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# New Light from an Old Source: Cyril and Scripture – By Michael Cameron

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Michael Cameron

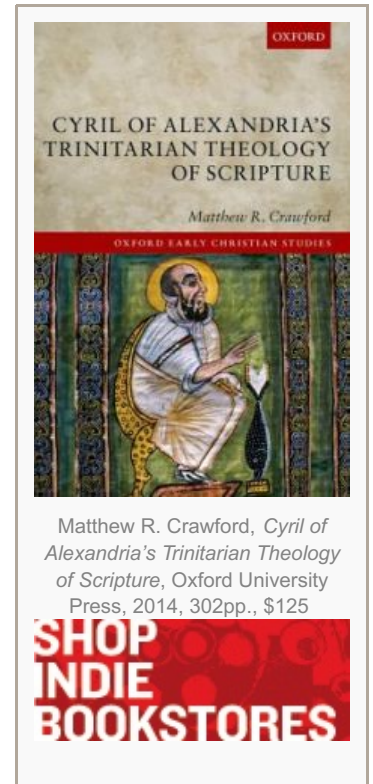
## Michael Cameron on Matthew Crawford's *Cyril of Alexandria's Trinitarian Theology of Scripture*

It might be hard for outside observers to tell, but for some time now the theological account of exegesis of the Christian Bible has been under intensive reconstruction. A still-fraught and fragile *détente* with historical criticism has put theology in the early stages of a long-term project of forging a historically responsible way to read Scripture with the eyes of faith. Those looking for resources have been reassessing the way pre-modern thinkers read Scripture, less to imitate their ideas and more to engage modes of thinking that integrated reason and spiritual experience, modes whose inner muscles have atrophied in the modern critical environment. Inductive studies pursuing *l'explication de texte* show these thinkers to be more than mere stages on the way to triumphant orthodoxy or defenders of dogmatic abstractions; they were dynamic thinkers and often committed pastors who articulated Christianity with magisterial depth and verve to the churches and to puzzled but intrigued observers of late antiquity. In a movement that crosses confessional borders, many modern readers have apprenticed themselves to ancient Christian masters in order simply to watch them work as thinkers unburdened by the modern bifurcation of head and heart, theory and practice, intellectual exactness and pastoral practice. As apprentices they want to learn not only *what the ancients learned* but even more *how they learned it*.

Matthew R. Crawford's candidate for consideration, Cyril of Alexandria (c. 375-444), is best known for his wily politicking against Nestorius and for his sophisticated teaching on the unity of Christ's two natures. But for Crawford that image unfairly pigeonholes Cyril "as only having to do with the development of Orthodox Christology." He contends that Cyril "should be taken seriously for his contribution to Trinitarian theology." Crawford's study shows how Cyril's close readings of biblical texts, which comprise the bulk of his surviving corpus, ground his thought generally. His book therefore seeks "to situate Scripture and exegesis in relation to [Cyril's] other theological commitments."

The book traces Cyril's biblical cast of mind to see what drove him to say what he said and write what he wrote in commentaries, sermons, and tracts amidst a busy period in the history of theology between the doctrinal settlements on the Trinity at Constantinople (381) and Christology at Chalcedon (451). Following the work of Marie-Odile Boulnois, Crawford explores Cyril's neglected pro-Nicene doctrine as it shaped his better-known teaching about Christ's divine-human unity. His understanding of that unity unfolds within the Trinitarian inseparability of operations among the three divine persons, which Cyril integrates with his perspectives on revelation and exegesis. The book offers a compelling view of Cyril's theology of Scripture as "Trinitarian in structure and Christological in focus." The study reveals Cyril to be a Christian thinker of a high order whose thought is at once subtle and bold, innovative and yet deeply (and self-consciously) continuous with tradition. Scripture was not a mere prop for Cyril's theological preconceptions, but rather the taproot of his entire theological enterprise.

Cyril's Trinitarian theology of revelation focuses above all on the Son's deep unity with the Father. The theological



claims for the words of Christ in Scripture are bold and large: “The words that the Son speaks do not stand at several steps removed from their ultimate divine source, but are instead words of God without qualification... [Cyril] explicitly grounds the identity of the words of the Father and Son in their ontological solidarity.” Crawford explains that this takes place only because the same Spirit who binds Father and Son also speaks in Scripture. “The fact that all three *hypostases* are involved in every divine act outwards makes certain that all of Scripture derives from the same divine source and therefore tells the same story.” But for Cyril the Gospels are the privileged site of divinity’s intersection with time and history. The controversy with Nestorius pushed Cyril to distinguish more strongly between the presence of God’s word by prophetic indwelling and by the immediacy of divinity to humanity in the Lord’s incarnation. As a result, writes Crawford, Cyril “took a step that thus far had not yet been taken in the tradition. He applied this Christological principle to his theology of Scripture. Because in the incarnation the Father speaks through his Word not by prophetic mediation, but immediately, the Gospels rise above the rest of Scripture as ‘especially inspired,’ representing the point at which the event of divine revelation comes most directly into contact with the world of lived human history.” The mission of the Son sent to save the world, constituting what Crawford calls the Son’s “soteriological immediacy,” translates directly to the scriptural word’s saving power. The Gospels have “paramount importance” because they provide “an immediate revelation of the triune God through the incarnate Son.” In sum, Crawford continues, “Cyril is concerned to uphold the soteriological immediacy of the divine Word in the written word.” Furthermore, this Christological-exegetical template “extends also to the canon itself, since the reader of Scripture is drawn toward the Gospels as the focal point of the inspired word.”



Cyril of Alexandria. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

A technical and theoretical quality characterizes the book’s first four chapters, which set up the theological framework for Cyril’s view of how Scripture impacts the life of the church. The book hits stride when it examines Cyril’s actual exegetical work with texts like Psalms 22 and 44 (LXX), and the Gospel account of feeding the 5000. Crawford advances a clear and bold thesis that elevates Scripture as a source of divine life in Cyril’s thought: “The Alexandrian conceives of Scripture alongside the Spirit and the Eucharist as a further means by which the church accesses the divine life of Christ that strengthens it in this world and sustains it unto the next.” This compelling claim refuses to leave Christology in the realm of concept and dogma, and relates it intimately to soteriology, to communal life, and to pastoral practice, especially preaching. This is a major contribution. The book also offers the benefits of being a revised academic thesis: it makes an ideal reference resource, with a bonanza of references to Cyril’s works, and a pathway into the maze of his exegetical writings, with detailed exploration of several key passages, along with solid overviews of recent and older scholarship on Cyril.

Nevertheless, in my judgment the study has not yet completed passage from dissertation to book, and remains deep in academic mode. I fear that readers in master’s and ministry training programs will find this volume tough going, even if they bring to it a background in early Christian studies. This is a pity because it makes a good case for the pastoral function of Christian doctrine, one that would benefit preachers and seminary students who study Scripture as a living word for the church.

Moreover, the book’s tight, dissertationesque focus impedes exploration of ancillary issues that arise along the way. Scripture’s role as “mystagogy” could use further elaboration beyond brief references to pagan mystery cults, sacramental connections, and apostolic “mystagogues.” Furthermore, the issue of Christian reading of Israel’s Scriptures offers the opportunity to set a fresh context to understand Cyril’s well known anti-Judaism; but the book does not take advantage of it. The remark that Cyril thinks “only the Jews have been rejected, not their Scriptures” is painfully superficial on a topic that deserves deeper treatment. Finally, an exposition of Cyril’s exegesis should plot his position in the then-old debate between proponents of Antiochene and Alexandrian models of Scripture

interpretation. It would be useful to place Cyril in the history of the reception of Origen, who deeply influenced him. But to address these themes adequately would require a broader approach.

More importantly, ripening from dissertation to book would offer a chance to clear up some conceptual confusion about how Christ relates to the entirety of Scripture. For Cyril “the Son is the mediator of divine revelation in both the Hebrew prophets and the Gospels.” But then Cyril is said to stress a “fundamental difference between prophetic indwelling and the incarnation,” one that distinguishes between revelation coming *mediately* through the human agency of the prophets, and *immediately* through the Son in the Gospels; the former is indirect while the latter is direct. The humanity of the Son is so at one with his divinity that even his human words are transparently divine. Whereas revelation through the prophets came through human mediators, the Son speaks “through himself.”

But that poses a problem that challenges the effort to retrieve Cyril for the modern study of Scripture in a faithful yet historically responsible way. Crawford calls attention to “an implicit inconsistency or at least tension in Cyril’s theology,” namely that “the agency of the evangelists as human mediators of divine revelation seemingly undermines Cyril’s statement that the Son speaks ‘through himself’ in the Gospels.” Crawford offers a solution by suggesting that Cyril might “insist that the dominical words of the Gospels are the *ipsissima verba* [actual words] of the divine Son rather than merely his *ipsissima vox* [actual voice].” But this move inclines the book toward a quasi-fundamentalist view of verbal inspiration that Cyril would have found unintelligible. One needn’t be a radical historical critic to ask whether this would not disqualify Cyril from contemporary biblical discussions shaped by historical consciousness. Does this not so stress the divine while obscuring the human that it functionally collapses the human into the divine? But as this book elsewhere shows, Cyril was too astute a Christological thinker to do this.

This overemphasis on the divine threatens the valuable thesis mentioned above, that Cyril sees Scripture as a source of divine life for the church alongside the Spirit and the Eucharist. The book puzzles over why Cyril did not say this explicitly. But its proposed explanation surprisingly swerves from the integrative template offered by Cyril’s balanced view of the union between divine and human natures in Christ, and looks instead to his dualistic view of humanity. Cyril’s ideas about receiving divine life through the Spirit and the Eucharist, writes Crawford, “nicely suits his dualist anthropology consisting of soul and body.” But that poses a problem for the idea of Scripture as a third source of divine life, which would have sat “somewhat awkwardly” within his dualist outlook. Crawford guesses that Cyril does not make this explicit “probably because a third mode of participation would disrupt the symmetry between his dualist anthropology and the twofold mediation of divine life.” But why is Cyril’s unitary Christology suddenly unavailable when we need it to understand Scripture? Crawford further speculates, “Another reason he might not have done so is that the Spirit and the Eucharist represent direct participation in the divine light of God, whereas Scripture is mediated through human authors and written words.” But after the book’s earlier strong statements on Scripture mediated by the Son, especially in the Gospels, this statement seems not to follow.

Furthermore, how does the Eucharist qualify as a “direct participation in the divine light of God”? Does not the sacrament by definition *mediate* Christ’s presence via earthly elements of bread and wine? And if that is the case, might not a mediated sacramental presence of Christ offer a viable model for understanding Scripture as a source of divine life for the church? Would a sacramental view of Scripture make better sense of Cyril’s thought here, whether or not he was explicit about it as a third source of divine life? Crawford skirts that possibility, quoting Origen’s beautiful statement that believers drink the blood of Christ “not only by the rite of the sacraments but also when we receive his words, which have life in them.” Nevertheless the discussion loses nerve, and shores up the gap in Cyril’s statements by wanly suggesting that “while it would be incorrect to regard Cyril as holding explicitly to a ‘threefold’ means of participation in the divine life, it might be best to view him as holding to ‘two-and-a-half’ means of participation, or perhaps, ‘two means of participation with an asterisk.’” Sharper explanation seems necessary.

The problem may lie with the book’s incomplete sense of mediation that sees it *only* as a divine function of the Son who mediates the Father, and not *also* a human function of “the one mediator between God and humanity, *the man Christ Jesus*” (1 Timothy 2:5, a text that Cyril discusses on occasion, though it does not appear in this book). It

makes Cyril appear to fear giving too much independence to the human Jesus, insisting that he believes “the incarnation of the Son’s humanity stands not as a distinct subject with a separate agency, but is instead drawn into the identity of the divine Son.” The extreme version of this is that “the man Christ Jesus” loses his identity in the Son, who speaks directly and immediately divine words in the Gospels, while the human dimension and historical analysis are displaced. That obstructs Cyril’s contribution to the modern historical and theological reading of Scripture. Correlatively it also obscures the possible sacramental view of Scripture in Cyril whereby the full-blooded humanity of the texts, mirrored in the full humanity of the Son of God, has power to convey really, however mysteriously and incompletely, the words and presence and power of God.

But despite these criticisms and caveats, a feast awaits the diligent reader who takes up *Cyril of Alexandria’s Trinitarian Theology of Scripture*. To approach an ancient thinker like this from the fresh angle of his use of Scripture makes old images appear new. Though needing development, the book’s overall outlook is suggestive and solid. Crawford rightly claims, “The reason Cyril so consistently connects Scripture with Christ as its source is because of his basic assumption that Christ must be the source of every spiritual blessing that the church enjoys. This tendency is best interpreted as another indication of the central place that Christology occupies in Cyril’s thought.” Those who ferret out its treasures will find a richly laden study of a relatively neglected figure that not only refurbishes his image but also contributes to our ongoing conversation about the theological reading of Scripture, the history of its reception, and its role in the church’s life.