

CHRIST IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS*

BY
JOHN S. ROMANIDES

Metropolitans of the Church of Greece assume that Latins and Protestants accept as a matter of course that Christ in the Old Testament is the Angel of Great Council Who reveals God in Himself exactly as He does in the N. T. As they become aware that this is not always the case, as happened at our Seventh Meeting in Sonderborg, Denmark, I have been instructed to make clear the teachings of the Fathers and the Ecumenical Councils on this subject. This tradition is deeply embedded in Orthodox hymns, prayers and icons and especially in those of Holy Week, Easter and Christmas.

Both Arians and Eunomians agree with the New Testament and the Fathers (apart from Augustine) that Christ in the Old Testament is the Lord (Yaweh) of Glory. The difference among them was that the Old Testament Lord of Glory, Angel of the Lord, Angel of Great Council, is for the Orthodox the uncreated manifestation of God, whereas for the Arians and Eunomians He is the created instrument by means of which God creates the world and saves those destined for salvation. For the Fathers this Messenger of God is generated before the ages and time. For the Arians this Logos was created before the ages but not in time, whereas the Eunomians seem to have dropped the distinction between the ages and time.

Augustine did not understand either the Orthodox or the heretical positions debated at and around the First and Second Ecumenical Councils. In his *De Trinitate*, bks II and III, Augustine attempts to solve the problem of the visibility of the Logos put forth by the Arians in order to prove His createdness. In contrast to the fathers, including Ambrose, Augustine insisted that the Logos did not appear to the eyes of the Old Testament prophets at all. It was the Holy Trinity Herself that appeared to the prophets by means of created entities which were brought into existence to be heard and seen by the prophets and which passed out of existence once their mission was

* A paper delivered at the Lutheran - Orthodox Joint Commission Eighth Meeting, Limasol, Cyprus, 1-8 August 1995

accomplished. Augustine applied the same principle to the New Testament by making the human nature of Christ the permanent creation by which the Holy Trinity continued to reveal words and concepts to humanity. Within this context the glory and rule of God revealed in Christ continued to be created and pass into and out of existence. The uncreated rule of God became the created kingdom of God in the Franco-Latin tradition.

Some Orthodox have accepted the position that the identity of the New Testament Logos with this Old Testament Angel of God was supposed to have been dropped by the Fathers as a result of the Arian controversy. That this is not so is belied by the prayers, hymns and icons of the Orthodox Church and especially by the Fathers at the time of the Second Ecumenical Council.

The Franco-Latin Augustinian tradition essentially reduced the Old Testament to prophecies about the coming Messiah and His birth from a Virgin. Augustine's position about the Holy Trinity's revelations to the prophets by means of creatures coming into and passing out of existence has been relegated to the dust bin of silence by his more modern devotees.

The following quotes may make the arguments of the Fathers of the First and Second Ecumenical Councils against Arians and Eunomians clear. This is especially so by the dominant role played by St. Gregory of Nyssa at the Second Ecumenical Council and his reading this work against Eunomius and explaining to St. Jerome. This is also clear by the decree of the Emperor Theodosius the Great listing the bishops with whom all must agree. For both Orthodox and heretics the Old Testament is completely Christo-Logo-centric. These passages may be compared to the Augustinian positions which became the only ones of the Franco - Latin tradition, but also of many post Peter the Great Orthodox «*academics*». This makes possible the picking and choosing of Orthodox «*specialists*» for Ecumenical «*callings*».

It must be emphasised that we are not concerned with what is doctrinally right or wrong, nor with what is correct from the viewpoint of biblical critical methodologies, but only with what is a correct historical description of the teaching of the Ecumenical Councils themselves which we are being called upon to accept. This is not a Lutheran problem, but also a more modern Orthodox one.

Quote¹.**a) Christ in the Old Testament and the Ecumenical Councils**

There is an essential aspect of the theological presuppositions of all Ecumenical Councils concerning the Person of Christ which is either missing or has been rejected by those following Augustine. This raises the question of whether those who do so really accept these Councils.

With the sole exception of Augustine, the Fathers maintain that Jesus Christ, before His birth from the Virgin Theotokos, in his uncreated Person of Glory, the Lord Sabaoth, is He who revealed God in Himself to the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament. Both the Arians and Eunomians agreed that it was Christ who did this in His person or His hypostasis which existed before the creation of the ages, but insisted that He was created from non-being and is therefore not of the same nature (consubstantial or co-essential) with God, who is alone truly God by nature.

In order to prove their points the Arians and Eunomians argued, as did the Jew Trypho with Justin Martyr, that it was not the Angel of the Lord in the burning bush who said «*I am He Who is*» (Ex. 3, 14), but God Himself by means of the created Logos Angel. The Fathers insisted that the Angel-Logos revealed this about Himself also, and not only about God. The Angel of the Lord spoke in His own right also when to Moses He said, «*I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob*» (Ex. 3, 6).

Against the Arians St. Athanasius argues that the name «*angel*» is sometimes applied to the uncreated Logos and sometimes to a created angel. He insists that there can be no confusion on whether one sees a created angel or the uncreated Son of God sometimes called «*angel*» in the Old Testament. He insists that «*when the Son is seen, so is the Father, for He is the Father's radiance; and thus the Father and the Son are one... What God speaks, it is very plain He speaks through the Logos and not another... And he who hath seen the Son, knows that, in seeing Him, he has seen, not an angel, nor*

1. Pages 232-239 of author's paper JESUS CHRIST, THE LIFE OF THE WORLD, delivered during W.C.C. Consultation in Damascus 5-9 February 1982, and printed in XENIA OECUMENICA, vol. 39, in honour of Metropolitan John of Helsinki, Vammala 1983, Finland. The Greek texts are to be found within the context of the Patristic debate with Arians and Eunomians in my ΔΟΓΜΑΤΙΚΗ ΚΑΙ ΣΥΜΒΟΛΙΚΗ ΘΕΟΛΟΓΙΑ, Thessaloniki 1973, vol. I, pp. 239-341.

one merely greater than angels, nor in short any creature, but the Father Himself. And he who hears the Logos, knows that he hears the Father; as he who is irradiated by the radiance, knows that he is enlightened by the sun» (Against Arians, III12-14). As a key to the Old and New Testaments, St. Athanasius states that «there is nothing that the Father operates except through the Son...» (Ibid. III, 12).

This means that the Old Testament is Christocentric since Christ is the pre - incarnate Angel of the Lord and of the Great Council, the Lord of Glory, and the Lord Sabaoth in Whom the patriarchs and prophets see and hear God and through Whom they receive grace, succour, and forgiveness.

That the Orthodox and Arians agreed that it was the Angel-Logos Who appeared to the prophets and revealed God to them and that it was this very same person who became man and the Christ should be taken very seriously as the key to understanding the decisions of the First and subsequent Ecumenical Councils. It is important to realise that the Orthodox and Arians were not arguing speculatively over an abstract Second Person of the Holy Trinity whose identity and nature one allegedly deciphered by mulling over Biblical passages with the help of Hellenistic philosophy and the Holy Spirit. What they were discussing was the spiritual experience of the prophets and apostles; specifically whether it is a created or uncreated Logos who appears in glory to them and being the exact Image of God reveals in Himself the Father as Archetype.

Because the Eunomians held the same positions as the Arians on the appearances of the allegedly created Logos-Angel to the prophets, this same discussion was carried to the Second Ecumenical Council. St. Basil the Great with a bit of loss of patience accosts Eunomius as follows: «*You atheist*, are you not going to cease calling Him Who is really *He Who Is* – the source of life, the one who gives to all that exists their being – non-being? Him who found, when giving an audience to His own servant Moses, His proper and meet appellation for His eternity, naming Himself «*He Who Is*». For He said «*I am He Who Is*». And that these things were said by the Person of the Lord no one will gainsay; that is, no one who does not have the Jewish covering lying over against his heart in the reading of Moses (2 *Cor.* 3. 15). For it is written, that an angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in fire of flame from the bush (*Ex.* 3, 2). Whereas the Scripture presents in the narrative an angel, the voice of God follows: «*He said to Moses, I am the God of your father Abraham*» (*Ex.* 3, 6). And a

bit latter again, «*I am He Who Is*». Who then is He Himself both angel and God? Therefore, is it not He about whom we learned, that He is called «*the Angel of the Great Council?*» (Is. 9, 6). «After summarising the same observations about the encounter between the Angel - Logos and Jacob, which one finds in St. Athanasius the Great and the earlier Fathers, St. Basil gives expression to the same interpretative principle as we saw in the bishop of Alexandria. «*It is clear to all, that wherever the same person is called both angel and God, it is the Only-Begotten who is declared, who manifests Himself to human beings from generation to generation and announces the will of the Father to His saints. Thus He who to Moses gave Himself the name "He Who Is", is to be thought of as none other than God the Logos, who in the beginning is with God*» (John 1, 1-2). (*Refutation of Eunomius' Apology I*, 18).

Eunomius answered the arguments of Basil by claiming that the Son is the angel of «*Him Who Is*», but not «*He Who Is*» Himself. This angel is called god to show his superiority over all the things created by him, but this does not mean that he is «*He Who Is*». Thus Eunomius claims that «*He who sent Moses was Himself He Who Is, but he by whom He sent and spake was the angel of Him Who Is, and the god of all else*» (Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eumonius XI*, 3).

The sophistic subtlety of the argument may seem strange but it is nevertheless important as a witness to the fact that the identity of the Angel, called God in the Old Testament, with Christ, the Only - Begotten Son of God and Creator, was so entrenched in the tradition that the Eunomians could never think of getting rid of it as Augustine, a younger contemporary, was about to do in North Africa— in spite of the fact his alleged teacher Ambrose and all the rest of the Western Fathers agreed with the tradition herein described.

St. Basil could not reply to Eunomius' answers to his arguments since he had passed away, so his brother Gregory did so in his twelve books *Against Eunomius* which he communicated to St. Jerôme during the Second Ecumenical Council in 381.

St. Gregory, among other things, argues that «*if Moses begs that the people may not to be led by an angel (Ex. 33, 15; 34, 9), (which God had announced He would send to lead His people to freedom; Ex. 32, 34; 33, 2) and if He who was discoursing with him consents to become his fellow-traveller and the guide of the army (Ex. 33, 17), it is hereby manifestly shown that He who made Himself known by the*

title "He Who Is" is the Only-Begotten God. If anyone gainsays this, he will show himself to be a supporter of the Jewish persuasion in not associating the Son with the deliverance of the people. For if, on the one hand, it was not an angel that went forth with the people, and if, on the other, as Eunomius would have it, He Who was manifested by the name of "He Who Is" is not the Only - Begotten, this amounts to nothing less than transferring the doctrines of the synagogue to the Church of God. Accordingly, of the two alternatives they must needs admit one, namely either that the Only - Begotten God on no occasion appeared to Moses, or that the Son is Himself "He Who Is», from whom the word came to His servant. But he contradicts what has been said above, alleging the Scripture itself (Ex. 3, 2) which informs us that the voice of an angel was interposed and that it was thus that the discourse of "He Who Is" was conveyed. This, however, is no contradiction but a confirmation of our view. For to say plainly, that the prophet, wishing to make manifest to men the mystery concerning Christ, called "Him Who Is", an "Angel", that the meaning of the words might not be referred to the Father, as it would have been if the title "He Who is" alone had been found throughout the discourse». (*Against Eunomius*, XI, 3).

These passages from mainstay Fathers of the First and Second Ecumenical councils should be sufficient indications that for the Council Fathers the doctrine of the Holy Trinity was identical to the appearances of Christ the Logos without flesh to the prophets and in His human nature to the apostles. No one within the tradition, except for Augustine, ever doubted this identity of the Logos with this concrete Individual who revealed in Himself the invisible God of the Old Testament to prophets and who became man and continued this same revelation of God's glory in and through His own human nature taken from the Virgin.

The controversy between the Orthodox and Arians / Eunomians was not about who the Logos is in the Old and New Testaments, but about what the Logos is and what His relationship is to God the Father. The Orthodox maintained that the Logos is uncreated and unchangeable, having always existed from the essence (325) or hypostasis (381) of the Father, who eternally and by nature causes His Son's existence before the Ages. The Arians and Eunomians insisted that this same Angel - Logos is a changeable creation of God who derives His existence before the Ages from non-being, not by God's nature, but by His will.

Thus the basic question was, did the prophets and apostles see in God's uncreated glory (Orthodox and Arians) or created energy (Eu-

nomians) an uncreated or a created Logos, a Logos who is God by nature and has therefore all the energies and powers of God by nature? Or did they see a God by grace, who has some but not all the energies of God the Father and them only by grace and not by nature. Both Orthodox and Arians / Eunomians agreed in principle that if the Logos has every power and energy of the Father by nature then He is uncreated, if not He is a creature.

The question at issue was the experiences of revelation or glorification or theosis which God gives in His Spirit through His Logos - Angel - Christ to the prophets, apostles, and saints. These experiences in the lives of saints are recorded primarily in the Bible, but also in the post-biblical continuation of Pentecost in the Body of Christ, the Church. Therefore, both sides appealed also to the Fathers of all ages, beginning with their lives recorded in Genesis and extending to their own day. They could not agree on the authority of the witnesses of their own time, but they did have a common ground of debate in the Old Testament and the New Testament, as well as in the earlier patristic tradition.

Thus Orthodox and heretics use both the Old and New Testaments indiscriminately in order to prove whether the prophets and apostles saw a created or uncreated divine hypostasis or person of Christ before and after His incarnation. The argumentation is simple. Both sides make a list of all the powers and energies of God recorded in the Bible. They do the same for the Angel - Logos - Only-Begotten Son. Then they compare them to see if they are identical. If they are identical then He is uncreated. If not then He is created. The exact same procedure was applied to the question whether the Holy Spirit is created or uncreated.

Both Orthodox and Arians fully agreed with the inherited tradition of the Old Testament witnessed to by the apostles and saints to whom God reveals His glory in His incarnate Son: i.e. that creatures cannot know the uncreated essence of God, and that between the uncreated and the created *ex nihilo* there is no similarity whatsoever. Thus, in order to prove that the Logos is a creature, the Arians argued that He knows neither the essence of God nor His own essence and is not in all respects similar to God. The Orthodox argued that the Logos does know the essence of the Father and is in every respect similar to the Father, having all that the Father has by nature except Fatherhood or the being the cause of the existence of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Orthodox and Arians were in agreement that what God is in Himself by nature and what He is or does by will are not identical,

but they differed sharply in the application of this distinction between the divine essence and will or energy. Thus the Orthodox argued that God causes the existence of the Logos by nature and the existence of creatures by will, whereas the Arians argued that both the Logos and all other creatures are products of the divine will.

Against both these positions the Eunomians argued that the essence and uncreated energy of God are identical, that the Logos is a product of a created energy of God, that the Holy Spirit is the product of a created energy of the Logos and that each created species is a product of separate or distinct created energies of the Holy Spirit. If each species did not have its individual energy of the Holy Spirit, there would be only one created species and not many, according to Eunomius.

Eunomius is here actually mimicking in his own way the biblical and patristic witness to glorification wherein each creature partakes and each saint communes with the Logos who is present to each by indivisibly multiplying His uncreated glory which is *in toto*, and not as part to each, present to and in each, as taught by Christ (*John* 14, 2-23) and experienced in Pentecost (*Acts* 2, 3-4) and which bears in the Logos both the Father and the Holy Spirit. This means that there are no universals in God and that God sustains not only species, but every single part of existence in all its multiple forms. Thus the individual is never sacrificed by Christ for a supposedly common good, but at the same time the common good is the good of each individual. As a result of the mystery of the Ascension of Christ in His own proper glory and His return to His disciples in the Spirit of glory in Pentecost, He is now all of Him present to and in each who are in the states of illumination and glorification (theosis). For this reason each communicant of the body and blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist receives not a part of Christ, but the whole human nature of Christ which since Pentecost multiplies itself indivisibly in each member of His Body. Thus by partaking of the eucharistic bread, which is one, and the cup, which is one, each member of the Body of Christ receives not part, but the Whole Christ, and becomes what he already is, a temple (ναός) or a mansion (μονή) of the Father and the Holy Spirit in the Logos Incarnate in common with the other members of Christ's Body.

Unquote

It should be clear from this summary why the Orthodox Church never gave up the tradition expressed in these texts and why it dominates Orthodox prayers, hymns and icons.