Introduction

One of the most enigmatic and certainly most controversial figures of the middle patristic era is Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 313–87). Ordained bishop by a metropolitan considered Arian, ally to moderate semi-Arians, yet in the end dubbed a defender of Nicene orthodoxy – Cyril, at first glance, gives the impression of having led a chameleon-like existence. Not surprisingly, Cyril was the object of a considerably mixed press during his lifetime and immediately following his death,¹ and contemporary assessment of his legacy appears to be no less vexed.² Any attempt to disentangle the seeming web of contra-

¹ Ancient commentary issues from Rufinus, Jerome, Sozomen, Socrates, Theodoret, Epiphanius, and the second session of the Council of Constantinople (382).
dictions surrounding his church life has so far proven to be a daunting, if not elusive, task. A number of reputable studies over the years, however, have taken up the challenge of trying to identify the cardinal points unifying Cyril’s ecclesiastical career. The body of modern commentary on Cyril from the last century is considerable. Notable among the research of late is J.W. Drijvers’s monograph, which gives focused attention to Cyril in the social-historical context of late antique Jerusalem, and P. van Nuffelen’s meticulous paper, which responds critically to a number of the former’s historical conclusions. The goal of the present brief study will be to converse with this literature, recent and remote, by: (1) modestly engaging the exchange between Van Nuffelen and Drijvers through the adoption of a joint historical-theological lens on Cyril; (2) synthesizing much of the sizable corpus of prior contemporary opinion on Cyril, and via these two lines; and (3) attempting to outline the basic lineaments of a sympathetic reinterpretation of Cyril’s much disputed clerical life.


3 Van Nuffelen, “Cyril.”
4 Drijvers, Bishop and City.
Controversial Cyril

The Essential Facts. Cyril was ordained deacon by the anti-Arian bishop Macarius of Jerusalem c. early 330’s and was ordained priest by Macarius’ pro-Nicene, pro-Athanasian successor, Maximus of Jerusalem, c. 342–43. After either the deposition or death of Maximus c. 348, Cyril was consecrated.


Drijvers, Bishop and City, 32; Gifford, Introduction, ii.

Röwenkamp, “Cyril,” 157; Drijvers, Bishop and City, 32.