

**THE DOGMA OF THE HOLY TRINITY IN THE LETTER OF EZNIK OF  
KOLB “TO THE BLESSED ARCHIMANDRITE MASHTOTS”\***

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**Abstract**

“The Book of Letters” contains Eznik of Kolb's letter “To the Blessed Archimandrite Mashtots”, which is one of the key documents reflecting the creed of the Armenian Church of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The dogmatic system of the Armenian Church is based on the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed, according to which God is one essence and three Hypostases. It means that the one God is eternally personified in the Hypostases of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each Hypostasis contains the fullness of the divine essence, so the three Hypostases are equally perfect God, yet not three Gods, but one God. It is so, because the divine essence is one and does not exist independently of the Hypostases. The Christian doctrine of the God-Man makes sense only if the divine nature of the Incarnate Word in Jesus is recognized. For this, it is necessary that all the Hypostases of the Holy Trinity are consubstantial and equally perfect. The Son is as much God as the Father and has all the attributes attributed to the Father. Although the Father is the cause of the Son's existence, the birth of the Son cannot in any way be considered the result of an act of the Father's will. It is an eternal and ineffable birth that necessarily takes place in the transcendent depths of the divine nature. The only begotten Son is begotten of the Father in eternity, and has all the attributes of the Father except that He is not begotten. In the same eternity, the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father. There is no temporal sequence between the Hypostases. They are coeternal and have the same nature, power and will.

**Keywords:** Book of letters, St. Cyril, Nestorius, Apollinarius, the Holy Trinity, Hypostasis, the Word, Christ, the Holy Virgin.

The “Book of Letters” preserves a letter by Eznik of Kolb “To the Blessed Archimandrite Mashtots”, which is one of the key documents reflecting the doctrine of the Armenian Church of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The Armenian Church believes, according to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed, that God is the Holy Trinity, the one essence of three Hypostases. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost”. (Matthew 28:19) These three divine Hypostases have one essence, one will, kingdom, power and glory. They are neither less nor greater than one another, but equally powerful and worthy of veneration. Each Hypostasis contains the fullness of the divine essence, so the three Hypostases are one essence, and it is not three Gods, but one God [10:47]. This is so because the divine essence is one and does not exist independently of the Hypostases.

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In order to justify the divine nature of Christ, and therefore the reality of the salvation performed by Him, the idea of “consubstantiality” was proposed during the First Ecumenical Council, which provided an opportunity to combine the biblical monotheism and the New Testament revelation about God having three Hypostases [12:64]. It was quite a bold innovation, since this term was not only absent in the New Testament, but was also discredited by the heretic Paul of Samosata, who used it to denote the identity of the Father and the Son, which was categorically rejected by the Church [15:40]. In the late 3<sup>th</sup> - early 4<sup>th</sup> century, Sabellianism became widespread. His supporters were especially numerous in North-East Africa. At the same time, Arianism emerged as a peculiar reaction to Sabellius’ schism. Arius’ doctrine was as follows. God is one, and there is no other God with Him. He alone is unborn, beginningless, eternal, ineffable and unknowable. He is the Cause and Creator of everything. These attributes constitute His essence. His activity is creation, the synonym of which is “birth”. God creates not by His nature, but according to His free will. Therefore, God was not always the Father, for then the creatures would be eternal. To them the nature of God cannot be communicated, for otherwise it would not be sinless. Wisdom and Word are characteristic of this God as impersonal powers inseparable from Him; besides them, there are many created powers. Before the existence of the world, God, according to His free will, created a being of his own as an instrument for creating other creatures, called Wisdom, Son or Word, which, like all creatures, was created from nothing and had a beginning [14:8]. Therefore, there was a time when the Son did not exist. Thus, the Son is a separate being by nature, essentially distinct from the Father; they have different natures and no properties in common [11:466]. The Son has free will and is subject to change, but by choosing the good, he thereby acquired immutability. Thus, the Son is not true God; his divinity is acquired and partial. Because He is not eternal, His knowledge is not perfect, so He does not deserve equal worship with the Father. But He is different from other creatures, because by Him all things were made. He has a special divine grace, and God gave Him majesty before He could justify it by His works. With God’s help and due to his own efforts, He became God, so He can be called “The Only Begotten God”. This Son really took on a human body, and since Christ did not have a human soul, the passions he felt testify that the Word was not perfect, but only aspired to perfection.

Opposing Arius, St. Athanasius showed that the latter’s ideas contradicted the very essence of Christianity, because it differed from Judaism and paganism precisely in that in Christianity God became a man, which was unacceptable to both Jews and pagans. The idea of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son proposed by S. Athanasius, which became the cornerstone of orthodoxy, was necessary to justify the deification by the incarnate Word of human nature, because without it the salvation accomplished by Christ would have been impossible [13:76]. Arianism was rejected by St. Athanasius, and the Church accepted his point of view, precisely because without the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, there can be no possibility of the deification and salvation of human nature.

According to St. Athanasius, if Christ is God, and only God can act as Savior, then He cannot be a creature under any circumstances. Because the divine nature of Christ is sinless, then his existence is not conditioned by the existence of the world. Thus, the idea of God saving people must be different from the idea of the world. Since the Godhead is unity, and the Son has nothing to do with the world, then He must be inseparable from the eternal principle of unity, that is, the Father. The name of the Father proves that the Godhead also has a second Hypostasis. God has always been a Father, so He has always had a Son. Thus, the Son is not created, as Arius believed, but is born of inner necessity from the essence of the Father like light from the sun. To be begotten means to be in communion with the nature of the Father, and the Father does not undergo any change as a result. Thus, the claims of the Arians are false. The Son is as eternal as the Father; He is of the same nature as the Father, so they are consubstantial. They do not differ from each other in nature, but they differ according to the quality of being born or not born. The Father is the cause, and the Son is the effect. The union of the Word of God with human nature was perfect from the beginning.

Eznik of Kolb fully shares the orthodox understanding of the trinitarian dogma. “We confess one God—rebuke to the many-named false gods—self-sufficient, without cause, simple, ineffable, Creator, all-powerful, all-creator, creator and maker of the visible and invisible. And from Him, and with Him, and to Him, there is one Birth—uncreated, creating, equal, cooperative. And one Holy Ghost of God—forever proceeding from Him and with Him, creating and equal to the Father and the Son. Thus, confesses the holy and universal Church the perfect Holy Trinity—the incorporeal, invisible, immaterial, foreknowing, known before all creatures, and established in the one kingdom and one Deity of the three perfect Hypostases. For the Hypostasis of the Father is not the Hypostasis of the Son, for He is not the Father of His Hypostasis. And the Hypostasis of the Son is not the Hypostasis of the Father, for He is not the Son of His Hypostasis. And the Hypostasis of the Holy Ghost is not the Hypostasis of the Father or of the Son, because He is not the Ghost of His Hypostasis, but of the Spirit of God” [1:29].

By saying that the Trinity is one God, Eznik of Kolb means that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have the same name, the same dignity, and eternity. The Father is God, uncreated and eternal. The Son and the Holy Ghost are the same. The Father is infinite, the Son and the Holy Ghost are also infinite. The difference lies in the characteristics of the Hypostases. The Father is not begotten; the Son is begotten, and the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father, and all three are one perfect God. The only begotten Son is the wisdom and power of God. The fact that the Son is born of the Father does not mean that He follows the Father in time; the same can be said of the Holy Ghost who proceeds from the Father. Every act of God is always done by the Holy Trinity, not just one of His Hypostases.

The Christian doctrine of the God-man makes sense only when the divine nature of the Word incarnate in Jesus is recognized. It is therefore quite logical that for Eznik of Kolb the trinitarian dogma is inseparably linked to the christological

dogma. As we know, the Christology of the Armenian Church is based on the teaching of St. Cyril of Alexandria [8:195]. The nucleus of the doctrine is the dogmatic formula "the One Nature of God the Incarnate Word" which refutes the Nestorian heresy. The Chalcedonites, wishing to discredit it, declare that it actually belongs to Apollinarius of Laodicea. He was a staunch supporter of Nicene orthodoxy, an opponent of Origenism and pagan Neoplatonism. Apollinarius, being a follower of St. Athanasius of Alexandria, was convinced that the union of the Word in one essence with the Father and of a perfect human nature inevitably leads to the idea of the existence of two sons of God, the first of whom is Son by nature, and the second by adoption [2:105]. A perfect God and a perfect man can never form one being. According to him, the Word in Christ was not united with a complete, but with a flawed and incomplete human nature. Christ had a physical body and an animating soul, but He had no self-conscious rationality, which in Greek is called *nous-intellect*, in place of which the divine Word took [4:180].

This was, of course, a blatant heresy condemned by the Church. However, even if the St. Cyril's formula does belong to Apollinarius, this is still no reason to reject it, for there have been cases in Church history when confessional formulas of heretical origin have become orthodox through their radical reinterpretation. The Cyrillic understanding of the one nature, also accepted by the Armenian Church, does not mean that the two natures, having mixed together, became one nature, but that the two natures, preserving their characteristic features, were united in Christ, the one and indivisible [9:408]. Speaking of the one nature of the incarnate Word, the Armenian theologians did not mean the absence of human nature in Christ, nor the diminution of the perfection of His divine nature. Unity means that Christ's human nature, while fully preserving all its characteristics, was not ontologically independent of His divine nature, as the Nestorians believed, but was initially inseparable from His divinity, without which it could not exist. In other words, the Word, having become incarnate, retained all His perfection, did not mingle with the human nature of Jesus, and entered into an inseparable ontological relationship with it. The two natures became one, fully preserving all their unique qualities. There is, of course, a logical contradiction here, but it is an ineffable mystery to be accepted on faith. The laws of logic simply do not apply in this area.

One of the important components of Cyril's Christology was the naming of the Virgin Mary as the Mother of God, which was directed against Nestorius who called Mary the Mother of Christ [7:130]. This concept was based on Antiochian Christology. The Antiochians, far from opposing the Nicene orthodoxy, which affirmed the incorruptibility of God the Word, nevertheless believed that the fullness of human nature, perceived by the Word, had a decisive role in the history of our salvation. And so in their interpretations of the New Testament they emphasized the human qualities of Jesus as much as possible, while his divinity receded into the background. The relationship between humanity and divinity in Christ they imagined was analogous to the temple, that is, Jesus' body was the temple in which God the Word dwelt [7: 252]. They did not draw any heretical conclusions from

this thesis, but they followed from it with logical necessity. Within the framework of Antiochian Christology the Blessed Virgin could not be called the Mother of God, because what was born of Her was not God incarnate, but only the temple of God. This conclusion was reached by Nestorius, the disciple of Theodore of Mopsuestia, whose name was given to the Christological heresy condemned by the Third Ecumenical Council. For Nestorius and his teachers, the man Jesus brought salvation, and the Word residing in him only contributed to this. It was a manifest heresy, firmly rejected by the Church.

If Christ's body was not an illusory body, but a real human body, united from the beginning with the Word, then the Holy Virgin, from whom Christ received this body, was really the Mother of God, not the Mother of Christ [3:292]. Christ's humanity was born of the Holy Virgin, and her only difference from the humanity of others was that it was united to God the Word from the very beginning, from the moment of conception and during his nurture in the womb. It is from this fact that one should call the Virgin Mary the Mother of God, for Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God and the perfect God. Of course, this does not mean that the Holy Virgin gave birth to the divine nature of Christ, for that is eternal and uncreated. She gave birth to the human nature of Christ, which was initially one with the divine nature of the Word. His body was not the body of man, but of the Word, without ceasing to have all the qualities of human nature except sinfulness.

Eznik of Kolb was entirely in favor of this idea. "And the same God the Word at the end of time put on flesh, and became man for our sake, without change or fall of his divine nature, and was born of the Holy Virgin a perfect man according to the fleshly birth, and the Virgin is called and is the Mother of God and the Virgin, who gave birth to God and a perfect man" [1:28].

Eznik's letter to Mashtots was taken into consideration. In 435, the Second Church Council was convened in Ashtishat by the initiative of Catholicos Sahak I Partev and Mesrop Mashtots in order to officially adopt the resolutions of the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (431) and solve a number of problems connected with the spread of Nestorianism in Armenia. Nestorians were also present in Armenia, where they actively propagated their ideas and translated the works of Diodorus of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia into Armenian. The main advocates of orthodoxy of that time, Cyril of Alexandria, Proclus of Constantinople, and Acacius of Melitene were deeply concerned about that. According to Koryun, "And as they drew near Constantinople they joined Eznik, and as most intimate companions, together they performed their spiritual tasks. Then they came to the land of Armenia, having brought authentic copies of the God-given book and many subsequent traditions of the worthy church fathers, along with the canons of Nicaea and Ephesus, and placed before the fathers the testaments of the Holy Church which they had brought with them" [5: 120]. The council of Ashtishat approved them, and then engaged in Nestorianism. Along with Theodore of Mopsuestia, the Nestorians were anathematized, and the delegation was sent to Proclus, the patriarch of Constantinople to seek his opinion about the rightness of the resolutions

adopted in Ashtishat. After listening, Proclus wrote a letter to the Armenians, in which he condemned the Nestorians for introducing two persons to Christ.

In summary, we can characterize the dogmatic concept contained in Eznik of Kolb's letter "To the Blessed Archimandrite Mashtots" as follows. God is the Holy Trinity with three Hypostases and one essence. The Hypostases are consubstantial and equal. One of the Hypostases, God the Word, was incarnated from the Holy Virgin and became a perfect man, having all the fullness of human nature, except sin. He had one divine-human nature, but by no means only a divine nature. Christ was in deity one with the Father, and in humanity one with the Holy Virgin and all men. In Christ, Deity and humanity were one, but each retained its own characteristics, and were not mingled with the other. At the same time, we should not think that the body of Christ was like the temple in which God the Word dwelt, as the Nestorians thought. Christ will return again to earth to judge the living and the dead, to give eternal life to the righteous, and to torment sinners forever.

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«ԱՌ ԵՐԱՆԵԼԻ ՄԱՇՏՈՑ ՎԱՐԴԱՊԵՏ» ԹՂԹՈՒՄ**

*Արթուր Մաթևոսյան*

**Բանալի բառեր՝** Գիրք թղթոց, Սուրբ Կյուրեղ, Նեստոր, Ապողինար, Սուրբ Երրորդություն, Անձ, Բան, Քրիստոս, Սուրբ Կոյս:

«Գիրք թղթոց»-ում պահպանվել է Եզնիկ Կողբացու «Առ երանելի Մաշտոց վարդապետ» թուղթը, որը 5-րդ դարի հայ Եկեղեցու դավանանքը արտացոլող կարևոր փաստաթղթերից է: Ամփոփ, Եզնիկ Կողբացու «Առ երանելի Մաշտոց վարդապետ» թղթի մեջ պարունակվող դավանաբանական հայեցակարգը կարելի է բնութագրել այսպես: Հայոց Եկեղեցու դավանաբանական համակարգի հիմքում ընկած է Նիկիո հանգանակի այն դրույթը, որի համաձայն Աստված մի էություն է և երեք Անձեր: Աստված Սուրբ Երրորդություն է, որն ունի երեք Անձ և մեկ բնություն: Այս երեք Աստվածային Անձերն ունեն մի էություն, մեկ կամք, զորություն, թագավորություն, ուժ և փառք: Անձերը մեկը մյուսից ոչ փոքր են, ոչ մեծ, բայց նույնքան հզոր, համագո և համապատիվ: Հայր Աստված չի ծնվել, Որդին ծնվել է Հորից, և Սուրբ Հոգին բխում է նույն Հորից: Անձերից մեկը՝ Բան Աստված, մարմնացավ Սուրբ Կոյսից և դարձավ կատարյալ մարդ՝ ունենալով՝ բացի մեղքից, մարդկային բնության բոլոր հատկանիշները, այսինքն՝ հոգին, մարմինը և միտքը: Նա ուներ մեկ աստվածամարդկային բնություն, բայց ոչ մի դեպքում միայն աստվածային բնություն: Հիսուս Քրիստոս Աստծո միածին Որդին է ու կատարյալ Աստված, ուստի Նրան ծնած Ս.Կոյսը պիտի կոչվի Աստվածածին: Իհարկե, դա չի նշանակում, որ Ս.Կոյսը ծնել է Քրիստոսին ըստ Իր Աստվածության, քանզի վերջինս հավիտենական է և անստեղծ: Նա ծնել է Քրիստոսի մարդկային բնությունը, որն ի սկզբանե միեղեն էր Բանի Աստվածային բնության հետ: Ուստի Սուրբ Կոյսին պետք է անվանել Աստվածածին, այլ ոչ թե Քրիստոսածին, ինչպես դա անում էր Նեստորը: Նրա

մարմինը ոչ թե մարդու, այլ Բանի մարմին էր՝ չդադարելով ունենալ մարդկային բնության բոլոր հատկությունները՝ բացի մեղսականությունից: Քրիստոս աստվածությամբ նույնական էր Հոր հետ, իսկ մարդկությամբ՝ Սուրբ Կոյսի և բոլոր մարդկանց հետ: Քրիստոսի մեջ աստվածությունն ու մարդկությունը մեկ էին, բայց նրանցից յուրաքանչյուրը պահպանում էր իր առանձնահատկությունները, և նրանք չէին խառնվում միմյանց հետ: Միևնույն ժամանակ, չպետք է ենթադրել, որ Քրիստոսի մարմինը նման էր տաճարի, որտեղ բնակվում էր Բան Աստված, ինչպես հավատում էին նեստորականները: Քրիստոս ևս մեկ անգամ կվերադառնա երկիր՝ ողջերին ու մեռելներին դատելու, արդարների հավիտենական կյանք պարգևելու, իսկ մեղավորներին հավիտենական տանջանքներին մատնելու համար: