovereignty, righteousness, justice, love, eternal life, omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, immutability, and veracity. Human nature may be described by “elements”: soul, spirit, body, and mind, and by “capacities”: intellect, sensibility, will, and conscience.

It was usually quite enough to speak of the “nature”. The idea of the “substance” was more technical. In popular usage we commonly speak of our Lord as “of the same nature” as the Father and as taking “our nature” upon Him. There is such a thing as “Godhead”, and there is such a thing as “manhood”, and there is a real distinction between them. Nestorius knew very well what he was doing when he insisted on the recognition of the “substances” as well as the “natures” in the Person of our Lord. To express the conception “substance” he used either of the two Greek synonyms *ousia* and *hypostasis*. In speaking of two “substances” in the Person of our Lord Nestorius was employing an expression which had been recognized in ecclesiastical usage from the earliest days of formal theology. The phrase was simply the technical expression of the Christian faith in the Godhead and manhood of the Lord. (pp. 49-50)

In like manner, in treating *ousia* and *hypostasis* as equivalent terms, Nestorius was simply carrying on the old traditional use of the words. (p. 50)

Cyril’s own use of the term *hypostasis* is certainly not consistently, if ever, the same as that which became established at a later time. As far as precision of terminology goes, Nestorius is more definite than Cyril. Cyril does not seem to have had a clear conception of the difference between the terms “substance”, “nature”, and “person”. But he used them all, and his language is really as elusive as Nestorius found it. (pp. 50-51)

In reading the words of Cyril and Nestorius it must be remembered that the hunt for the proper term was still going on, unconsciously rather than of purpose; and though we cannot avoid consideration of the terms themselves, it is to the arguments of Nestorius rather than to the technical terms he uses that attention must be paid. (p. 53)

11. In the fifth century theologians were developing important doctrines from Scripture. One of these was how to define the Person of Jesus Christ. Since He is at once deity and humanity then how is this to be stated in order to achieve accuracy and avoid heresy?
12. The theologians at Alexandria attempted to define this but were influenced by false doctrines that embellished the person of Mary.
13. Further, their allegorical system of hermeneutics caused them to be imprecise in their use of words as is noted by Bethune-Baker when he writes that Cyril’s “language is really as elusive as Nestorius found it.”
14. On the other hand, Nestorius was much more precise in his use of words which is characteristic of the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic practiced at Antioch.
15. Since Cyril could not express himself precisely then his definition of the hypostatic union suffered and Nestorius attacked him on a technical level.



16. No academic who considers himself to be an intellectual and an expert likes having his inadequacies exposed. But Cyril was no better than his hermeneutics and as a result he was rightfully challenged by Nestorius.
17. However, Cyril had the power of the pope on his side. Cyril's motivation was to protect his academic integrity while both he and the pope were motivated to protect the heretical doctrines of Mariolatry.
18. Together they brought down Nestorius and later the chief rival to their system of biblical interpretation at Antioch.
19. Nevertheless, Nestorius was able to write his polemic against Cyril and although it remained undiscovered for almost 1500 years, it has served to vindicate Nestorius and bring into the clear light of day the conspiracy against him by Cyril, Celestine I, and the Roman church.
20. In his book, *The Bazaar of Heraclides*, Nestorius presents his case using several literary techniques including dialogue: spoken exchanges between characters in a narrative work.
21. This device is explained by:

**Bethune-Baker, J. F. *Nestorius and His Teaching*, 31:**

*The Bazaar of Heraclides*. There is first a short introduction. Then follows a brief statement of various heresies, after which the book suddenly assumes the form of a dialogue between Nestorius and one Superianus, probably an imaginary person, who puts objections and arguments from the point of view of each heresy as it comes in turn under examination, as its 'advocate': and the discussion is carried on in that form throughout the first part of the book.