CHAPTER ONE

THE CONTEXT OF THE EPHESUS CRISIS

1. THE EARLY LIFE AND WRITINGS OF CYRIL, 378-428

Cyril of Alexandria was not only one of the finest Christian theologians of his day, he also stands out in the ranks of the greatest patristic writers of all generations as perhaps the most powerful exponent of christology the church has known and, after Athanasius, the writer who has had the greatest historical influence on the articulation of this most central and seminal aspect of Christian doctrine. When one adds to this the political aspects of his life, the fact that he occupied the throne of one of the most important sees of the Byzantine Oecumene and was, by virtue of that office, in the select ranks of the most powerful men in the world of his time, then the extraordinary range of his life and work stands out all the more vividly and in relief. Cyril is, without doubt, a profound and controversial figure.

For the Eastern church he is the father of Orthodox christology par excellence; a great exegete as well as a spiritual guide, a saint in the full range of his doctrine and his life’s energy and focus, the two aspects being inseparable in the Orthodox understanding of the nature of theology and sanctity. Much modern work on christology and church history is, however, loud in his criticism, yet frequently that criticism only lightly masks the theological contentions from which it springs. Much the same can be observed even in his own lifetime. He was regarded by some of his episcopal colleagues, though a minority it must be added, as a great heretical manipulator of the church. By most others he was regarded as the greatest theologian living, and by many as a living saint and defender of the truth in a time of crisis in the manner of a new Athanasius or Gregory Nazianzen. He was capable, both in terms of his political manoeuvres as well as his theology, of stirring up violent feelings for and against him, wherever he went. In itself this is a testimony to the extraordinary vigour of his mind and his character. Small men do not create such large effects. No less than his enemies admitted that his intellectual work could not be disregarded, and even bitter opponents such as Theodoret of
Cyr came in the end to adopt much of the argument for which Cyril had been pressing, even expressing it in Cyrilline terms which they had earlier denounced.\footnote{In his later writing, especially the Eranistes, Theodoret applied the Cyrilline usage of 'hypostatic christology' for which in his earlier writings he had loudly criticised Cyril. cf. Richard \(1936\).} Because of this, since he represents the central Eastern tradition of christological spirituality, and because he is a conciliar symbol, like Athanasius, over whom theological and historical disagreement endures in modern thinking, then his life and doctrine have a canonical and contemporary relevance of no small proportions.

The records of the great christological controversy, in which Cyril was a leading protagonist after 429, and the voluminous correspondence it stimulated, have left the historian with an abundance of detailed sources for the reconstruction of Cyril's activities after this date. His earlier life is less well documented, indeed the dates only tend to become clear after 403.

According to the 7th century Coptic bishop and historian John of Nikiu\footnote{The Chronicle of John of Nikiu; Ed. & tr.(from the Coptic) by Zotenberg, Paris, 1883; E.T. R.H. Charles, The Chronicle of John Bishop of Nikiu, London, 1916. q.v. p. 76.} Cyril was born in the obscure Egyptian town of Theodosios close to, if not identical with, the present village of Mahalla el Kobra.\footnote{cf. Munier \(1947\).} Later tradition, especially in Greek sources, has tended to locate his birth in Alexandria, which of course is the locus around which all the important aspects of his life certainly revolved. We could posit a date for his birth some time near 378. His mother seems to have originated from Memphis, and in her younger years spent some time as a refugee in a monastic house in Alexandria, moving about 120 kms. from the capital in order to be married. Her elder brother, Cyril's uncle the priest Theophilus, remained in the city, eventually becoming one its most powerful bishops in 385, when Cyril was about seven or eight years of age. Cyril's mother evidently kept in close contact with her brother after his ecclesiastical advancement\footnote{In a hostile account in his Life of Chrysostom, the historian Palladius says that Theophilus arranged for her to give false witness against a certain priest he wanted to depose.} and it cannot be doubted that Theophilus would have guided his nephew's education and advanced his ecclesiastical career from the outset.

Cyril's mature writings show quite clearly the depth and rigour of his educational training, and bear clear witness to its christian