

***Incorruptible Bodies:  
Christology, Society, and Authority in Late Antiquity***  
By Y. Moss (2016)  
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*Reviewed by Jeffrey Wickes*

The events that took place among Christians in the fifth and sixth century Mediterranean form a reformation as significant as that which occurred in sixteenth century Europe, yet of which many of us have never heard. As is better known, in the early fourth century, the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and moved his capital to Constantinople (née Byzantium, now Istanbul). His conversion ushered in a new era, in which adherence to the *wrong* version of Christianity (not to mention Judaism or Manichaeism) held political consequences.

*Incorruptible Bodies: Christology, Society, and Authority in Late Antiquity* – a revised version of Yonatan Moss' 2013 Yale dissertation – takes shape against the backdrop of this increasingly politicised Roman-Byzantine Church. It concerns the birth of the Miaphysites, a federation of ecclesiastical communities that, during the fifth through seventh centuries CE, came to extend from Armenia in the north, to Ethiopia in the south. All these churches commonly confessed that Christ had one nature, which set them at odds with the two-nature christological orthodoxy of the Roman Empire. Because of their allegiance to this 'one nature' (*mia physis*) theology, they would come to be called 'Miaphysites' (or 'Monophysites', pejoratively). Because of their rejection of the formula of the imperially convened Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), they would come to be called anti-Chalcedonians. Theirs is an ecclesial body that exists to this day, primarily in Syria, Palestine, Armenia, Egypt, Ethiopia, and India.

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The action of *Incorruptible Bodies* takes place amidst this developing anti-Chalcedonian movement. The book contributes to the broader question of how and why a Christian community rejected the imperial Church, despite the political consequences it suffered. Moss immediately focuses on a debate between two prominent leaders of the anti-Chalcedonian movement: Severus of Antioch (died 538 CE) and Julian of Halicarnassus (died c. 528 CE). Though Severus and Julian stood united in their rejection of Chalcedon, they became vehemently divided over a specific question: was Christ's body incorruptible from birth, or did it become so only after the passion and resurrection? Julian argued the former, Severus the latter. This debate over Christ's body forms the context within which Moss explores his broader thesis. Contrary to scholarly opinion, Moss argues, Severus never intended to form a distinct non-Chalcedonian Church. He was ardently opposed to Chalcedonian theology, yet wished anti-Chalcedonians to remain in the imperial Church, and, from within, to convert it. Moss' book makes this case compellingly, drawing on an array of difficult, and often untranslated, primary sources.

Beyond its specific argument about the Miaphysite movement, Moss' book asks broader questions about the relationship between theological and social ideas of the body. To these debates about the body and society, he contributes a study of a particular historical moment, in which two thinkers reflected on seemingly abstract theological ideas while simultaneously reimagining the social foundations of their church. Moss is interested in how Severus and Julian's ideas about the physical body of Christ shaped their ideas about the social body of the Church, and vice versa. He pursues what he calls a 'stereoscopic' approach, which aims to hold together the various areas of Severus and Julian's theological reflection upon Christ, liturgy, and the Church. This methodology leads Moss to a nuanced reading of these debates; it allows the reader to see apparently pedantic arguments as, in fact, exposing profoundly different ways of seeing and being in the world.

The book's argument unfolds through four chapters. Chapter 1 traces the development of the debate, and shows how Severus and Julian's views on the body of Christ were shaped by their understanding of protology and anthropology. As Julian saw it, an originally incorrupt Adam and Eve had, through their transgression, immersed humanity in a corruptibility that would be passed on through procreation. Christ, because he stood outside of this procreative cycle, was not subject to this initial corruptibility – his body was therefore incorruptible (p. 35). Severus argued otherwise. For him, the bodies of Adam and Eve were always corruptible, but were graced with potential incorruptibility prior to their transgression. Christ shared

with them their corruptible state, with all its attendant needs. Morally, he was incorruptible, in that he did not sin; but, until the resurrection, his body shared the same needs as any other human body (pp. 35–6). What is crucial, Moss argues, is that their different perspectives on these issues led to different understandings of how the Church should look. Julian argued that the Church should reflect Christ's incorruptibility, with heresy figured in terms of corruption. Severus, on the other hand, was willing to see the Church as a corruptible body in process, moving towards an incorruptible state, but achieving such only after the resurrection (pp. 41–2).

Chapters 2 and 3 trace the ramifications of these respective ecclesiologicals. Chapter 2 looks at debates over practices of baptism and ordination. Predictably, Julian insisted that converts to the anti-Chalcedonian cause needed to be reinitiated (through baptism or ordination), even when such practices necessitated dismissal of certain canons (such as those governing the consecration of bishops). Severus, meanwhile, insisted on allegiance to the canons of the imperial Church, and advised lenience in the reception of its members. Chapter 3 turns to the liturgical aspects of this debate, focusing especially on the Eucharist and the diptychs (a list that a bishop would intone liturgically to indicate the other bishops with whom he was in communion). Here, Severus advocated a relaxed position: he permitted the retention of the names of Chalcedonian bishops within the diptychs, and argued for a non-literal Eucharist theology that understood the benefits of the Eucharist primarily from a post-resurrectional perspective.

Chapter 4 examines Severus and Julian's views on 'the body of the Fathers'. During the debates that led to the birth of the Miaphysites, the authority of certain fourth and fifth century authors grew, along with a sense that one's theological position needed to be rooted in the canon formed by these authors' works. Moss shows that Severus held the Fathers' corpus to be utterly incapable of admitting error, while Julian was happy to accept lapses in the Fathers' theological judgement. This is surprising: elsewhere in the book, Severus comes across as flexible, and Julian as rigorous. That in this case their thought developed in unexpected ways allows Moss to caution against a too thorough-going application of his stereoscopic methodology: sometimes a thinker's theological and social ideas just do not neatly align. Moss' willingness to accept this indicates one of the refreshing aspects of the application of his methodology: it generally guides the narrative of the book, but it is not applied to the point of misinterpreting the sources.

Yonatan Moss has written an engaging and important study. The book is most impressive in its careful reading of the sources. To get at the story that Moss aims to tell, he must wade through the complicated textual record in which this debate survives. Julian's writings are mostly lost, and his ideas

survive predominantly in writings biased against him. Severus' writings, meanwhile, are theologically dense, and survive primarily in Syriac translations of their original Greek. Moss leads the reader through this dense textual landscape with enviable ease. Despite the textual difficulties, Moss presents Severus and Julian believably and compellingly. He has used his impressive textual skills to pen a piece of revisionist history, which adds depth and nuance to this sixth century debate.

The book is a success, and its failings are of a minor sort. The book could have been strengthened with a stronger sense of the 'why' of the thinkers' various positions. In the introduction, Moss argues against an attempt to pursue a causative link between the various aspects of the figures' thought (between Christology, liturgy, and ecclesiology). He argues, instead, that we should think not in terms of causation, but correlation. He pursues this insight consistently throughout the book – rarely does he privilege a particular aspect of Severus or Julian's thought, instead placing them alongside one another, tracing the outlines of their connectedness. Surely this is historically responsible, but I found myself repeatedly looking for a greater sense of 'why': surely, for example, Severus' protology, anthropology, Christology, and liturgical theology all connected, but which came first, or held a central place in his thought? Moss often seemed content to trace the parallels, without hazarding a more holistic account of their underlying rationale.

I felt a similar sense in the final chapter, on the body of the Fathers. Moss uncovers some fascinating detail here, and his account of the unexpected turn of Severus and Julian's thought was compelling. Here, he does offer some brief explanations for why Severus might have developed as he did – Severus' reading seems to reflect his legal training in Beirut – or that the positions reflect different understandings of the *loci* of authority. But these explanations seemed almost something of an afterthought.

These criticisms are minor; they by no means detract from the overall success of the book. The book reconstructs a history of a seemingly minute debate, but Moss connects this micro-history to the broader history of Christianity in late antiquity, and the history of religions. His study models how to anchor oneself in a particular historical moment, while opening up to wider views of the period as a whole. He touches on ritual, liturgy, and the Eucharist, the importance of theological style, the growth of 'the Fathers' as an authoritative source, and developing ideas of the Church. His book would be helpful to anyone exploring these issues in any period.