Violence in the Early Years of Cyril of Alexandria’s Episcopate

Hans van Loon

In this article, I will discuss the violence in the early years (412–418) of Cyril of Alexandria’s episcopate, and especially the role of the bishop himself in it, basing myself on the primary sources. Through the ages, Cyril, the archbishop of Alexandria from 412 till his death in 444, has been described as a saint by some and as a villain by others. The turbulent beginning of his tenure as bishop is partly responsible for negative assessments, but, of course, his attitude and actions during the Nestorian controversy have largely contributed to his reputation, not just positively, but also negatively. The monks of Egypt, who actively supported their bishop during his first years, also played a role at the council of Ephesus in 431,1 and Cyril is infamous for the scale of the bribes he sent to the imperial court immediately following that council.2

1 While in Ephesus (431), Nestorius and ten fellow-bishops wrote to the emperor about the bishops from Egypt and from Asia Minor: ‘Scattering in the market place the partisans (στασιώτας) that were with them, they filled the city with confusion, going round our houses publicly, attacking our meeting and throwing it into confusion’, and Nestorius and his friends suggested that ‘none of the clergy or of the monks’ would be allowed to enter the council, in ACO I, 1, 5 (ed. Eduardus Schwartz, Berlin, Leipzig 1928), 14. In a letter to the emperor, the oriental bishops gathered in Ephesus (431) wrote that they ‘found the ecclesiastical affairs in total confusion and in a state of civil war’, and that ‘Cyril of Alexandria and Memnon [the archbishop of Ephesus] had closed their ranks and had gathered together a multitude of rough men’, in ACO I, 1, 5, 124. Nestorius repeats his remarks about the situation in Ephesus in 431 in the Liber Heraclidis II, 1, written in 450: ‘And the [followers] of the Egyptian and those of Memnon, by whom they were aided were going round the city, girded and armed with rods, stiff-necked men’, in G.R. Driver and Leonard Hodgson (eds), Nestorius: The Bazaar of Heracleides (Oxford 1925), 266. John A. McGuckin, St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology and Texts (Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae, 23, Leiden 1994; reprint Crestwood, NY 2004), 91, argues that these partisans came not from Egypt, but from Asia Minor, and that they point to ‘widespread popular disapproval of Nestorius’. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss these issues, but the hostile remarks of Nestorius and his supporters should not be taken at face value.

2 A catalogue of bribes is preserved as ep. 96, in ACO I, 4 (ed. Eduardus Schwartz, Berlin 1922), 224–225. It is preceded (ACO I, 4, 222–224) by a letter of introduction from Cyril’s archdeacon
First, a few examples of the varying ways Cyril of Alexandria has been assessed over the centuries. An unknown contemporary wrote on the occasion of Cyril’s death in 444:

At last and not without difficulty the villain’s life has come to an end. ... His departure has indeed delighted the survivors, but it may have disheartened the dead. And there is some fear that, burdened by his company, they may send him back to us.3

The Coptic bishop John of Nikiu, however, called him towards the end of the seventh century ‘the holy Cyril’, ‘the great star which lighted up all places by his doctrine, being clothed with the Holy Spirit’.4 In a tendentious description of the events, Edward Gibbon, the eighteenth-century English historian, paints Cyril as an ambitious man who develops into ‘the Catholic tyrant of Alexandria’,5 but in 1882 pope Leo XIII declared him a doctor ecclesiae. Although Cyril’s writings cover ten volumes of Migne’s Patrologia Graeca, his works are not to be found in the English translation of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers.6 Such

3 Preserved in Latin, as a letter from Theodoret of Cyrus to John of Antioch (which should have been Domnus of Antioch, since John had already died in 441) in the acts of the fifth ecumenical council of Constantinople (553), as part of the ‘Three Chapters’; ep. 180 (ed. Johannes Straub, ACO IV, 1, Berlin 1971, 135–136). Theodoret’s authorship has been doubted by modern scholars.


6 Of Cyril’s enormous oeuvre, only three of his letters are to be found in NPNF since they were discussed and two of them canonized at the councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451): Henry R. Percival (ed.), The Seven Ecumenical Councils (NPNF II, 14; Buffalo, NY 1900; reprint Peabody, MA 1994), 197–198, 201–217, 251–253.