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The Remarkable Christmas Homily of Kyros Panopolites

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AN IMPORTANT piece of evidence for the life and times of Kyros of Panopolis is a most unusual sermon which the ex-prefect gave on a Christmas Day in the 440's before a hostile congregation.¹ Many observers have cited this sermon and used it to support their views concerning the personality and religious persuasion of Kyros; in addition, the interpretation one puts on this sermon and its reception by Kyros' audience has significant implications for any understanding of the nature of popular religious feeling in the mid-fifth century. Nevertheless, the remarkable character of this homily, and its wording in particular, have not received the close analysis they deserve.

Kyros, a poet of some repute, came to Constantinople from his native Egypt and used his literary ability and the patronage of the empress Eudokia to become *praefectus urbi* about 435 and *praefectus praetorio* by 439.² He held both offices simultaneously for about four years, but his career was ruined when Theodosius II accused him of being a pagan, removed him from power, and confiscated his property.³ Whether paganism was really the issue is difficult to say, as

¹ Two recent articles represent modern scholarship on Kyros: Alan Cameron, "Wandering Poets: A Literary Movement in Byzantine Egypt," *Historia* 14 (1965) 470-509, esp. 473-74 and 497-98, and Demetrios J. Constantelos, "Kyros Panopolites, Rebuilder of Constantinople," *GRBS* 12 (1971) 451-64. These two articles are complementary in their treatment of Kyros, as Cameron traces his literary milieu while Constantelos focuses on historical and religious questions.

² On chronology see O. Seeck, "*Φλόουιος Κύρος*," *RE* 12 (1924) 188-90, and Constantelos, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 452-53.

³ The sources represent at least two separate traditions concerning Kyros. One of these, quoted by the Paschal Chronicle, ed. B. G. Niebuhr (CSHB, Bonn 1832) 588-89 (=ed. C. Müller, *FGH* IV [Paris 1868] 73), and echoed by Malalas, Theophanes and the *Suda*, is derived from Priskos of Panion, who was a younger contemporary of Kyros. The other is the *Vita S. Danielis Stylitae*, ed. H. Delehayé, *AnalBoll* 32 (1913) 121-229, which is also nearly contemporary. A primary problem for any reconstruction of the life of Kyros is, however, the disagreement of the sources, even those presumably based on Priskos, concerning many details. Kyros' supposed paganism and the charge against him is a good example of

several sources claimed that the emperor's real motive was envy of Kyros' popularity among the people of Constantinople.⁴

Stripped of his office, Kyros sought sanctuary in the church and became a priest. Then, on the emperor's orders, he was sent as bishop to Kotyaion in Phrygia.⁵ The rather unusual choice of an accused pagan as an episcopal appointee was explained by the reputation of the people of Kotyaion. They had killed four of their previous bishops, and Theodosius supposedly hoped that they would do the same to Kyros, thus ridding him once and for all of a dangerous rival.

Kyros arrived in Kotyaion at Christmas-time and was officiating in the church when the people, who had learned that he might be a pagan, suddenly (*ἐξαίφνης*) called out for him to preach, presumably to test the validity of the report. It was under these circumstances that Kyros delivered his only recorded sermon. He ascended the ambo, gave the greeting of peace, and spoke:

Ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί, ἡ γέννησις τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ
Χριστοῦ σιωπῇ τιμάσθω, ὅτι ἀκοῇ καὶ μόνῃ συνελήφθη ἐν τῇ
ἀγία παρθένῳ ὁ τοῦ Θεοῦ λόγος· αὐτῷ ἡ δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας.
ἀμήν.⁶

“Brethren, let the birth of God our Savior Jesus Christ be honored with silence, because the Word of God was conceived in the holy Virgin through hearing alone. To him be glory for ever. Amen.”

this difficulty. Malalas, ed. Niebuhr (CSHB, Bonn 1831) 361–62, says he was deposed *ὡς Ἕλληνας*. Theophanes, *Chronographia* A.M. 5937, ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig 1883) 96–97, however, says merely *ἐλληνόφρονα*, while the text of Priskos as it is preserved in the Paschal Chronicle says nothing about paganism as the basis for Kyros' removal from office, only that the people of his church learned *ὅτι ὡς Ἕλληνας αὐτὸν ὁ Βασιλεὺς ἐκεῖ ἐπίσκοπον ἐποίησεν*. To complete the confusion, the *Suda*, s.n. Θεοδόσιος (ed. A. Adler, II [Leipzig 1931] 695) adds that Kyros was removed *ὡς Ἕλληνας καὶ βασιλείαν ἐλπίζων*.

⁴ The *Vita S. Danielis* 31, ed. Delehaye (*supra* n.3) 150, blamed the eunuch Chrysaphios for Kyros' fall. This does not contradict the account of Priskos, as Chrysaphios was probably the cause of the emperor's envy. Constantelos' division of the court into parties, including a 'conservative' and a 'Hellenic Christian', is unconvincing. While it should not be surprising that Eudokia and Kyros had much in common, it is unlikely that Chrysaphios would align himself with a conservative, orthodox party of Pulcheria, even had one existed. The ambition of the eunuch is enough to explain the fall of Kyros.

⁵ Constantelos has argued convincingly that Kyros was sent to Kotyaion, rather than to Smyrna as Priskos and Theophanes report.

⁶ Theophanes, *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.3); Malalas 362 has essentially the same text, while the other sources preserve their own particular variants, none of which affect the argument. Cf. J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire* I (London 1923, repr. New York 1955) 227 n.6.

The sermon had taken perhaps half a minute, and the reaction of the people was instant and unanimous. Instead of killing Kyros on the spot, they rejoiced and praised him (*εχάρη ὁ λαός καὶ εὐφήμησαν αὐτόν*),⁷ and he lived on to administer his see piously for many years. Kyros was a figure around whom Christian lore collected (*cf.* the story of the miraculous ikon, *infra* p.323), and an element of hagiography may be operating in our accounts of this event. But we should remember that the evidence for Kyros' sermon seems to come originally from Priskos of Panion, a contemporary observer and one not always favorable to Christian luminaries. To the extent that we can accept the historical reality of the event as described by the sources, both the sermon and its reception by the people of Kotyaion call for analysis and explanation.

In the view of Alan Cameron, Kyros' congregation was "evidently too taken aback to lynch him."⁸ This reconstruction is hardly convincing since the Byzantine *λαός* was rarely characterized by either inaction or a good sense of humor. If the people of Kotyaion had been displeased with Kyros' sermon, the new bishop would quickly have joined the ranks of his predecessors.

Instead, it seems clear that the people found something attractive in the short homily. Demetrios Constantelos, following Bury and ultimately Harnack, identified this as the bishop's practical, philanthropic Christianity. Rather than obscure theological speculation, Kyros "expressed his preference for ethics and practical issues."⁹ In this way Constantelos would modify the common impression that east Roman Christian society was caught up in endless doctrinal controversy: despite Gregory of Nyssa's famous description of bakers and bathhouse attendants spouting theology, the people of Kotyaion applauded Kyros' commonsense refusal to engage in theological subtleties.¹⁰

A point which seems to support this view is the similarity between the words of Kyros and those of Evagrius Pontikos, a man described by Constantelos as "thrifty in words but rich in societal involve-

⁷ Theophanes, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 97. Priskos and Malalas say that after the sermon Kyros *εὐφήμηθεις κατήλθε*.

⁸ Cameron, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 473.

⁹ Constantelos, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 463.

¹⁰ Greg.Nyss. *Or. de Deitate Filii et Spiritus Sancti*, Migne, PG 46 (1863) 557; Constantelos, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 462.

ment."¹¹ Thus, Kyros' *σιωπῆ τιμάσθω* may be paralleled by Evagrius' *σιωπῆ προσκυνείσθω τὸ ἄρρητον*.¹² Nevertheless, the force of the comparison is weakened when we put Evagrius' statement in context. Evagrius was a disciple of Origen and an important although shadowy figure in the development of Egyptian monasticism and the apophatic tradition.¹³ He can be said to have evaded theological dispute only in the sense that he denied the possibility of the ultimate definition of the Godhead. Thus, in the passage in question, quoted by Sokrates from Evagrius' *Monachikos*, he argued that definition was proper only for compound objects, which may be divided into their various parts (*πάσα πρότασις . . . ἢ γένος ἔχει κατηγορούμενον, ἢ διαφορὰν, ἢ εἶδος, ἢ ἴδιον, ἢ συμβεβηκός, ἢ τὸ ἐκ τούτων συγκείμενον*). The divinity, however, is simple (*ἀπλοῦς*) and may not be divided—or defined fully. This is a far cry from a simple, uneducated form of Christianity.

Indeed, Kyros' language and sentiment reflect a well-known patristic *topos*: the majesty and mystery of God are ultimately beyond man's understanding, so reverent awe and pious silence are preferable to over-ambitious questioning. Such ideas were expressed by many of the Fathers, from Clement of Alexandria to Maximos the Confessor.¹⁴ Ps.-Dionysios the Areopagite provides a contemporary example: *τὴν ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς κρυφίότητα σιγῆ τιμήσαντες*.¹⁵

Kyros, however, went beyond the patristic idea of silence in the presence of the divinity. He said, in fact, that the Nativity should be honored in silence because the conception of the Word took place *ἀκοῆ καὶ μόνῃ*. Surprisingly, no one has discussed the new bishop's reasoning on this point. Obviously he referred to the Annunciation (although Mary was far from silent on that occasion), and he may have meant that the Incarnation came about as a result of the 'obedience' of the Virgin. This use of *ἀκοή* occurs in the Septuagint (*I Kings 15.22: ἀκοῆ ὑπὲρ θυεῖαν ἀγαθή*), and the bishop may have found this sentiment particularly appropriate in the face of a hostile crowd. Just as the Virgin was obedient to the will of God, the people of Kotyaion should respect the authority of their bishop (and not disturb the

¹¹ Constantelos, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 462.

¹² Sokrates, *Hist.Eccl.* 3.7.

¹³ On Evagrius Pontikos see Johannes Quasten, *Patrology III* (Utrecht 1960) 169–76.

¹⁴ Clem.Al. *Paedagogos* 2.7, Migne, PG 8, 461B and GCS I (1905) 192.5; Origen, *Schol. in Cant.* 4.3, Migne, PG 17, 272A; Maximos Confessor, *Ambiguorum liber*, Migne, PG 91, 1057A. Cf. *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, ed. G. W. H. Lampe (Oxford 1961) 1262 s.v. *σιγή*.

¹⁵ Ps.-Dionysios Areopagita, *De caelesti hierarchia* 15.9, Migne, PG 3, 340B.

sanctity of the day with a lynching). Taken literally, however, Kyros said that the conception of Christ took place through the ear of the Virgin, the implication being that at the time of the Annunciation the Word of God entered the body of Mary in this way. Probably Kyros meant his congregation to appreciate both these connotations of his words.

Strikingly similar ideas and language are found in the sermons of Proklos, bishop of Constantinople.¹⁶ In 428 or 429 (before he became bishop) Proklos delivered a sermon against Nestorius, who had just condemned the use of the title *Θεοτόκος* for the Virgin.¹⁷ This sermon was a landmark in the development of Mariology. In it Proklos praised Mary simply and eloquently, not only as the instrument of salvation but as important in her own right: “servant and mother, virgin and heaven, the only bridge for men to God . . . the reasonable paradise of the Second Adam, the workshop of the union of the natures.”¹⁸ Significant for our purpose is Proklos’ use of *ἀκοή* in connection with the conception of Christ: “Just as the serpent injected the poison through disobedience (*παρακοή*), so the Word entered in through obedience (*διὰ τῆς ἀκοῆς εἰσελθών*) and took upon himself humanity.”¹⁹ At another point Proklos compared the manner of Christ’s conception to that of his birth: “As God he did not cleave the portal of virginity, but he went out from his mother just as he had come in through hearing (*δι’ ἀκοῆς*). Thus he was born as he was conceived. Without passion (*ἀπαθῶς*) he came in; miraculously (*ἀφραστῶς*) he went out.”²⁰

In the latter passage at least, reference to the conception of the Word *δι’ ἀκοῆς* was ultimately connected with the idea of the virgin birth and the perpetual virginity of Mary. Furthermore, as this sermon clearly shows, Mariology was closely linked to the great theological issues of the day. The Nestorian controversy, although ultimately concerned with Christology, was openly fought over the

¹⁶ F. X. Bauer, *Proklos von Konstantinopel. Ein Beitrag zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte des 5. Jahrhunderts* (Munich 1919); W. Ensslin, “Proklos,” *RE* 23 (1957) 183–86; and Quasten, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.13) 521–25.

¹⁷ E. Schwartz, ed., *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* I.1 pt.1 (Berlin/Leipzig 1927) 103–07; older edition Migne, *PG* 65, 679–92. One of the Marian sermons attributed to Proklos has been shown to be much later: A. Kirpitschnikow, “Reimprosa in 5. Jahrhundert,” *BZ* 1 (1892) 527–30; cf. P. Maas, “Das Kontakion,” *BZ* 19 (1910) 285–306.

¹⁸ Schwartz, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.17) 103, 17 and 12–13.

¹⁹ *ibid.* 103, 25–26.

²⁰ *ibid.* 107, 18–19.

issue of the honor to be paid to the Virgin. The Nestorians refused to call Mary the 'Mother of God' (*Θεοτόκος*) because, they said, she was only the mother of Christ's humanity. Proklos and the 'orthodox' party objected to this division of the person of Christ and argued that after the Incarnation the divine and the human natures in Christ were inseparably joined. Mary was thus not only a model of virtue but the "workshop of the union of the natures," and as the *Θεοτόκος* she became a symbol of correct belief.²¹

Proklos' sermons on the Nativity (three have survived) reveal much the same sentiment. In one of these he again spoke of the conception of Christ "through hearing": *ὁ δὲ Λόγος δι' ἀκοῆς εἰσεπήδα*.²² On another occasion he revealed that some persons, Jews in particular, had questioned the virgin birth and the perpetual virginity of Mary: *εἰ ἔτεκε παρθένος, οὐκ ἔμεινε παρθένος*.²³ Proklos admitted the seeming impossibility of this but said that with God all things were possible: "It was miraculous because the birth conquered the law of nature. For nature had regard for the mother who was giving birth, while grace pointed her out, protected the Virgin, made her a mother, and did not affect her purity . . . For without being married she became a mother . . . The infant was born and left the covering of the womb intact."²⁴

A sermon attributed to Attikos of Constantinople, but probably in part the work of Proklos, described the Virgin and the birth of Christ in much the same words.²⁵ Through obedience and attentiveness Mary opened herself to God; in imitation of her, good Christians were to do the same—again sound advice for Kyros' congregation in Kotyaion. The sermon concluded with a clear statement of the Christological significance of the veneration of the Virgin: she should be honored because of her son, who was "not an angel or an elder

²¹ On the background of the Christological controversies and the dispute over the *Theotokos* see especially Aloys Grillmeier, "Die theologische und sprachliche Vorbereitung der christologischen Formel von Chalkedon," in Aloys Grillmeier and Heinrich Bacht, eds. *Das Konzil von Chalkedon I* (Würzburg 1951) 5–202; see also his *Christ in Christian Tradition* (New York 1965) 74, 188 n., 244, 272–74 and 364–71.

²² Procl. *Or. III de Incarnatione*, Migne, PG 65, 708.

²³ Procl. *Or. II de Incarn.* Migne, PG 65, 696; cf. *Or. IV*, 713.

²⁴ Procl. *Or. IV de Incarn.* Migne, PG 65, 709 and 712.

²⁵ *Or. V Laudatio in S. Virginem*, Migne, PG 65, 715–22; Syriac text and translation J. Lebon, "Discours d'Atticus de Constantinople sur la sainte Mère de Dieu," *Le Muséon* 46 (1933) 167–202; and M. Brière, "Une homélie inédite d'Atticus, patriarche de Constantinople," *RevOchr* 29 (1933–34) 60–80.

[references to ideas which might be characterized as Manichaeian and Nestorian respectively]; but God himself came, and he saved us.”

That Kyros' inaugural sermon in Kotyaion should echo the thought and language of Proklos need not surprise us; Proklos had been bishop in Constantinople since 437 and his theological ideas were well-known and popular. Kyros, moreover, as *praefectus urbi* and a leading member of the imperial administration, probably met the bishop on many occasions. Even more importantly, when Kyros fled to the Church after his disgrace, Proklos must have received him and ultimately arranged for his ordination.

Seen in this light, Kyros' Christmas sermon was not an expression of simple, uneducated Christianity but a clever—one might even say wily—statement of orthodox theology. Recent controversies had demonstrated the importance of key words and phrases in defining doctrinal positions—*Θεοτόκος* and *ψιλὸς ἄνθρωπος* in the Nestorian dispute—and there is every reason to think that Kyros' reference to the conception of Christ *ἀκοῆ καὶ μόνῃ* fit the new bishop perfectly into a theological slot: he was a follower of Proklos of Constantinople and a supporter of the decisions of the Council of Ephesus (431). It is, thus, no wonder that the people of Kotyaion rejoiced and praised him; there could be no question that he was a heretic or a pagan.

Furthermore, Kyros was a defender of the honor of the Virgin, something which must have counted for much at this time when veneration of Mary had become an important part of popular devotion.²⁶ There is, indeed, evidence to identify Kyros, at other periods in his life, with the worship of the Virgin and the defense of her perpetual virginity. Thus, ps.-Kodinos said that Kyros dedicated a church to the Theotokos in the region of Constantinople which bore his name.²⁷ (In fact, the text states that this occurred during the reign of Theodosius II, presumably placing the event before his fall from power.) Perhaps describing another foundation, Nikephoros Kallistos reported that an ikon of the Virgin had at some time been hidden in a

²⁶ The best evidence for the growth of popular veneration of the Virgin is the institution of a number of festivals in her honor; see M. Jugie, “La première fête mariale en Orient et en Occident,” *EchO* 22 (1923) 129–52. Another indication of this is the growing importance of Mary in the art of the time: G. A. Wellen, *Theotokos. Eine ikonographische Abhandlung über das Gottesmutterbild in frühchristliche Zeit* (Utrecht 1961) 14–29 and 139.

²⁷ Ps.-Kodinos, *Περὶ Κτισμάτων* III, *Scriptores Originum Constantinopolitarum* II, ed. Th. Preger (BT, Leipzig 1907) 252. Cf. Theophylaktos Simokatta 8.8, ed. I. Bekker (CSHB, Bonn 1834) 329; and R. Janin, *Constantinople byzantine*² (Paris 1964) 378–79.

large cypress tree. This tree suddenly began to give off a miraculous light, and the ikon was discovered. Kyros was impressed by the miracle and dedicated a church to Mary on the spot: *τιμῶν δὲ Κῦρος τὸν χῶρον, περικαλλῆ τε καὶ μέγιστον τῇ Θεοτόκῳ ἰδρύετο τέμενος.*²⁸

Finally, late in his life after he had resigned his episcopacy and returned to Constantinople, Kyros inscribed his famous poem on the column of St Daniel the Stylite.²⁹ This epigram, undoubtedly reflecting the poet's own ideas, described Daniel as *νύεα κηρύττων μητρὸς ἀπειρογάμου*. This reference to Mary as "unwed mother" is certainly more than a literary flourish and again demonstrates Kyros' devotion to the Virgin. Interestingly enough, these words also echo Proklos, who addressed her in much the same way: *ὦ παρθένε, κόρη ἀπειρόγαμε, καὶ μήτηρ ἀλόχευτε.*³⁰

This is not to deny the practical Christianity of Kyros. The *Vita* of St Daniel amply attests his kindness toward the poor. But our analysis of Kyros' Christmas sermon suggests that even the most pragmatic of churchmen, and one trained in the atmosphere of pagan Alexandria, would be deeply involved in the complex doctrinal questions of the day. Finally, this event is further evidence for the importance and centrality of theological issues among all sections of the population. While every baker and bathhouse attendant might not philosophize on the begotten and the unbegotten, they would at least appreciate the issues and react strongly to the proper terminology. Kyros realized this, and his Christmas homily spoke clearly and directly to that concern.

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²⁸ Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, *Hist.Eccl.* 46, Migne, PG 146.2, 1220. This incident reminds one of the revelation of the Trisagion to Proklos, presumably during the earthquake of 437: Theophanes, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) A.M. 5930, 93.

²⁹ *Anth.Pal.* 1.99; cf. H. Delehay, "Une épigramme de l'Anthologie Grecque (I,99)," *REG* 9 (1896) 216–24.

³⁰ *Procl. Or. IV de Incarn.* Migne, PG 65, 713.