

**Alberto Nigra, *Il pensiero cristologico-trinitario di Giovanni di Scitopoli*. Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum (Rome: Institutum Patristic Augustinianum, 2019)**

The individuals on whom rested the defence and further development of Chalcedonian Christology in the sixth century were quite unlike the fathers of the Nicene Church. From the early fourth century onwards, Patristic theology had become largely a matter of bishops. In fact, some of the most prominent thinkers and writers of the time were associated with the major sees of the Eastern Church: Athanasius and Cyril were Patriarchs of Alexandria, Basil was Metropolitan of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Chrysostom, and the unfortunate Nestorius all were (for a time) Patriarchs of Constantinople. To the extent that this tradition continued after 451, it did so outside the Imperial Church. Miaphysite theologians such as Severus of Antioch, Philoxenus of Mabugg, and Peter of Callinicus more or less fit the mould of the earlier fathers. Among those who accepted the Council of 451, by contrast, we find a rather different cast: John the Grammarian, apparently a teacher of the classics; the Leontii of Byzantium and Jerusalem, both probably monks; and Pamphilus the Theologian who was possibly a deacon.

Another member of this amorphous group of early Chalcedonians is John of Scythopolis. Active in the former half of the sixth century, John is the subject of the present monograph by Alberto Nigra, the revised version of his doctoral dissertation defended at the Augustinianum in 2018. John *may* have been bishop of Scythopolis, but Nigra, whose judgment throughout this supremely solid study is secure and reliable, rightly urges caution given the relatively late attestation of the title (p. 45). In the majority of contemporaneous references, John is called *scholastikos* which may mean that he was a lawyer although it may also just refer to his impressive erudition.

On this as on most questions relating to the person of John and his work uncertainty abounds. In this, too, he is quite typical for sixth-century Chalcedonians whose identities are often shady and whose works have been lost, are preserved in fragments or, if they have survived whole, are contained in a tiny number of manuscripts. In the case of John of Scythopolis, as Nigra recounts in scrupulous detail in the first chapter of his book, we possess brief fragments in Severus of Antioch, in a seventh-century florilegium, and in Photius' *Bibliothēke*. These fragments indicate that he wrote in defence of the Council of Chalcedon, against the Miaphysites, and especially against Severus. More intriguingly, he also seems to have written a work against 'Nestorians' which presumably was directed against those who held a rigid interpretation of Chalcedon.

These fragments together will not fill more than a handful of pages, and it would be impossible to write a monograph on John on their basis. That the material on which Nigra could base his research is, in fact, much more extensive is due to the fact that John also authored the earliest scholia to the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. The entirety of the scholia, which are printed in Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* together with Ps.-Dionysius' works, has traditionally been ascribed to Maximus the Confessor. Apart from some early modern rumours (cf. pp. 49-53), it was only the late nineteenth century publication of Phocas' Syriac translation of the Dionysian Corpus that made modern readers aware that Maximus was not the only scholiast. For Phocas, who worked at the turn of the eighth century, attests John as the author of the scholia he includes in his version. For much of the past century, scholars have laboured to divide the scholia between those belonging to John and those authored a century later by Maximus. Nigra contributes to

this debate by pushing gently against the authoritative view of Beate Regina Suchla who would only permit the external evidence of inclusion in Phoca's translation as criterion for John's authorship. Through careful stylistic and theological comparison, Nigra can show that there are many scholia *not* included in Phoca's translation which nevertheless can be securely ascribed to the *Scholastikos*. In this connection, it is worth mentioning that Nigra's book includes a full list of the scholia with brief comments on their authorship (411-99). As a result, Nigra concludes that out of 1684 scholia 729 can entirely or partly be ascribed to John. These texts then, together with a Prologue to the Corpus, furnish the scholar with the opportunity to gain a better sense of John of Scythopolis' theology.

And yet, they also make it difficult to come to definitive conclusions on major points of interest. After all, John is annotating another author's work, and his main concern, it must be assumed, is therefore exegetical rather than the presentation of his own views and ideas. Extracting from the scholia John's own theology thus requires subtle adjudication and a willingness to find *less* certainty than one might hope for. Nigra's methodological caution guides him well in this treacherous terrain. Throughout his analyses, he remains conscious of the hermeneutical limitations of his exercise. Where possible, therefore, he takes the information from John's other works (as far as known) as his starting point and seeks to align insights from the scholia with those that can be gained from those writings. At the same time, he is careful to consider relevant aspects of the Dionysian Corpus that may have defined the task of the annotator. To facilitate this methodological step, Nigra inserts between the first part in which he establishes relevant sources (pp. 19-131) and the third part in which he offers a detailed account of John's own theology, a second part in which he provides an overview of important doctrines in the Ps.-Dionysian Corpus (pp. 135-208).

Only once this basis has been established, Nigra proceeds on c. 200 pages with an analysis of John's own theology (pp. 211-413). At the centre of his attention, inevitably, stand John's Christological and trinitarian doctrines. It is perhaps not unfair to the author to observe that the outcome is not an entirely novel picture of this father. As previous scholars before him – English readers will think of Rorem and Lamoreaux in particular (cf. *John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus: Annotating the Areopagite*, Oxford: OUP, 1998) – Nigra identifies John of Scythopolis as an early Neo-Chalcedonian. In other words, while the *Scholastikos* defends the Council of 451 and affirms its language of two natures in Christ, he *also* embraces Cyril's emphasis on the hypostatic union, the divine character of the single hypostasis, and the affirmation that God suffered in the flesh. Nigra helpfully points out that John not only accepts the full set of Cyril's anathemas (to the chagrin of strict Chalcedonians such as Basil of Cilicia) but also the more recent theopaschite language introduced by the Scythian monks (*unus de Trinitate passus est carne*). He speaks perceptively of a 'new *via media*' of theopaschite Chalcedonianism (p. 355).

John, in other words, is remarkably close to the position the Emperor Justinian himself adopted and would later have sanctioned by the 5<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council. This is important in light of new research on the Dionysian question by Ernesto Sergio Mainoldi (*Dietro 'Dionigi l'Areopagita': La genesi e gli scopi del Corpus Dionysiacum* [Rome: Città Nuova, 2018]). This work appeared only just before Nigra's book so could presumably not be used by the author who, nevertheless, inserted a note (p. 129, n. 561) indicating his general agreement with Mainoldi's work. According to Mainoldi's complex theory, the composition of the Dionysian Corpus was

orchestrated by Justinian himself and can therefore be read as programmatic of his religious policies. Mainoldi himself thought the apparent agenda in John's scholia strengthened his case as the early annotator would presumably have been connected with the project even if not part of the original auctorial team (Mainoldi, *op. cit.*, 517-23). I think it is fair to say that little in Nigra's results vitiates against this conclusion.

Nigra does relatively little to compare his author with roughly contemporaneous Chalcedonians such as John the Grammarian or Leontius of Byzantium. What is immediately striking is the absence in John of the technical defence of Chalcedon based on Cappadocian terminology. His main suspicion against the miaphysites is that they are clandestine Apollinarians. At the same time, his trinitarian thought also shows relatively little indebtedness to Cappadocian language which otherwise is omnipresent from the early fifth century onwards. Both can be the result of the selection of texts we have but is remarkable anyway.

The great strength of Nigra's book is its solidity and erudition, its careful examination of every aspect of the few remains we have of a major participant in early sixth-century doctrinal debates. His scholarship is constantly informed by his comprehensive knowledge of previous research which is discussed and even-handedly evaluated throughout the book. Nigra is also remarkably modest, even understated about the merits of his work informing the reader after over 400 pages of dense analysis that 'the present labour does not pretend to be exhaustive' (p. 412). This reviewer would want to correct the author on this last point at least: I think this book surely represents an exhaustive investigation of what we can know of John of Scythopolis. As such, it performs an excellent and important service to scholarship. Those who in the future will seek orientation about John himself, early Chalcedonianism in general, and the early reception of the Ps.-Dionysian Corpus will be grateful that they can use this fine resource.

Johannes Zachhuber  
University of Oxford