CHAPTER THREE

MEANINGS AND METAPHYSICS
IN THE TRINITARIAN WRITINGS

3.1. Introduction

In our investigation into Cyril of Alexandria’s knowledge of Aristotelian logic we have come across the terms ὁμοίωσις and φιλοσοφία many times, while also other key terms from the christological debate can be found in his earlier works. Although in christology the words do not necessarily have the same meaning as in trinitarian theology, it is useful to get an idea of the various meanings they have in the anti-Arian works, since it is likely that at least part of those meanings will recur in Cyril’s christology. Besides, it is worthwhile to investigate what metaphysical notions these terms express, since the metaphysical framework will probably be very similar in both parts of Cyril’s oeuvre, even if the terminology varies at times. Thus, his utilization of certain notions in his earlier works will shed light on the meaning of words and phrases in his christological writings. This chapter will, therefore, be devoted to a discussion of the meaning of some key terms in the archbishop’s trinitarian writings, in debate with several modern scholars. The main sources for this discussion are the Thesaurus and the Dialogues on the Trinity, but passages from other works from before 428 will also be used, especially the Commentary on John.1 Jacques Liébaert’s well-documented book on Cyril’s christology before the Nestorian controversy provides many useful references.2

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1 I am aware that this procedure brings along the dangers of the ‘proof-text’ method, which I mention in section 1.1.2, but it is not possible to include a full-scale investigation of works from before the Nestorian controversy in this study.
2 Liébaert (1951).
3.2. Οὐσία

Before we look at a broader overview of how the Alexandrian archbishop employs the word οὐσία in his trinitarian writings, it is interesting to see how he introduces and develops this term in the first of the Dialogues on the Trinity.

3.2.1. Dialogues on the Trinity I

In the first dialogue, after a brief introduction, A (Cyril) cites the symbol of faith accepted at the Council of Nicaea (325), including the anathema (380e–390a), and asks what the heterodox have against it. B (Hermias) responds that they object to the word ‘consubstantial’ (ὁμοούσιος), since it is an innovation and non-scriptural (391a). A points out that there are other terms used to describe God’s nature, which cannot be found in Scripture either, for example, ‘bodiless’, ‘without form’, ‘without quantity’, and asks why, then, they denounce the strangeness of such a clear and philosophical (ἐμφανές) term (391c). Without being induced by his opponents to do so (at least explicitly), Cyril then uses logical terminology: although it is true that the divine transcends genus (γένος) and specific difference (διαφόρα ἐνδοσοφίας), we would be unfaithful and unlearned if we were to reject the things through which one is called to some, albeit little, knowledge of the substance (οὐσία) that transcends everything (391d). If we totally reject the seeing, albeit it in a mirror and in a riddle, and the knowing in part, we are like unperceptive stones.

When B repeats the question where ‘consubstantial’ can be found in Scripture, A adds a new argument. When God reveals himself to Moses he says: “I am he who is (ἐγώ ἐίμι ὁ ὢν)” (Exodus 3:14, LXX). ‘He who is’ is used strictly and properly (κυρίως) of God only, but improperly (ὡς ἐν καταχώρησι) it is also employed with respect to others (392b). Since ‘substance’ (οὐσία) and ‘consubstantial’ (ὁμοούσιος) are derived from ‘he who is (ὁ ὢν)’, there is nothing innovative about these terms, but they have their foundation in Scripture.

B now introduces another term, ‘similar in substance’ (ὁμοουσιός). A does not miss the opportunity to point out that, if his opponents dismiss ‘consubstantial’ as non-scriptural, they should dismiss ‘similar in substance’ for the same reason. But then he refutes the term on material grounds. By using this term, they deny the natural relation and intimacy (σχέσεως ἐν καὶ οἰκειότητος φυσικής) of the Son with