What Is a Composite Hypostasis? Leontius of Jerusalem, Maximus the Confessor and the Nestorian Challenge

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Abstract

At the Fifth Ecumenical Council the concept of a ‘composite hypostasis’ was enshrined in dogma. This implied that after the incarnation the divine and human natures had the status of parts that constituted a single whole. In order to make this concept intelligible a comparison was drawn with the human compound where two different natures, the soul and the body, formed one being. In the seventh century Maximus, the foremost Chalcedonian theologian of the time, came to the conclusion that the differences between the incarnated Word and a human individual were too great for a strict comparison to be useful. Yet he continued to defend the notion of composition. Indeed, his views on this point have been lauded as an important step in the development of doctrine. This article seeks to show that composition itself had become problematic, and that it was relentless Nestorian polemic that induced Maximus, and his contemporary Leontius of Jerusalem, to change their understanding of the concept.

Keywords

Maximus the Confessor – Leontius of Jerusalem – John Maxentius – Babai the Great – Nestorian
When in his Christological writings Cyril of Alexandria sought to explain what had happened at the incarnation he spoke most often of an assumption of the flesh into the divine Word, which made it the Word’s ‘own’ (ἴδιον). Yet he did also use another model, derived from the human being, according to which the incarnated Word was the result of a ‘composition’ (σύνθεσις) of divinity and humanity. At first sight these two conceptual frameworks appear to be mutually exclusive. In the former case the relationship between Word and flesh is asymmetrical whereas in the latter case both Word and flesh are described in analogous fashion. Yet as regards the anthropological paradigm the discrepancy was not as great as one might think. Although Cyril often states that a soul and a body are united with one another, he can also say that the soul has the body as its ‘own’ (ἴδιον) or that it appropriates the body, which suggests that it is the primary entity and that the body is merely an appendage. The notion of composition was more difficult to reconcile with the asymmetrical model since both Word and flesh are conceptualised as parts and the resulting whole seems to differ from both parts, just as soul and body are combined in order to constitute a third entity, the human being. Cyril sought to solve the first problem by emphasising that the two parts were not of the same kind. By contrast, the second problem does not seem to have bothered him. He never spells out that in the case of Christ one of the parts would be identical with the resulting whole.

Cyril’s second model was to become highly influential. In the early sixth century the Monophysite leader Severus of Antioch and the Chalcedonian theologian John of Caesarea both made use of the anthropological paradigm and of the concept of composition. Yet they differed in one crucial point. Severus spoke of ‘one composite nature’ (μία φύσις σύνθετος) whereas John

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1 The precise nature of Cyril’s Christology is a hotly debated topic with many differing positions, which cannot be discussed in this paper. See the summary and evaluation of the positions of Richard Norris, Ruth Siddals and Thomas G. Weinandy in H. Van Loon, *The Dyophysite Christology of Cyril of Alexandria* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2009) (Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae, 96) 205–220.

2 See R.A. Norris, Christological Models in Cyril of Alexandria, *Studia Patristica* 13 (1975) 255–268, esp. 267. See also Van Loon, *The Dyophysite Christology...*, 383, 389, 399–400: ‘In Christ the Word is the subject, while his body or the things pertaining to his body are the predicate, just as in a human being the soul may be regarded as the subject and the body as the predicate.’

3 See Norris, Christological Models..., 263–265. See also Van Loon, *The Dyophysite Christology...*, 206.

4 See Van Loon, *The Dyophysite Christology...*, 212, who agrees with Norris on this point.

used the alternative formula ‘composite hypostasis’ (ὕπόστασις σύνθετος), which was reconcilable with the Chalcedonian teaching of two natures. It needs to be said, however, that this formula occurs only twice in John's theological oeuvre. Leontius of Byzantium who flourished in the second quarter of the sixth century was even more reserved. In his treatise Contra Nestorianos et Eutychianos he makes frequent use of the anthropological paradigm and refers to body and soul as parts. Yet he does not employ the crucial term composition. In his later work Solutiones he acknowledges that composition can be used in the Christological discourse but does not accord the concept any particular significance. By Leontius' time, however, steps had already been taken to make ‘composition’ the central plank of Chalcedonian Christology. In the year 519 a group of men, the so-called Scythian monks, had claimed that the formula of the ‘one composite hypostasis’ was needed in order to safeguard the oneness of the incarnated Word on which Cyril had insisted and to dispel any suspicion that Chalcedonians were in reality followers of Nestorius.

These developments raised the ire of the ‘Nestorians’, who may at this point simply have been Chalcedonians who did not wish to go beyond the conciliar formula and put more emphasis on the distinction between the two natures. In Leontius of Byzantium' Contra Nestorianos et Eutychianos we encounter a ‘Nestorian’ interlocutor who points out that the incarnated Word and the human being are not alike since the Word pre-existed the flesh whereas the souls come into being at the same time as the bodies. In a dialogue penned by John Maxentius, one of the Scythian monks, the ‘Nestorian’ not only challenges the anthropological paradigm but also rejects the notion of a composition.

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7 For a brief overview of Leontius' biography and writings see Grillmeier, Jesus der Christus, 2/2..., 190–223.


10 On the Scythian monks, see Grillmeier, Jesus der Christus 2/2..., 336–355.


Omne compositum partibus constare non dubium est, pars autem minus est quam totum; est ergo Deus Verbum pars Christi, quem ex divinitate et humanitate compositum asseris; et si Deus Verbum pars est Christi, est Deus Verbum juxta vos minor Christo, cujus et pars est.13

There is no doubt that every compound consists of parts, but a part is lesser than the whole. Accordingly, the divine Word is a part of Christ, whom you assert to be composed of divinity and humanity, and if the divine Word is a part of Christ, the divine Word is according to you lesser than Christ whose part he is.

This is quite an intricate argument. It is claimed that all compounds consist of parts and that these parts must behave in the same way. This would make it impossible to apply the concept to the specific case of the incarnation. Of course, Leontius and John Maxentius let the ‘Nestorians’ only speak in order to refute them immediately afterwards. Leontius claims that paradigms need not in all respects be identical with that which they illustrate;14 and John Maxentius declares that the Word as a part is not lesser than the compound Christ, because he himself is Christ.15 Yet these clarifications also show that the concept could only in a loose sense be used in the Christological discourse. Even so, composition, as exemplified by the human being, became a leitmotif in the theological writings of Emperor Justinian.16 In his Edictum de recta fide Justinian declares that in the one Christ the difference between the natures is preserved and then adds the explanation: ‘for when composition is confessed the parts exist in the whole and the whole is recognised in the parts’ (συνθέσεως γὰρ ὁμολογουμένης καὶ τὰ μέρη ἐν τῷ ὅλῳ ὑπάρχει καὶ τὸ ὅλον ἐν τοῖς μέρεσιν γνώσκεται).17 The notion of a composite nature is rejected with reference to the human being. Justinian declares that a human individual can be called a composite nature because it is an instantiation of a common nature or species, whereas Christ is a singular being. Yet he does not go so far as to abandon the anthropological paradigm.18

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16 Grillmeier, Jesus der Christus 2/2... , 456, calls it ‘Leitwort der Christologie Justinians’.
18 Justinian, Edictum de recta fide, ed. Schwartz, 80.18–36.
In the year 553 Justinian convened the Fifth Ecumenical Council and saw to it that the participants gave his theological position the status of a dogma. The fourth anathema, which resembles very closely a passage in his *Edictum de recta fide*, condemns Nestorian concepts such as ‘relation’ (σχέσις), ‘equality of honour’ (ισοτιμία), and ‘reference’ (ἀναφορά), and presents the formula ‘one composite hypostasis’ (μία ὑπόστασις σύνθετος) as the orthodox alternative. The anathema had a clear purpose. It was meant to reassure the Monophysites that the Chalcedonian position was not Nestorianism in disguise.

Not everybody found it easy clearly to distinguish the orthodox composite hypostasis from the heretical composite nature. Yet this did not hinder the dissemination of the concept. In one of his theological treatises Anastasius, the patriarch of Antioch, makes the following statement.

"Ὅσον οὖν ἐστι τοῦ τρόπου στοχάσασθαι τῆς πρὸς τὴν σάρκα τοῦ λόγου ἐνώσεως, ἀλλήν ἀρμοδιώτεραν ὑμᾶς εὑρήσομεν εἰκόνα τῆς ψυχῆς πρὸς τὸ ἱδιὸν σῶμα, ἔξ ἀν ἀποτελεῖται ζῷον ἐν ὁ ἀνθρώπως, οὐτε τῶν μερῶν τρεπομένων ἐν τῇ συνθέσει ..."

As far, then, as it is possible to conjecture the manner of the union of the Word with the flesh, we will not find another more fitting image than that of the soul with its own body, from which is effected one living being, the human being, where neither the parts are changed in the composition ...

This does not, however, mean that all opposition had been silenced. In the late sixth or early seventh century the ‘Nestorian’ theologian Babai the Great


21 The concepts of part and whole also played a role in the polemic between Chalcedonians and Monophysites. There, however, other issues were in the foreground. See D. King, *Philoponus: A Treatise Concerning the Whole and the Parts* (London: Garland, 2016) 169–184. As this article focuses on the controversy between Chalcedonians and ‘Nestorians’, this debate will not be considered here.


who had studied at the famous School of Nisibis and had then become abbot and one of the leaders of his church, waded into the debate. He wrote a Christological treatise, the *Liber de unione*, in which he set out his understanding of the incarnation. The third part of this treatise contains a description of heresies, which culminates in a vicious attack on the Emperor Justinian.

Then after these an evil of evils erupted, which obscured with its wickedness all earlier evils, all of which are in it, that is, a complete consummation of impiety, which gathered strength at the hands of Emperor Justinian, the Roman tyrant, and still persists.

This is a clear reference to the Fifth Ecumenical Council. Babai states that he has already written a treatise against the emperor in eight books, which he is now summarising. As one might expect he is incensed at the posthumous
condemnation of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodore of Tarsus who were considered authoritative figures in the ‘Nestorian’ church. Yet he is not simply engaging in *ad hominem* polemic. He discusses in turn each of the anathemas against heretics, which Justinian had drafted, and strives to show that they are themselves heretical. Of particular importance is his refutation of the fourth anathema. The version, which he presents to his readers, is a conflation of two passages in the *Acts* of the Council and in Justinian’s *Edictum de recta fide*, which must at some point have been translated into Syriac. Unsurprisingly, Babai seeks to show that terms such as ‘grace’ (χάρις), which had been rejected by the council, are justified both through Scripture and through the tradition of the church. Yet he does not stop there. He also attacks the concept of a ‘composite hypostasis’, which the anathema presents as the orthodox point of view.

For this is the order of things that are composed to one, that without the composition with each other, they cannot effect anything nor hypostatically exist, and they would not suffer when one (sc. of them) is without its companion; as long as they are in a composition, and each of them loses through composition and mutual communication the quality which it had while it was still in its own simplicity.

Here Babai claims that there is a common ‘law’, applying to all parts of compounds, under which the incarnated Word would also fall if the incarnation were conceptualised as a composition. It is evident that none of the features listed by him could be attributed to the divine Word who exists on his own and is in no way changed by the union with the flesh. The similarity between this argument and the reasoning of John Maxentius’ ‘Nestorian’ is striking. There, too, the argument started with a universal proposition. As I have pointed out this ‘Nestorian’ may have been a conservative Chalcedonian. Yet the evidence

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31 See also Abramowski, Goodman, *A Nestorian Collection ...* II, xix.
from Babai’s treatise shows that members of the Church of the East put forward the same arguments.

By rights the characteristics of the ‘order of compounds’ should have been established through comparison of all cases of composition in creation. Yet Babai then mentions only a single example, that of the human being.

Therefore they have the thing which their properties would constitute. And this one to operate, this one and that one and that one to suffer, just as the spirit along with the body would suffer its sufferings. And through it (sc. the body) it (sc. the spirit) teaches and operates. And through it (sc. the spirit) it (sc. the body) lives and suffers and gets perturbed and operates. And just as they get strengthened by each other, also they get weakened by each other. And when the body dies, the spirit is left ineffectual.

That Babai does not give other examples is not an oversight but part of a sophisticated argumentative strategy. As we have seen Leontius of Byzantium’s ‘Nestorian’ had rejected the use of the anthropological paradigm, and John Maxentius’ ‘Nestorian’ had denied that the concept of composition could be applied to the incarnation. In the Liber de unione the two arguments are combined. By claiming that the human being was only one instance of a general law Babai gives the impression as if no other kind of composition could be conceived of. This does not, however, mean that the anthropological paradigm had lost its former function. Quite the contrary, Babai uses it to open a second line of attack. As we can see he claims that the soul suffers with the body and benefits from it, and that it cannot function if it is not compounded with the body. None of this can be said of the divine Word. The argument is based on a particular understanding of the human being where the soul is very closely related to and even dependent on the body. This anthropology, which finds its strongest expression in the notion of a ‘sleep of the soul’, has roots in Syrian Christianity but may also have been influenced by Aristotelian philosophy.

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35 It is, of course, possible that Babai relied here on an older ‘Nestorian’ text.
36 See Engelmann, Annahme Christi..., 135–136.
At the time this was, of course, not the only model on offer. Other authors who took their inspiration from Platonic philosophy were of the opinion that the soul did not need the body in order to function and that it remained active even after death. Consequently they found it much easier to create a parallel between the soul and the divine Word. Babai could not hope to ‘convert’ these people but he could capitalise on a religious trend, which led to the rejection of a Platonising anthropology. Curiously enough, this development reached its peak at the same council that anathematised Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodore of Tarsus. It was there that the teachings of Origen and Evagrius were also condemned.

Babai was a member of the ‘Nestorian’ church in the Persian Empire, which was flourishing because it normally enjoyed the support of the kings. Since he wrote his treatises in Syriac his primary audience would have been his co-religionists in Iran and Iraq. Yet this does not mean that there were no longer any ‘Nestorians’ in the Roman Empire who could engage in Greek with their Chalcedonian counterparts. Although their numbers must have dwindled due to persecution by the state they still produced one important theological text, a treatise in eight books, which contains an allusion either to Emperor Maurice or to Emperor Heraclius and may have been written in the early seventh century when the Persians occupied the Roman East. It has disappeared in its original form but can be reconstructed from a Chalcedonian Christological

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41 See D. Krausmüller, Leontius of Jerusalem, a Theologian of the Seventh Century, Journal of Theological Studies, n.s. 52 (2001) 637–657, esp. 650–654. Like Babai, the anonymous author was a Nestorian in the strict sense of the word. See e.g. Leontius of Jerusalem, Contra Nestorianos, 11, PG 86, 1525, where the existence of two hypostases is acknowledged.
treatise, Leontius of Jerusalem’s *Contra Nestorianos*, where each argument is quoted and then refuted. The first book, which attacks the teaching of a composite hypostasis, is explicitly directed against the Fifth Ecumenical Council. It contains literal parallels with Babai’s treatise, as can be seen from the following comparison.

Πᾶν ὁτιοῦν συντιθέμενον ἑτέρῳ, ἢ ὅλον ὅλῳ συντίθεται, ἢ μέρος μέρει, ἢ μέρος ὅλῳ.44

Everything that is composed with something else, is composed either as a whole with a whole, or as a part with a part, or as a part with a whole.

In every composite there is composed either a whole with a whole or a part with a part or a part with a whole.

Since both authors were contemporaries it is possible that they relied on now lost older sources, which would have dated to the second half of the sixth century. If this hypothesis is correct, we could speak of a broader ‘Nestorian’ discourse, sparked by the Fifth Ecumenical Council, which spanned both the Persian and the Roman spheres.

The arguments put forward by the anonymous ‘Nestorian’ are self-contained. At their most elaborate they begin in the following manner.

Πᾶν ὁτιοῦν συντιθέμενον ἑτέρῳ πρὸς μιᾶς φύσεως καὶ ὑποστάσεως ζώσης σύστασιν, μέρος δείκνυται τῆς ἀποτελεσθείσης φύσεως ἢ καὶ ὑποστάσεως, πᾶν δὲ μέρος φύσεως καὶ ὑποστάσεως ζώσης….46

Everything that is composed with something else in order to constitute one living nature and hypostasis, is shown to be a part of the nature or also hypostasis that has been effected. Yet every part of a living nature and hypostasis is ...

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43 See Krausmüller, Conflicting Anthropologies..., 49, note 15.


In each case there then follows a statement about a particular property of the part. The similarity of this approach to the Nestorian argument found in John Maxentius’ treatise is even more striking than in the case of Babai. Both authors insinuate that there is no difference between the one composite nature and the one composite hypostasis and that the Chalcedonians are therefore in reality Monophysites. Unlike his forebear, however, Leontius of Jerusalem’s ‘Nestorian’ adversary adduces the human being as an illustration of the general rule. Only after this step follows the Christological application. We are told that the divine Word cannot have this property and that it can therefore not be a part of a composite hypostasis. For example, we read that in all compounds one part suffers with the other, and benefits from the other, and that this is therefore also the case with the soul as a part of the human compound. Another passage reveals further parallels with Babai’s *Liber de unione.*

Εἰ σύνθετος ὁ δεσπότης Χριστός, καθά φασί, μέρος ὁ θεὸς Λόγος, καθά βούλεται τῶν συνθέτων ὁ νόμος· πάν ὀδέ μέρος ἐλάττων κατὰ τὸ καθεστηκε τοῦ ἱδίου ὀλου· ἐλάττων ἁρμινιῶς κατὰ τι το ἔλος Λόγος· οὐκ ἄν γὰρ εἶη μέρος, μὴ ἐλάττων ἂν τοῦ ὦλου. Εἰ δὲ τούτο, οὐδὲ θεὸς ἀληθινός ὁ θεὸς Λόγος, ἐπεὶ τὸν ἀληθινὸν θεὸν οὐδενὸς ἐλάττων λέγειν δυνατόν.

If the Lord Christ is composite, as they say, the divine Word is a part, as the law of compounds demands it. But every part is in some respect lesser than its own whole. As a consequence, the divine Word would be in some respect lesser than something. For it would not be a part, if it were not lesser than the whole. But if this is the case, the divine Word would not even be true God, since one cannot say that the true God is lesser than something else.

The argument that the whole is greater than the parts had already been put forward by John Maxentius’ ‘Nestorian’ sparring partner. It is not found in the *Liber de unione* even though it makes an appearance in another text authored by Babai. Yet the closeness between the two contemporary texts is evident. Both authors speak of a ‘law of compounds’, which applies to all cases of composition and which would also apply to the incarnation if it were conceptualised in this manner. In this instance, too, the only example that the ‘Nestorian’ considers relevant is the human being. He declares that the human

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49 See Abramowski, Goodman, *Nestorian Christological Texts*..., II, no. VIIb, 94.11–18.
being is greater than the soul because the soul is inactive after its separation from the body as it lacks the necessary organs. A similar argument we have already encountered in the Liber de unione. In this case, however, the polemical aspect is much more obvious. The anonymous ‘Nestorian’ claims that those who believe that the disembodied soul continues to be active after death, by necessity also believe in its pre-existence and are thus not true Christians but Manicheans and pagans. These are the usual accusations directed against the followers of Origen and Evagrius who were actively persecuted at the time. Thus, it is insinuated that all Chalcedonians who continue to make use of the anthropological paradigm are in reality heretics.

Leontius of Jerusalem preserved the syllogisms of the anonymous ‘Nestorian’ author only in order to refute them. Employing a strategy that is often found in Late Antique polemical texts he builds his case incrementally. In a first step he questions the validity of the general rule. In a second step he concedes ‘for the sake of the argument’ that the rule is valid in principle and then proceeds to show that there are exceptions to it. The former topic is dealt with in chapters six and eight. There Leontius attacks the axiom that everything that is composed with something else in order to constitute a hypostasis is a part of this hypostasis. His aim is to show that the divine Word does not have the status of a part and therefore is not affected by whatever happens to parts. Yet he does not focus on the specific case of the incarnation but instead claims that even in creation one cannot speak of ‘parts of a hypostasis’. In order to make his case he defines hypostasis as a bundle of accidents, without according it a substantial component. He declares that such accidents cannot be regarded as parts of the hypostasis because they have no existence outside of substances and because they appear and disappear in the substrate. This argument has no relevance for the Christological debate. More significant is what Leontius has to say about substances. In chapter six he appeals to Aristotle’s Categories, declaring: ‘nor are the substances of the compounds parts of the hypostases, for substances are the parts of substances, not of hypostases’ (οὔτε δὲ αἱ οὐσίαι

50 Leontius of Jerusalem, Contra Nestorianos, 1.51, PG 86, 1513C6–13.
52 See Krausmüller, Conflicting Anthropologies..., 438–440.
53 Leontius of Jerusalem, Contra Nestorianos, 1.6.8, PG 86, 1421A4–8,1432A5–11.
54 Leontius of Jerusalem, Contra Nestorianos, 1.6, PG 86, 1421A8–11, 1432A11–B3.
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τῶν συνθέτων μέρη τῶν ὑποστάσεων εἰσι· τῶν γὰρ οὐσίων οὐσίαι τὰ μέρη γίνονται, οὐ τῶν ὑποστάσεων). In chapter seven he sets out a more elaborate argument.

Εἰ δὲ μέρη τῆς ὑποστάσεως τὰς τῶν κατ᾽ αὐτὴν ἰδιωμάτων φύσες λέγετε, ἢ καὶ τὸ ὅλον ὁμοίως τοῖς μέρεσι φύσιν εἰδότες πάσαν ὑπόστασιν, φύσιν τινα κατά συγχύσιν τῶν συντεθεισῶν ἵστε φύσεων, καὶ ἐπιγέννησιν ἐτέρας παρὰ τὰς ἐν τῇ ὑποστάσει συνελθούσας, ἢ σύχ ὁμοίως τοῖς μέρεσιν ἑαυτοῦ τὸ ὅλον τῆς ὑπο-

τάσεως εἶναι λέγετε, εἴπερ οὐσίας τὰ μέρη, ἀνούσιον τόδε τι εἶναι νομίζετε, καὶ ἐκ συνθέσεως τῶν ἐνυπάρχον των ὑποστάσεων συνάγετέ τι ἀνύπαρκτον·μέσον γάρ τι οὐσι ῶν καὶ ἀνουσίων οὐκ ἔστι. If you call ‘parts of the hypostasis’ the natures of the idioms in it, you either know that the whole is similar to the parts, and consequently know that every hypostasis is a certain nature according to confusion of the composed natures, and additional birth of another one apart from those that have come together in the hypostasis, or you say that the whole of the hypostasis is dissimilar to its parts, if indeed you think that since the parts are substances this particular thing is non-substantial, and conclude something inexistent from the composition of the ones that are existent, for there is no middle thing between substances and what is without substance.

Here, too, Leontius offers two alternatives: if the hypostasis were a whole and the natures its parts, the parts could be either similar or dissimilar to the whole. The second option is manifestly absurd. By contrast, the first option is again based on Aristotle’s dictum. If the parts were similar, the two substances would constitute one substance. Such a scenario, however, would be heretical since the substances would then be confused. Leontius’ arguments are truly astonishing since they undermine the traditional Chalcedonian position where the divine and human natures are said to be parts of the composite hypostasis. This raises the question whether one can still meaningfully speak of the incarnation as a composition. The second step of the argument is more traditional. Leontius juxtaposes the Nestorian’s monism with a dualist anthropology. Two examples may suffice. Where the ‘Nestorian’ states that the soul needs the body if it wishes to

55 Leontius of Jerusalem, Contra Nestorianos, 1.6, PG 86, 1421A12–15 See Aristotle, Categories, 5. 3429sqq.
56 Migne: ἐπεὶ γέννησιν.
57 Leontius of Jerusalem, Contra Nestorianos, 1.8, PG 86, 1432B10–C4.
study the commandments, Leontius declares that the body is the main obstacle to studying;\(^{58}\) and where the ‘Nestorian’ avers that the soul suffers with the body, he objects that the soul can thrive when the body is in pain.\(^{59}\) Thus he can insinuate that the human being is an exceptional case to which the general rule does not apply and that it can therefore serve as a paradigm for the incarnation. Yet it is worth noting that he does not challenge the Nestorian’s claim that the soul is lesser than the human compound.\(^{60}\) This is surprising when we consider that half a century earlier John Philoponus had still declared that the soul was better than the complete human being, just as the Word was better than the compound Christ.\(^{61}\) It is possible that Leontius felt he had to tread more carefully because an overtly ‘Platonic’ anthropology would have laid him open to accusations of Origenism.

Indeed, his trust in the anthropological paradigm appears to have been shaken since he develops another line of argument, claiming that God can always create new kinds of composition, beyond those that can be found in the present world, and that the composite hypostasis of Christ would therefore not need to have a counterpart that is known to us. This leads him to conclude.

ϕανερὸν οὖν ἐκ τῶν ἀποδεδειγμένων πάντων, ὡς καὶ μέρος ὁ Λόγος ο ὐ μετὰ μερικῆς ἀτελείας λέγεται, καὶ συντιθέμενος οὐ καθώς φατε, τῷ νόμῳ τῶν συνθέτων οὐσιῶν τῶν παρ’ αὐτὸν ὑποβάλλεται.\(^{62}\)

It is, then, evident from all that we have proved, that the Word is called part not with the incompleteness that is the sign of parts, and that even when he is composed, he is not, as you say, subjected to the law of the composite substances that exist beside him.

Not all of the conceptual problems faced by Leontius were caused by the Nestorian. He himself found it very difficult to apply the concept of composition to the incarnation. At one point he concedes that wholes cannot constitute themselves. Yet then he declares that this rule does not apply to the incarnation of the Word.

\(^{58}\) Leontius of Jerusalem, *Contra Nestorianos*, 1.6, PG 86, 1421D7–9.
\(^{60}\) Leontius of Jerusalem, *Contra Nestorianos*, 1.51, PG 86, 1517C4–7.
\(^{61}\) See LANG, John Philoponus..., 84.
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He, then, would not be brought into existence by something else, for it is confessed by us all that the one who is subjected as part to this whole is the only maker of substance and natural producer of species. But if this had been somehow brought into existence by him as some whole, the product would be brought into existence by the one who creates it as by its own part. For thus the cause as part in the whole will be comprehended by that which is caused, which is impossible. Since, then, this is impossible, it is obvious that it is not called thus in the strict sense of the word but the part, which has produced the so-called whole of Christ, is that which is composed with another, that is, the Word with the flesh.

Here Leontius wrestles with a problem that is inherent in the concept of composition. In normal cases there are three factors, which are clearly distinguished from each other: the parts, the whole, and a ‘composer’ who puts together the parts in order to make a whole. One such case is the human being whom God creates by uniting a body and a soul. This model is evidently not applicable to the specific case of the incarnation where one of the parts is at the same time the ‘composer’ and is furthermore identical with the whole. Thus, Leontius comes to the conclusion that in the case of Christ one cannot speak of part and whole in the strict sense.

It is doubtful whether even Leontius himself would have been satisfied by this contorted argument. When he does not engage in polemic, he speaks about the incarnation in quite a different way. In the sixth chapter he declares that Christ had already established a relation with this world when he created it and that the incarnation was therefore only the logical next step ‘when he brought it forth into being and hypostasised it into himself, leading it to a higher state of being, embracing and enfolding it as the one who is, in order that none of those who are his own again return to non-being through

63 Leontius of Jerusalem, Contra Nestorianos i.52, PG 86, 1524A6–B8.
64 See Pamphilus, Diversorum capitum solutio, qu. VIII, ed. DeClerck, 181.107–182.117, on ‘composite nature’.
In the seventh century Leontius of Jerusalem was not the only Chalcedonian theologian who wrestled with these conceptual problems. Another important contribution to the debate was made by Maximus the Confessor. As is well known the concepts 'part', 'whole' and 'composition' play an important role in Maximus' cosmological speculation. At first sight the situation does not appear to be very different in the field of Christology. In his fifteenth letter Maximus speaks of a 'true union in a hypostasis of each of the parts that come together with one another to the composition of a whole' (ἀληθὴς καθ᾽ ὑπόστασιν ἑκατέρου τῶν εἰς ὅλου τινὸς σύνθεσιν ἀλλήλοις συνερχομένων μερῶν). Such statements give the impression as if this framework can be applied without any problems to the incarnation and that Word and flesh can be regarded as equivalent. Yet this is not Maximus' final word on the topic. A more considered discussion is found in the last two sections of his thirteenth letter. There we find the following statement.

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65 Leontius, Contra Nestorianos 1.6, PG 86, 1425D1–12.
67 There is a substantial literature on Maximus' life and teachings. See most recently the contributions in P. Allen, B. Neil (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
69 Maximus the Confessor, Epistula 15, PG 91, 557D3–5. It has been dated to 633. See M. Jankowiak, Ph. Booth, A New Date-List of the Works of Maximus the Confessor, in: Allen, Neil The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor, 19–77, esp. 43.
70 See K.-H. Uthemann, Das anthropologische Modell der hypostatischen Union: Ein Beitrag zu den philosophischen Voraussetzungen und zur innerchalkedonischen Transformation eines Paradigmas, Kleronomia, 14 (1982) 215–312, esp. 282–312, who explains that Maximus returned at a later stage to the anthropological paradigm but used it only in a very vague manner.
71 The letter has been dated to between 629 and 633. See Jankowiak and Booth, A New Date-List..., 33.
What Is a Composite Hypostasis?

...
incarnated Word. Maximus insinuates that the ‘Nestorians’ should by rights only attack Monophysite Christology. In order to achieve this result, he is prepared to abandon the anthropological paradigm.

In the subsequent section Maximus then explains how he conceives of the incarnated Word as a 'stand-alone' composite hypostasis.

'Επὶ γὰρ πάντων καθ’ ὅλου τῶν κατά φύσιν συνθέτων, οἷς ἡ τοῦδε πρὸς τόδε κατά πρόσληψιν σύνοδος, τὴν δὲ τοῦ εἴδους, ὡς ἐκ μερῶν ὄλου ποιεῖται σύστασιν. ἀλλ’ ἡ ἀθρόα τῶν μερῶν ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἰς τὸ εἶναι γένεσις, κατὰ τὴν ἄμα τῷ εἶναι πρὸς ἄλληλα σύνοδον, ποιεῖται τοῦ ὄλου τὴν σύνθεσιν, τὸ δὲ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν καὶ θεοῦ καὶ σωτῆρος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μυστήριον, ὡς κατὰ τὸν τόν τρόπον γέγονεν, ἀλλὰ θεὸς ὑπάρχων φύσεως καὶ θεόν κατὰ φύσιν Υἱὸς ἁπλοῦς τε καὶ ἁμαρτωλός, ... ἐξ ἡμῶν γέγονεν οἰκονομικῶς καθ’ ὑπόστασιν σύνθεσις καὶ ἐνσώματος.

For generally in all compounds according to nature, it is not the concurrence of this one with that one according to assumption, but that of the species that makes the constitution of a whole as from parts. But it is the sudden coming-to-be from non-being to being of the parts, insofar as the concurrence with one another happens at the same time as the coming-to-be, that produces the composition of the whole. But the mystery of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ did not come to be in this manner, but being God by nature and Son of God according to nature, simple and incorporeal ... he came to be from us ‘economically’ composite and corporeal as regards his hypostasis.

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75 Maximus the Confessor, Epistula 13, PG 91, 529A13–B14.
In this passage, too, Maximus juxtaposes a hypostasis that is at the same time an instance of a species, with a hypostasis that is singular. In the latter case he states that the composition happens through assumption of the flesh by the Word. Comparison of the two complementary statements reveals a significant difference. Maximus employs the terms, ‘part’ and ‘whole’ only in the case of created compounds such as the human being, whereas in the case of the incarnated Word he merely speaks of ‘simple’ and ‘composite’. This is undoubtedly a deliberate move. According to Maximus one can only use the terms ‘part’ and ‘whole’ in the case of created beings, which fall under species. At this point one can ask whether it still makes sense to refer to the incarnation as a composition. It is arguable that Maximus would have abandoned the term in favour of assumption if it had not been enshrined in dogma. Since he could not take this step, he declared instead that assumption was one type of composition, rather than an alternative to it as had been argued by Cyril. This conclusion, too, is not simply a logical consequence of Maximus’ thought. In the following passage we read.

Εἰ τούτων μὴ κατὰ νόμον καὶ τάξιν τῆς τῶν συνθέτων φύσεως, ἀλλ᾽ ἐτέρῳ παρὰ τὴν φύσιν τῶν συνθέτων θεσμῷ — κατὰ πρόσληψιν γὰρ ἀφράστως ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ πρὸς τὴν σάρκα συνετέθη Λόγος, ἀλλ᾽ οὐ κατὰ γένεσιν ἀμα τῇ σαρκί πρὸς σύνθεσιν τὸ εἶναι λαβὼν εἰς ὅλων τινὸς κατ᾽ εἴδος συμπλήρωσιν, καθὼς ὁ τῆς ἀληθείας διαπρύσιως πάσιν ἐμβοᾷ λόγος —, μάτην τοῖς ὑπὸ φύσιν θεσμοῖς ὑπαγαγέν αὐτὴν τὴν πάντα φύσεως ὅρον τε καὶ λόγον ἐκβαίνουσαν σύνθεσιν.

If then (sc. the composition is effected) not according to the law and order of the nature of the compounds, but through another law besides the nature of the compounds — for the Word of God was composed with the flesh ineffably according to assumption, but has not received being as regards the coming-to-be together with the flesh so as to effect a composition, for the completion of some whole according to species, as the word of truth loudly shouts to all — the uneducated vainly attempt to subject the composition that exceeds all definition and concept of nature in an unlawful manner to the laws of nature.

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76 See GARRIGUES, La personne composée..., 199–201, who juxtaposes composition (composite nature) and assumption (composite hypostasis) but does not explain how assumption could be conceptualised as bringing about a composite hypostasis. See also BIELER, Der Einheitsbegriff..., 280.

77 Maximus the Confessor, Epistula 13, PG 91, 529C11–D7.
This statement bears a striking resemblance to the passage in the treatise of Leontius of Jerusalem that I have quoted above. In both cases the authors speak of people who claim that there exists a ‘law of compounds’, which is derived from examples in the created order, and that the incarnated Word must be subject to this law when one conceptualises the incarnation as a composition. These people whom Maximus calls ‘uneducated’ can only be ‘Nestorians’. Like Leontius of Jerusalem before him, Maximus is forced to give up on seeking parallels for the incarnation in the created order, such as the human being. As a consequence he declares that God became man in a supernatural way. This shows clearly that two hundred years after the condemnation of their Christology ‘Nestorian’ theologians could still incommodate their Chalcedonian counterparts. It seems very likely that Maximus had in his hands a Nestorian text. Whether this text was identical with the treatise excerpted by Leontius of Jerusalem is doubtful since none of the arguments in the first book of Contra Nestorianos creates direct juxtaposition of the co-existing soul and the pre-existing Word.

In the end Maximus, like Leontius of Jerusalem, opts for the concept of insubsistence as an alternative conceptual framework that is more in tune with the model of assumption. In his fifteenth letter he declares that the flesh ‘is enhypostasised as having received its coming-to-be in him (sc. the Word) and for him and has become his flesh through union, and is made one with him in hypostasis’ (ἐνυπόστατος ὡς ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ δι’ αὐτὸν λαβόμενα τὸν εἶναι τὴν γένεσιν, καὶ αὐτὸς γενομένη καθ’ ἑνωσῖν σάρξ, καὶ πρὸς αὐτὸν καθ’ ὑπόστασιν ἑνιζομένη).80

To conclude, the Fifth Ecumenical Council decreed that the incarnation should be understood as a composition of two parts, the divine and human natures, and that one should therefore use the term ‘composite hypostasis’. This Christological model was made intelligible through recourse to a parallel in creation. It was claimed that in the human being two different natures, the soul and the body, became parts of a whole. In the fourth anathema ‘composite

78 Alternatively one could argue that Maximus’ adversaries were ‘strict Chalcedonians’. Yet there is no evidence that this group survived until the seventh century.
79 It appears only as part of a complex argument. See Leontius of Jerusalem, Contra Nestorianos, 1.34, PG 86, 1513BCD. Babai and Leontius’s adversary also have different views on the formation of the human embryo. See D. Krausmüller, When Embryology Intersects with Christology, Byzantinische Zeitschrift, 113 (2020) 853–878.
hypostasis’ was presented as the orthodox alternative to the ‘Nestorian’ understanding of the incarnation. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the ‘Nestorians’ inveighed against it. In the late sixth or early seventh century Babai the Great and an anonymous ‘Nestorian’ author contended that there was a universal law of compounds, which also applied to the human being, according to which parts were closely related to and even dependent on one another. Thus, they could conclude that the divine Word must not be conceptualised in this manner. This argument was so forceful that Chalcedonian authors such as Leontius of Jerusalem and Maximus the Confessor gave up on seeking parallels for composition in the created order and instead opted for the alternative model of assumption. Since it was enshrined in dogma, they could not abandon the concept of a ‘composite hypostasis’ altogether. Yet they reinterpreted it in such a way that nothing was left of the original conceptual framework.