

# **MOSES AND THE ‘MYSTERY OF CHRIST’ IN ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA’S EXEGESIS - Part I**

*Fr. John A. McGuckin\**

If the Christological controversy of the Fifth Century had not proved as explosive and as internationally disruptive as it did, Cyril of Alexandria would still have gained a lasting reputation as a theologian, as the most consistent exponent of the Athanasian tradition of salvific Christology in patristic thought (something which led Anastasius of Sinai to call him the ‘Seal’ of the Fathers’) but history’s approach to his thought and work would surely have taken another route; one less narrowly focused on dogmatic constructs, and less concerned with proof texts. It was inevitable that his Christological argumentation (once battle had been engaged with Nestorius and then with the wider Antiochene tradition in the years following the council of Ephesus of 431) should have been carefully and minutely scrutinised and his particular formulae challenged : not least those concerned with ‘Hypostatic Union’ and his concept of the ‘One Nature’. Theodoret of Cyrrhus and Andrew of Samosata, his main Syrian rivals, sensed that Cyril’s foray into formulaic, syllogistic thought (the decision to condense his doctrine in the form of the Twelve Anathemata attached to his Third Letter to Nestorius ) was his real Achilles’ heel and they relentlessly pursued him on this point. In modern western thought it has, perhaps, been an inevitability that Cyril’s Christology should be approached through scholastic avenues, and formulaic reductions, and in the latter part of this century Grillmeier’s great labours on Chalcedonian Christology, together with the rediscovery of the precise terms of the Antiochene tradition, has reinforced this trend rather than diminishing it.

Cyril, however, is not especially a formulaic theologian. His theology was already more or less laid out in all its contours before 429, and he was a rock

\* Fr. John McGuckin is an Orthodox priest and theologian. He is Professor of Early Church History at Union Theological Seminary, New York.

1 The sealing stamp, or the mark of authentication of a whole line of teachers.

against which Nestorius shattered precisely because he was able to subject all the Antiochene statements to the measurement of a simple canon of thought he already knew intimately, and was willing to apply with an unwavering single-mindedness. The doctrinal message was by his own preference, however, elaborated in his exegesis. It is in the exposition of the scripture that we find Cyril most at home in elaborating the 'Mystery of Christ. Here it is not the appeal to mystery as 'refugium obscuritatis' that sometimes might be suspected in the course of the hot controversies that were the order of the day after 429, rather the careful, painstaking, and massively consistent laying-out of the sense of Christology as a dynamic of salvation that runs throughout sacred-history, and throughout every aspect of the Christian church's life (especially its sacramental mysteries of Baptism and Eucharist that confer 'Adoptive- Sonship'). It is for this reason that we find Cyril at his most true ( though least personally creative ) when we look at him in his exegesis. This aspect of Cyril's theology, despite some excellent modern treatments,<sup>2</sup> still has not received the full attention it deserves.

The present paper offers, as an example, a close study of one aspect of his Old Testament typology. It concerns Cyril's use of one of the central figures of the biblical narrative, the prophet Moses, and how the Moses stories are used as a complex symbol of direct continuities, indirect continuities, and radical discontinuities, between the Old Dispensation and the Christian Gospel.<sup>3</sup> Cyril sees the whole dynamic thrust of the 'sacred story'<sup>4</sup> as Christocentric, it follows, then, that the typology of Moses will have an obvious Christological reference for him.

The Antiochene opponents of the Alexandrian tradition of 'spiritualising exegesis' had, from the time of Didymus, argued strongly that this way of reading the biblical text strained credence as it progressed through labyrinths of allusions based upon doubtful first premisses. They preferred to give serious weight to the historical reading of the text. Cyril was already aware of these Syrian criticisms of Egyptian allegorisation techniques long before the Nestorian controversy made the Christological argument focus sharply on the correct reading of Scriptural proof-texts. His early use of the typology of Moses shows how he was a subtle exegete who, while he followed the Alexandrian principle that the spiritual sense was the

---

2 cf. A Kerrigan, *St. Cyril of Alexandria : Interpreter of the Old Testament*. Rome. 1952; G Lambert, 'S. Cyrille d'Alexandrie et l'Ancien Testament.' *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*. 75, 1953, 520-523; R Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind: A Study of Cyril of Alexandria's Exegesis, and Theology*. 1971; LR Wickham, 'Symbols of the Incarnation in Cyril of Alexandria.' in M Schmidt & CF Geyer (edd.) *Typus Symbol, Allegorie bei den ostlichen Vatern und ihren Parallelen im Mittelalter* (Internationales Kolloquium. Eichstatt. 1981) Regensburg. 1982, pp. 41-53; B. de Margerie, 'L'exégèse Christologique de S. Cyrille d'Alexandrie.' *NRT*. 102, 1980, 400-425.

3 The study by L M. Armendariz, '*El Nuevo Moises : Dinamica Cristocentrica en la tipologia de Cirilo Alejandrino.*' Madrid. 1962. is the only other work, as far as I know, to focus on Moses typology specifically.

4 By which he means the process how the biblical narrative of Israel becomes a story of salvation in Christ, in the tradition of the Church's preaching, and his own episcopal preaching in particular.

heart of the matter (the text's Christological import), had also taken some of the criticism to heart. As a result he abandoned the attempt to apply his biblical types within an overarching single system.<sup>5</sup> As a result, his Christologically driven exegesis leads him into interesting new and radical positions.

For present purposes I have restricted the scope of investigation to the 'type' of Moses only, and this focuses our consideration mainly on the *Glaphyra*<sup>6</sup> on *Exodus*, written just before the crisis between the oriental sees started to become public in 429. The figure of Moses is most fully and directly interpreted as Christological type within this narrative, though it also appears sporadically throughout Cyril's *On Adoration in Spirit and Truth*, the *Commentaries on the Minor Prophets*, and the *John Commentary*. A difference in tone and approach can be observed between the *Glaphyra* and the other sections which we shall see is probably due to the specific context of the latter material.

The *Glaphyra* serve as a kind of parallel treatment to the more through-written treatise *On Adoration*. At specific instances in both texts Cyril refers back to fuller references he has given to points in question in the other work. Clearly he edited the final version of these books with cross references to similar material in each, though he worked on the material in general (a selective working through the Pentateuchal text) from a similar time in his Alexandrian ministry. This can be situated more or less precisely in the period of his early years as Archbishop of Alexandria, an office to which he succeeded in 412. His episcopal administration was marked by a significant political and intellectual context which forms the background to the Old Testament exegeses in hand. The Theodosian imperial administration was at the time energetically advancing Christian civil rights beyond those of the other two important factions in early Byzantine Alexandria: the Jewish community,<sup>7</sup> and the intellectual adherents of the 'old religion'. Theophilus, Cyril's uncle and predecessor, had used the legislation available to him to deconstruct, often violently, significant shrines in and around Alexandria, and Cyril himself continued this process of active moves against centres of Hellenistic cult and belief. The incident of the creation of the shrine of Saints Cyrus and John is one example of this,<sup>8</sup> as is the continued cultivation of monastic leaders such as Shenoudi, whom Cyril was later to take in his delegation to Ephesus, but who was actively engaged in this period in the Christian suppression of pagan Egyptian cultic practices. Cyril's anti-Hellenistic apologetic is more clearly seen in the *Against*

5 The gathering storm of anti-Origenism in Egypt may have also helped him to distance himself from this tradition. Even so, Cyril's *Commentary on the Minor Prophets* contrasts markedly with that of Theodore, who hardly has a Christological focus, whereas for Cyril it is the whole point of the work.

6 *Glaphyra* – or 'Book of Elegant Comments'.

7 Jewish conversions of Christians were made punishable by law in 415. (Cod. Theod. 16.8.22). Other restrictive imperial edicts concerning Jewish affairs were issued in 409, 412, 415, 417 & 423.

8 cf J.A. McGuckin. 'The Influence of the Isis cult on St. Cyril of Alexandria's Christology.' *Studia Patristica*. 24. Leuven. 1992. pp. 191-199.

*Julian*, but it frequently appears also in his Old Testament exegeses. The overall struggle against the power of the Jewish communities in Alexandria, however, ought never to be overlooked. It was this community which Cyril perceived as the more dominant 'threat' to the claim of the Christians to be the ascendant element in Alexandrian intellectual life. If the Christian community advanced its deconstruction of Hellenistic religion and culture on the basis of biblical paradigms, especially that of divine election, then it was a serious matter to have within the same city an extensive Jewish intellectual élite with a long-standing commitment to allegorical biblical interpretation which they too advanced for the purposes of missionary outreach as well as internal community catechesis. Even in the time of Origen's stay in Alexandria (covering the publication of his *First Principles* and the early books of the *John Commentary*), the Christian community felt the close religious proximity of the Jewish communities to be something uncomfortable, and Origen was exercised to insist that Christians do not follow 'Judaic' practices such as food purity regulations and Sabbath observance.<sup>9</sup> In Cyril's time the tension with 'The Synagogue' was no less prevalent, and had the added element of Christian political ascendancy being much more deliberately advanced. The tension between the communities, as was exactly the case with the relation of Christians to the cult of Isis and other ubiquitous forms of Hellenistic religion in Alexandria, was one where leakage of Christians to Hellenistic and Jewish practices was more common than the hierarchs would like to admit.<sup>10</sup> Cyril's constant insistence on the cessation of regulations such as Sabbath, festivals, and food laws, needs to be visualised locally and immediately (beyond the scholarly circle for whom Cyril would later prepare his works) in the preached addresses to his local Christians who were attracted to exactly these things as structural forms shaping the outlines of their own religious lives.

In his early years as Archbishop, Cyril served as Ethnarch of the Christians in a time of great civil unrest between Christian and Jewish factions in the area around the 'Alexander' church,<sup>11</sup> involving mutual burning of places of worship. The imperial Governor, Orestes, had a hard time quelling the violence that arose, and was clearly being tested, over and against the episcopal administration of Cyril, for the real governance of the city. The violent clash with the Jewish factions of the Alexander church seemed to have been one from which Cyril emerged as the undisputed Christian leader of Alexandria, an issue which need not merely be read in Kingsley's depressing manner<sup>12</sup> of envisaging Cyril as an anti-semitic dema-

9 cf. J. McGuckin. 'Christian Asceticism and the Early School of Alexandria'. *Studies in Church History*, vol. 22, Oxford, 1985, 25 - 39.

10 The extent of cross-religious leakage can be ascertained from the syncretism evident in the Coptic amulet texts collected by M Meyer and R. Smith. *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic texts of Ritual Power*. Harper. San Francisco. 1994.

11 cf. Socrates. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. 7.13.

12 It is necessary to keep in mind that Kingsley's : *Hypatia ( or : New foes with an old face)* London. 1889 - is a work of creative fiction, and the Cyril who emerges from his pages is an unjust caricature that has too often been accepted as a 'working model' for many modern commentators.

gogue,<sup>13</sup> but one which certainly shows how much political (and hence intellectual and theological ) tension with the Jewish community was a real mark of Cyril's episcopal administration in the early years. The violence of the Christian mob which murdered Hypatia, formed another crisis point which led to Cyril's powers being curtailed. His personal bodyguard (parabalani) was cut back so that it could no longer serve as an effective paramilitary force. But within a few years (certainly before the Nestorian crisis began) and largely as a result of the manner in which he had shown his ability to control and master those Christian mob forces that constituted a significant faction among Alexandria's riotous populace, Cyril had bounced back into favour with the Emperor and was awarded a personal force that had even been increased from its former size.<sup>14</sup> The *Glaphyra* need to be read keeping in mind this active and tense conflict with Jewish theological and cultural life which was so close to the surface.

In the opening book of his *Glaphyra* Cyril gives Palladius, the dedicatee and notional reader, his overall exegetical intention. The search for the spiritual meaning (theoria) in the Pentateuch will guide him primarily throughout, and he will therefore give ethical interpretations of the works only as and when it strikes him as most useful in the context. The whole narrative of the scriptural book is an adumbration of the Mystery of Christ which comes only in shadowy form while the Law still held sway:

We have been making our way through each of the chapters of the Five Books of Moses, considering the higher sense of the meaning contained there; setting out such things in relation to moral exegesis as might be useful or necessary, in so far as time allows, or as best fits an ordered commentary on each part. But as for those things that lie within and surely refer to the Christ-Mystery, things which have been foretold as if in shadows to those who were still under the Law, this is what I have reserved to expound in this present study.<sup>15</sup>

---

13 This is not to say Alexandria was not an anti-semitic place and a violent place too (see H. I. Bell, 'Anti-Semitism in Alexandria.' JRS 31, 1941, 1-18 ) merely to argue that the interpretation of Fifth Century mob violence during Cyril's ethnarchy as 'anti-semitism' is too simplistic an analysis for the events of his early reign. See J. McGuckin: *St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy*. Brill, Leiden. 1994, pp. 11-15; cf. TE Gregory. *Vox Populi: Popular opinion and violence in the religious controversies of the Fifth Century*. 1979.

14 cf A Philpsborn. 'La compagnie d'ambulanciers 'parabalani' d'Alexandrie. Byzantion. 20. 1950, 185-190.

15 *Glaphyra in Exod.* 1. Text in JP Migne. *Cursus Completus Patrologiae Graecae*. [Henceforth PG] (Paris 1859, Turnhout 1987). PG. 69.385B - 386A.

The theological implication of this exegetical premise is, of course, that the explication of the mystery of Christ is itself a primary indication that the Law does not hold sway any longer. In spite of all his 'fulfilment' theory, this is the general trend of most of what Cyril has to say, and it is surely not coincidental that his immediate Alexandrian context of Church-Synagogue tensions has brought him to this point. Re-applying the Pauline notion of the transition from shadows to realities, Cyril is not so much concerned to demonstrate the essential relation of the two biblical covenants, as to argue that the Truth displaces Type, just as light displaces shadowy darkness. He not only works from the general Pauline context but more particularly is taking the initial sections of *Colossians* as his guide to the exegesis of the book of *Exodus*, as can be seen from the manner in which the *Colossians'* prelude sets the terms for his major concepts of the 'Mystery of Christ' as the interpretative key to the 'Economy of Salvation' as revealed in the Old Law.<sup>16</sup>

The context of Colossians 2.16f. which lays down the basis of the patristic hermeneutical principle of 'shadows to reality', by setting a tone of discontinuity between the dispensations, is even more explicit a guide to Cyril when he turns his attention to the way in which the old law cannot be given an abiding force for Christians. The contrast is already drawn here between the 'shadows' and real things in the context of not allowing the old food regulations and festivals (particularly the Sabbath) to have a continuing validity in the Christian community.<sup>17</sup>

The selfsame concept of the shadow being evidently an inferior premonition of what was to come, and which is displaced by the real in its own time, is sustained by the writer of Hebrews, where those who offer sacrifices in the economy of the Old Covenant ('according to the Law') are described as an inferior type, designated by Moses, of what was to come in the time of the new dispensation in Christ.<sup>18</sup>

It is, accordingly, this late Pauline<sup>19</sup> theology of the displacement and supersession of the old by the new which serves as Cyril's guide for all his treatment of the type of Moses. With both the *Hebrews* passages which speak of shadows and realities,<sup>20</sup> the issue of mediatorship is central to the logic of discontinuity between the covenants. It is for this reason that salvific mediation is also at the heart of the issue of Moses as a Christological type in the exegesis of Cyril. He is taking his hermeneutical lead from the passages in Colossians and Hebrews primarily, which thus sharpens his polemic more than if he had taken a broader textual basis for his covenant theology.<sup>21</sup> Christ, for Cyril, is certainly not a 'New Moses'<sup>22</sup>, rather the supreme Mediator who displaces the outmoded and partial type of Moses' mediation.

16 Coloss. 1. 26-27 : 'The Mystery hidden from the Ages... which is Christ in you.'

17 Coloss. 2. 16-17.

18 Heb. 8. 5-6.

19 Cyril, of course, takes *Hebrews* as a writing of Paul's.

20 See also Heb. 10.1 ff.

21 As instanced, for example, in *Romans* 3.31, or ch. 11.

22 *Pace* the title of Armendariz's study ( see fn. 3. ).

In the opening chapters of his *Glaphyra on Exodus* Cyril marks out three focal points of interest in regard to the Moses-type, around which he organises most of his material in this book, thereby making it his most extensive and consistent treatment of the symbolic meaning of Moses in all his work. The three aspects are : the birth story of Moses,<sup>23</sup> the story of Moses' exile and meeting with Jethro the priest<sup>24</sup> (most particularly here he mentions Moses' marriage and relation to Sephora), and lastly his vision of God in the burning bush.<sup>25</sup> Apart from these three central exegeses, the typology of Moses is developed in an extensive number of other random incidents and figures, mostly gathered around the ( negatively developed ) conceptions of Moses as mediator and as symbol of Israel, where Cyril is more concerned to delineate the limitations and ineffectiveness of Moses' role, rather than its strong points.

The treatment in the *Exodus Glaphyra* Book One, however, has the hallmarks of a coherently designed threefold unit, and one might speculate that these exegeses were in fact preached at a similar time. A common motif of invitation to the church, is found in the perorations to the end of each of his three sections which might suggest an occasion ( unusual in Cyril's works as we shall see by comparison with the general tenor of his other Moses material) where he has in mind a hopeful evangelistic outreach to the Jewish community. There may well have been a recent upsurge in Jewish converts to the Christian community, consequent on the stepping up of the Theodosian dynasty's measures to restrict the rights of Hellenistic and Judaic alternatives to Christianity in the early Fifth Century, which Cyril seems to have taken as a positive sign for future developments. He alludes to it in the peroration to his first treatment of Moses' nativity story showing how the manner in which Pharaoh's daughter (the pagan world) gave back the infant Moses (the knowledge of God through Christ) to his true mother (the Synagogue) prefigured the manner in which Israel itself would be persuaded by the gentile Church, 'in these last days', into the truth of Christ :

For even though the Synagogue of the Jews once, as it were, exposed and cast off Jesus through faithlessness , even so in these last days it shall receive him, being initiated into the mystery through the teachings of the Church.<sup>26</sup>

And he comes back to a similar upbeat theme as the peroration of the second section about Moses in exile. Once again Moses (the Christ figure) acts as a mediator to salvation when Jethro (the name is interpreted to mean vacuous man) is

---

23 *Glaphyra in Exodum* Bk.1. 1-5. PG 69. 388f.

24 *Glaphyra in Exod.* 1.6-8. PG 69. 397D - 409B.

25 *Glaphyra in Exod.* 1.9. PG 69. 409C - 417A.

26 *Glaphyra in Exod.* 1.5. PG 69. 397C.



turned into Raguel (the flock of God) through the covenant made through his daughter Sepphora (the gentile church) with Moses.<sup>27</sup>

The same motif of welcome extended to those of the Jewish community who wish to lay aside their sandals of corruption and enter the holy ground, that is convert to the mystery of Christ, is noticeable in the third peroration to this Moses triptych, when Cyril exegetes Moses' vision of the burning Bush, and concludes:

He said to them : 'Amen, Amen, I say to you , if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not have Life in you.' This indeed was a Mystery, yet not for those who once were under the law, but for those who had received faith, and had been justified in Christ, and had been founded on a far greater teaching than the Law. I mean, of course, the Gospel. Those under the Law are still far from Christ and bound in corruption. They have death as their mother (I refer of course to sin) who have not yet cast it off through faith. But if they wish to 'unfasten their sandals'<sup>28</sup> which symbolise 'corruption' that cannot give the power to be justified; and if they truly wish to approach the life-giving grace, then let them draw near to the One who can indeed justify the wicked, that is to the Christ. Through Him and with Him be glory to the Father, with the Holy Spirit, to the Ages of Ages. Amen.<sup>29</sup>

This suggests, perhaps, that all three motifs of the Moses type, as found in the first book of *Exodus Glaphyra*, possibly originated in a series of preached sermons at a time in his early Archiepiscopal ministry when Cyril was hopeful that a surge of converts from Judaism could be expected. It accounts for the evangelistic tone of the material, and his more open readiness to depict Moses in Christlike form.

We can briefly note how the Christological aspects of the Moses type are drawn out in these three figures of the Nativity, the Exile into Madian, and the Epiphany of the burning Bush. In the first place, at the head of his treatment, Cyril states how Moses' story is an adumbration of the Mystery of Christ. Those who stand in the light of the new order, with the perspective of the Christian mysteries leading them (and most particularly Cyril the exegete, poised to open up the mysteries in his present work), are mystagogues who are able to see how this is so:

But as for those things that lie within [ the Pentateuch] and surely refer to the Christ-Mystery; things which have been foretold as if in shadows to those who were still under the Law, this is what I have reserved to expound in this present study.<sup>30</sup>

---

27 *Glaphyra in Exod.* 1.8. PG 69. 409B.

28 Like Moses before the mysterious sign of the Burning Bush.

29 *Glaphyra in Exod.* 1. PG 69. 416D - 417A.

30 As he outlines in his Preface : *Glaphyra in Exod.* 1.1. PG 69. 388A. See fn. 15.



He goes on immediately after this Glaphyra preface to explain how, as only Christ held the key to the whole symbolic system of biblical foreshadowing, only Christ could unlock the meaning of those mysteries, which He does only in the fullness of the new dispensation. The Christian exegete, it follows, is the only interpreter possessed of the true meaning of the narratives. Even texts with an apparently coherent structure and purpose, are rendered insubstantial, or irrelevant, when not considered in the light of their true meaning: in Christ. From the outset, therefore, Cyril is unremittingly Christocentric in his exegetical principles. The discovery of the true meaning is a way of advancing further along the path of redemption in Christ<sup>31</sup> and as such, inspired exegetical interpretation (either hearing it, or delivering it) serves to embody and realise the fulfilment of the Mystery of Christ.

*(To be continued in Part II in the next issue).*

---

31 *Glaphyra in Exod.* 1.1. PG 69. 'Since the tenor of the entire book relates to the redemption discovered in Christ.'

## ***BOOK REVIEW***

### ***Bonding with God***

*By Roland J. Faley. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997. 151 pp. \$ 12.95 (paperback). ISBN 0-8091-3706-2*

This book is an in-depth biblical study of an essential theme in the Word of God, that of covenant or testament. It is a fundamental issue in both Old and New Testaments and is essential in the spiritual life of every Christian. The author follows the concept of covenant. from Sinai back to Abraham, Noah and Adam, forward to David, Jeremiah, and finally its climax in Christ. The author digs deeply into the biblical data dealing with the new covenant since it was predicted by Jeremiah, instituted by our Lord in the Last Supper and as it continues in the Eucharist. He follows with the letters of St. Paul that explain how, in the new relationship, the Law has been replaced by the Holy Spirit with his divine gifts that start with love. The book demonstrates the implications of the New Covenant on individual and Church spirituality, social action and ecumenism.