Eucharist and the Mystical Supper in the Syriac Fathers

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At the heart of lived Christianity is the Eucharist and the origin of the Eucharist is the mystical supper. Commentaries on this passage and theologies of the Eucharist in general abound in all traditions. The Syriac tradition (traditions) also possesses a rich theology of the Eucharist and commentary on the Eucharist. Yet, the tradition does not remain isolated and one can notice differences in theology as one gets further away from primitive Syriac sources. This paper will examine some of these differences through examining some of the writings of four theologians, Ephrem, Cyrillona, John Chrysostom, and Isaac of Nineveh, following the distance of the writer from the primitive origin with Cyrillona following Ephrem because of temporality and with John Chrysostom following Cyrillona because of exposure to Byzantine modes of thinking and expression.

Syriac theology did not grow in a vacuum and did not grow ex nihilo. Rather the theology came from the scriptures, from Jewish and Semitic customs, and from the model of nature. Furthermore, the theologians studied in this paper have an additional source- church tradition and liturgy from which they draw their theological conclusions.[[1]](#footnote-1) What may seem like a profound insight, may be the most obvious statement of fact and what may seem absurd may be as plain as day from the text or from some cultural understanding. Before looking at the theologians themselves, there will be a brief examination of one of the scriptural sources which influenced profoundly Ephrem (directly) and Cyrillona (at least indirectly). This text presents issues which are not present for theologians at other times who have access to other texts.

There are three theological methods which this paper hopes to point out. The first is what this paper will call unity of theology or unified theology in which nonlinear topics are merged together to show something which would not be seen separately. An analogy to this is polarized or filtered lenses. Polarized lenses allow one to see certain things (light coming from one direction) while blocking out other things (light coming from all other directions). Sometimes this allows the Syriac theologian to see all of the colors of a scene where a western/linear theologian might see only one. Other times it allows western theologians to attempt to name things clearly, when Syriac theologians see only dazzling light beyond comprehension. The second aspect which is important and which relates to unified theology is typology which is the study of promise and fulfilling promise (in Christ) and eschatological fulfillment. All four of the theologians studied utilize typology which is repeatable and properly exegetical. However, they also practice allegorical theology, which is the explanation of one thing (scripture or nature) in the images of another thing or concept. While this method often tells us little about the scripture, it does provide insight into the explaining concept. For example, the four gospels are not a mystical call to go forth to all directions and this interpretation teaches nothing about why there are four Gospels. Yet, this interpretation does teach about the need to preach the Gospel. Following this model, this paper will extract interpretations of allegories found in the text and apply the relevant data.

Scriptural Sources of early Syriac Writers

Before looking at the commentary of the Syriac fathers on the mystical supper, one should look at what text the fathers are using. One text which played a large role in the Syriac Church was the Diatessaron. This text is no longer extant, but we do have Ephrem’s commentary. Based on Ephrem’s commentary one can deduce the text of the Diatesseron and note anything that is special or unique about it. According to Louis Leloir, Ephrem’s commentary on the mystical supper references primarily the Gospel of John (13,1-17,5,12,14,23,25f,30, 14:10,11, 15:18, 16:6,15,28,32,17:11,12), secondarily the Gospel of Matthew (26:21,24,48f,52,67,72), and finally the Gospel of Mark (14:5) with no explicit references to the Gospel of Luke.[[2]](#footnote-2) What is important is that there is an assumption that all of the Gospel accounts go together, without the struggle over how to put them together (because the texts are put together) however there may be some missing nuance. Furthermore all of the texts (foot washing, Passover, mystical supper, discourse) are all seen as going together. Below is the text as compiled by Hamlyn Hil,

“With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you, before I suffer… One of you , he that eateth bread with me, he it is that shall betray me. And behold, the hand of my betrayer is with me at this table, dipping. And the Son of man goeth, as also it is written of him; but woe to that man!...it were better for him, if he had not been born…Our Lord blessed and brake. I will not drink henceforth until the kingdom of my Father. Behold Satan hath obtained permission to sift you as wheat, and I have prayed the (Father) for thee, that thy faith fail not. A new commandment I give unto you: Love one another, as I have loved you…. I am the way…Shew us thy Father, and it sufficeth us… have ye not known me?... My Father,, that is in me, he doeth these works… I am in the Father, and the Father in me; and we are one…. He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he also do; and greater works shall he do.. Another Advocate I send unto you. … and findeth nothing that is his in me… he that hath not his sword, let him buy himself a sword… Two are enough… Ye are clean through my word, which I have spoken unto you… This is my commandment…Greater love than this can none other have, that he lay down his life for his friends… know that they hated me also, before they hated you…I chose you, before the world was…If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you also…as also it is written in the law: They hated me without cause…. Behold , I send unto you the Advocate…It is expedient for you that I go away; for, if I go not away, the Advocate cometh not unto you ( and all truth is not made known unto you.)… and of judgement because the prince of this world is judged… Whatsoever my Father has is mine. And I came from the Father… I am not alone, because my Father is with me…. I have overcome the world… the hour is come: glorify thy Son and thy Son will glorify thee… give me glory from thyself, of that which thou gavest me before the world was… (and that which I have, is my Father's)… and I come to thee, my Father… and none of them perished but the son of perdition.….My soul is sorrowful …Father if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; but not my will, but thine be done…”

The first thing to notice about the text is that there is no citation of the washing of the feet, although Ephrem does mention briefly the washing of the feet. Second, the outline of the text: (washing of the feet), desire for the Passover, prediction of betrayer, the blessing and breaking, the promise not to drink, an exhortation to love one another, discourse on the Father, the promise of the Spirit, the two swords, and then (though moved now to the garden) let this cup pass from me. Third, the text places the institution narrative (found in the synoptic gospels) before the giving of the morsel to Judas. Many modern unifiers of the gospels following other fathers prefer to put the institution narrative after Judas leaves. The high priestly prayer is omitted. There is a closer proximity of the mystical supper and the “let this cup pass from me.”

The Eucharist in Ephrem

Ephrem’s commentary on the mystical supper begins briefly with the washing of the feet. Then he writes of the betrayer, and in light of the betrayer, Ephrem writes of communion, “If it is truly certain that, when (the Lord) gave bread to his disciples, he gave them the mystery of his body, one must also believe that, when he gave the bread to his slayer, he gave it to him as the mystery of his slain body.”[[3]](#footnote-3) From this text and its place one may notice three things. First, it is important that the words of the institution narrative are not mentioned, for they are not primary as in the Latin Rite. Second, Ephrem holds that the bread became the mystery of Jesus’ body. Third, the use of the word “mystery” or “raza” characterizes the view of Ephrem not to pry into what is happening. Ephrem would not have used such phrases as transubstantiate. He uses both the word “bread” and the phrase “mystery of his body”. However, one cannot doubt that Ephrem believed in what the Latin Church would call the real presence, because Ephrem goes on to speak of the slain body, which would imply a realism as well as a timelessness (or outside-of-time-ness) of the mystery. Fourth, along this line, since the mystery of the body was a mystery of something to come it would easily follow that this mystery is to be repeated in time after the typified event takes place. Fifth, Ephrem holds that Judas ate the bread which had been blessed (which was the mystery of Jesus’ body).

Ephrem gives two explanations for Judas eating the bread which was blessed. The first explanation is an allegorical interpretation, “He (Jesus) dipped it, to render (evident) the total participation (of Judas) in his death, for his body was destined to be dipped in his blood.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In this typological interpretation, Judas actually eats the Body of Christ. Ephrem seems to decide against this idea (that the betrayer eats the body of the Lord). However, whether or not the betrayer ate the Lord, the typological interpretation could still apply. Before giving his historical interpretation he gives another allegorical interpretation, “Or (alternatively), he dipped it so as not to give testament with him. He moistened it and then gave it to him; moistened first because it had been prepared for the (testament) which was to follow.” This allegory interprets the dipping as a rejection and a separation. The first use of “testament” refers to Judas not entering into covenant with Jesus. The second use of “testament” refers to the Death and Resurrection of Jesus and means sign or testimony. Ephrem then continues by interpreting the washing of the feet in terms of the Body of Christ (the Church) and Judas. “Judas was not a member of the Body of his Church, he was but the dust which clung to the feet (of the disciples).”[[5]](#footnote-5) Here Ephrem links both the foot washing and the Eucharist to ecclesiology and unites the two aspects together. For Ephrem there is no contradiction between John and the Synoptic Gospels (although if the Diatessaron was the only text to which he had access then this would not be an issue). Ephrem continues with a third theory of what happened when Jesus fed Judas, “He dipped the bread in the water and gave it to him, for Judas was not worthy of the bread which, together with the wine, was given to the twelve. It was not permissible that, through it, he should receive the one who would save from death him, who was going to hand him over to death.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Before going to the multiple possible interpretations of this text, I would like to note three items. First, although Ephrem believed in what the Latin Church would later call the real presence, Ephrem does not have a preoccupation about what to call what the Latin Church would call the sacred species. Ephrem says bread and wine referring to the Eucharist. In Syriac “fagro” is masculine and so is “lahmo” unlike in Greek where “ἄρτον” is masculine and “σῶμά” is neuter, “Καὶ λαβὼν ἄρτον εὐχαριστήσας ἔκλασεν καὶ ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς λέγων· τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ σῶμά μου τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν διδόμενον· τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν.”The demonstrative adjective “τοῦτό” which is neuter when translated into Syriac would have translated into the ambiguous masculine “hono”. Again, Ephrem is not denying that the qurban is true flesh and true blood. Second, Ephrem seems to imply the practice of intinction, for he is comparing the dipping in water to the dipping in wine. Third, Ephrem believes that the Eucharist saves one from death and consequently gives life. Ephrem interprets the text with Judas not consuming the qurban because the consequence of eating the qurban is life. Contrary to some modern theologians who question the position of Judas, Ephrem condemns him as betrayer. Now it seems that there are two possible interpretations of the text, either the dipping washed away the blessing or this bread is different than the consecrated bread. Elsewhere, Ephrem explicitly states that the blessing is washed from the bread. What is interesting to note is that this interpretation which is about what literally happened is compatible with one or both of the allegorical interpretations.

After presenting three theories of the dipping of the morsel, Ephrem presents three theories of how the three days are numbered. Ephrem inserts a talk of the three days here because of the close relationship with which he holds the death/resurrection and the mystical supper. Ephrem sees the events as going together and being interpreted together. The first interpretation focuses most explicitly on the relationship between the passion and the mystical supper. Ephrem writes, “From the moment when he broke his body for his disciples and gave it to his apostles, three days are numbered during which he was counted among the dead, like Adam.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Above Ephrem spoke of the qurban as Christ slain. Ephrem counts the three days of death from this moment. It would be interesting to know if Ephrem considered the mystical supper as distinct from Eucharist after the Resurrection. It is possible that Ephrem considered this qurban as slain as opposed to the later qurban as resurrected. Furthermore, Ephrem shows a relationship between Adam and Jesus through a typological relationship. Ephrem goes on to explain, “For, although, after having eaten the fruit of the tree, (Adam) lived for many years, he was nonetheless numbered among the dead for having transgressed the commandment.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Ephrem continues the typology between Adam and Jesus in relating the Eucharist to the fruit of the tree of life. Ephrem even implies the teaching, which he speaks of elsewhere, that Jesus partook of the Eucharist. For Adam ate as a type of Jesus eating. Moreover, Adam ate as a negative type of Christians eating. Ephrem’s interpretation has profound soteriological implications. First, Adam died spiritually before he died physically, and his death was real from the time of the eating. Following this model Christians have new life spiritually at first communion, even though they may not see immortality until later (post death or post sheol). Yet, this spiritual life is actually the new life and is not merely a promise of new life, just as for Adam the eating was more than a promise of death. The other two interpretations of the three days before resurrection were not related to the mystical supper directly, but it is telling even that a discussion of this idea is mentioned in a commentary on the mystical supper. This shows the unity of theology ever present in Syriac theology (this paper on a single topic would not be typical of Syriac theology).

Next, Ephrem gives an interpretation of the blessing of the bread which follows the Adam/Jesus theme, “It was because Adam had not blessed (the fruit) at the time when, as a rebel, he gathered it, that Our Lord blessed the bread and broke it.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Now while for Ephrem the sin of Adam, as expressed in his commentary on Genesis, was based on disobedience followed by rejection of mercy, Ephrem here emphasizes Adam’s act of separation from God before eating the fruit. Adam did not bless the fruit which means calling down God’s blessing upon it. To eat without blessing is to eat separated from God. Ephrem counteracted Adam’s lack of blessing with Jesus blessing of the bread. It is possible that this blessing refers to what in liturgy is referred to as an epiclesis. For if a father blesses an act by letting it be done with his favor, then it is possible that the blessing of God would be to send His Holy Spirit. Ephrem continues, “The bread entered (into them), making up for the avarice by which Adam had rejected (God).”[[10]](#footnote-10) Ephrem considers this time after Judas left as the time when the other apostles receive communion. He further continues Adam typology with this food removing what Adam’s food brought to Adam. The qurban removed the avarice which the apostles had inherited from Adam. Here in the midst of Ephrem’s discussion of the mystical supper, he again demonstrates the unity of his theology by speaking of the effects of ancestral sin. It is interesting that it is avarice that is considered the effect of ancestral sin. However, this may have more to do with the relationship of the greed of Judas and an interpretation thereof. Yet, Ephrem neatly links Adam as type to the mystical supper as fulfillment.

After the eating (or after communion), Ephrem moves on to the interpretation of the swords. Ephrem interprets the swords allegorically, but he does so in a way that nicely complements the context. Speaking of the swords, Ephrem writes, “Because they were of the Jewish people, of those who were thirsting for the sword and blood, like two of them.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The number two is interpreted as a thirst for the sword and for blood. These are the two worst reasons to go to war, for they elevate war as a good in itself. However, hidden in the expression of blood lust we find a type of the Eucharist. In Jewish law, it was forbidden to drink blood or to eat foot with blood in it and so the idea of drinking blood would be foreign or reprehensible. Yet, if the Jewish people had a tendency for war, then the qurban could be seen as a replacement of peace. It is as if Jesus were to say, “you desire blood, take mine.” The idea of the Jesus’ blood as a replacement for war is an interesting interpretation and fits in the context of the apostles taking up swords to defend themselves and Peter readily striking one of the men who came to apprehend Jesus. On another note, Ephrem’s apparently anti-Jewish comment must be read in the context of competing for converts and of a man who commonly practiced rabbinical methods and practices.

Surrounding the discussion of the swords, Ephrem speaks about the Father about the Holy Spirit and about the Trinity in general.[[12]](#footnote-12) Ephrem follows John for this lengthy text. This juxtaposition again shows the unity of theology in the Syriac tradition. I would go on to comment in general that there seems fitting that a revelation about the Trinity follows the mystical supper, seemingly representing the communion in the Trinity that follows the Eucharist. This is a fitting close to Ephrem’s commentary on the mystical supper.

Cyrillona on the Eucharist

Cyrillona has three memre on the night of the mystical supper: *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, *On the Washing of the Feet*, and *On the Pasch of Our Lord*. The three together make a commentary of the events of that night in a poetic form. The most relevant is the first of the three memre although all three add content to the topic relevant to this paper.

In *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, Cyrillona begins by calling Jesus the lamb, which invokes typological imagery of the Passover lamb, this becomes more explicit in the third memra. Furthermore, Cyrillona defines the mystical supper as a new Passover, for he writes, “the Firstborn revealed to his disciples the pasch which (took place) in the upper room.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Not only is Jesus the new lamb, He is also the firstborn of the Egyptians who was slain. However, the death of Jesus is not a slaying but a sacrifice, “Our Savior prepared himself for the sacrifice and the libation.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The liturgical table is fittingly called a table and the presbyter is fittingly called a priest, because Jesus is the sacrifice and the high priest and the Eucharist is truly the Lord. Cyrillona continues with an allegorical interpretation of the bread, which for him was leavened, “the dough of His body was leavened with the leaven of His divinity.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Here are two items found above in the commentaries of Isaac and Ephrem. First, Cyrillona interprets the mystical supper in light of his liturgical experience. The liturgy he was experiencing used leavened bread, so he assumes leavened bread, elsewhere in the memra he contrasts the leavened bread which is living to the nonliving unleavened bread of the first Passover, “It was cold like a corpse, and was bread entirely lacking leaven.[[16]](#footnote-16)” Second, Cyrillona freely jumps from one concept to the other because of the unity of theology.

The memra continues with ecclesiology, “He took the heap from Zion and gave it to the church in purity. He made a new meal and summoned… the sons of his house. He prepared a dinner for his bride.”[[17]](#footnote-17) For Cyrillona, the Lord made the Church in the Eucharist (and at the passion). He ties various images around the idea of bread and Christ feeding the beloved. The imagery of Jesus as chef and cook are unusual, yet they flow from the poetic meditations of Cyrillona and while allegorical are not isegetical.

Cyrillona saw many more allegories than Ephrem for instance he makes an allegory about the place of the mystical supper in relation to ecclesiology, “’in the upper room and not in the lower’, for the Firstborn desired to raise his church upwards to heaven.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Cyrillona stretches the text in this interpretation for what could have a much simpler historical explanation, however, he does hint at his theology of the Eucharist. The Eucharist elevates or transfigures those in who partake of it and through it the Church may enter heaven.

The next aspect follows most likely from a Syriac understanding of meals. In what seems impossible to modern western sensibilities Cyrillona writes, “The lamb ate the lamb and the Pasch devoured the pasch.”[[19]](#footnote-19) This is a position that other Syriac fathers hold and that makes its way into the liturgy.[[20]](#footnote-20) The scriptural accounts of the mystical supper do not explicitly state that Jesus ate what he gave to the disciples, however, he did share in the meal surrounding. Yet, it would seem that it would be the cultural norm for the priest who offers the sacrifice to share in the sacrifice or a host to share in the meal. If so this would be an example of Cyrillona interpreting the text culturally. However, this need not be the case. There could be some other reason, either from liturgical practice, or from some extra-biblical tradition. However, this could be a critical interpretation of scripture. For instance in Mark one finds Jesus say, “I may eat the Passover with my disciples” (Mark 14:14 NRSV). Furthermore, Jesus says, “I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine” (Mark 14:14 NRSV). This may be interpreted as he did partake in His own blood or that He does not partake of the cup, but He did partake of the qurban.

Cyrillona also interprets the liturgy in terms of love, as Isaac of Nineveh later does, “His mercy gushed forth and his love bubbled up, that He might be food for His own.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Here as in Isaac we see that Jesus institutes the Eucharist out of love. The food is even seen as an overflowing of Jesus’ love. Cyrillona continues the love angle of the Eucharist when Jesus uses the Eucharist as a sign of His love, “See how much I have loved you.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Jesus speaking to the reader, tells the many gifts He has given to the Church out of love through the Eucharist. Among them are making the Church near to God, giving the kingdom. Here again the Eucharist is related to the kingdom. Again love is mentioned when Jesus hold Himself in His own hands, “bearing it in his love.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The qurban was blessed out of love, was broken out of love, was offered out of love, and was given out

Cyrillona, like Ephrem, writes of the dipping of the morsel to remove the blessing, so that Judas does not communicate, “He dipped the bread and took his blessing from it.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Unlike Ephrem, Cyrillona gives only one explanation of why the bread is dipped, to remove the blessing. He gives no analogical interpretation. However, Cyrillona assumes the removal of the blessing so that he relates the removal of the blessing with the casting out of Judas.

Cyrillona gives an interesting account of what happens in the consecration. This most likely parallels a liturgical rubric or understanding. First, Jesus raises up the bread. Then there is a talk of a mixing, “(He) mixed His blood though not thirsty.”[[25]](#footnote-25) This could refer to the comingling or to the mixing of water and wine or even to one of the mixed wines of Passover. Then there is a reference to Jesus appearing in the bread and the wine.[[26]](#footnote-26) Then one finds talk of a blessing which includes a prayer and glorification. Next there is a sacrifice, possibly corresponding to a breaking. Then one finds an institution narrative followed by an invitation to communion as well as how to receive communion, “I shall place myself in your palms.”[[27]](#footnote-27) This is a different use than that which Eprhem seemed to imply when he compared the dipping of the morsel with reception of communion. Throughout this “liturgy” one finds profound Eucharistic theology and imagery. He believes in a real presence, “with teeth of fire grind my bones and (with) corporeal tongues (taste) my hot blood.”[[28]](#footnote-28) In western expression there is no talk of grinding of bones or the heat of the blood as though from an animal freshly slaughtered. Yet, this language corresponds to John 6:53 which in Greek uses the visceral word “φάγητε”. He continues this strong imagery, by saying that the angels cannot look at the qurban. Furthermore, the qurban is the source of all holiness even unto the angels, for it is divinizing. Cyrillona refers to the qurban as the bread of divinity, and as that which Adam desired which had the power to make him divine. Because of divinization, the one who eats the Lord receives mercy as compared to the one who does not eat who receives justice and is burned, “I do not burn the one who eats me, but rather whomsoever tastes me not.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Cyrillona and the Syriac fathers take Jesus literally in John 6 with the direct relationship between the Eucharist and salvation.

The Eucharist and divinization impart effects. Those who receive the Eucharist are made zealous and there sorrows are consoled. The Eucharist also ended all animal sacrifices, so that they become null, and most likely an offense. The Eucharist gives endurance and conquers death. People are freed, redeemed, released from bondage, and all are made equal to each other. The Eucharist also unites heaven and earth.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Skipping over the memra *On the Washing of the Feet,* one finds further insight in the memra *On the Pasch of Our Lord*. In one section, Jesus speaking of His Cross, says that if he rejects suffering good will not come. One of the strophes is particularly Eucharistic, “if I withhold my mouth from the vinegar, I withhold my blood from the Church.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Here and throughout the section Cyrillona is interpreting mysteries analogically. Yet, what is important is that the Eucharist is seen as a gift and a positive consequence of the Cross. The Eucharist comes from the sacrifice of the Cross, because it is the same sacrifice.

Repeating the imagery of love, Cyrillona speaks of three biblical Eucharistic images, “a grain of wheat, a vineshoot, and also…a grape.”[[32]](#footnote-32) While these images are used to describe Christ’s relationship to the Church and to the Cross it is not coincidental that they are Eucharistic images. For instance when writing about how Jesus is like wheat, Cyrillona focuses on Jesus’ passivity and silence. Within this context of the wheat, Jesus allows Himself to be eaten just as He allowed Himself to be slain. Jesus is furthermore compared to wheat in Jerusalem which was mounded as He was mounded on the cross. In regards to the vineshoot, the sweetness of grapes is compared to the “sweetness of divinity”[[33]](#footnote-33) and the wine is called “the drink which slaked our thirst”.[[34]](#footnote-34) Again Christ’s passivity is stressed and again one finds typological references to Adam in the Garden. Additional typology is made from the grapes which were brought out of the Promised Land on a pole compared to Jesus on the cross.

In one of Cyrillona’s unrelated memra, *On Zacchaeus*, one finds a nice allegorical interpretation of the Eucharist as medicine of life as opposed to the devil’s poison. Cyrillona begins with an attempted negative type, “The serpent mixed sin in secret and mingled (it) with the blood of death for Eve, and that she might not loathe to drink it, he filled her full of sins in the guise of a friend.”[[35]](#footnote-35) The most profound image of this section is “blood of death”. Biblically it may be more common to relate blood to life, yet, Cyrillona’s emphasis on the relationship of blood and death is accurate. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on deception which prepares a way for a contrast to truth. The memra continues, “Our Lord mixed wine with his blood; he confected the medicine of life ‘til it brimmed over. His sweet savor descended and overpowered the lethal salt of death.”[[36]](#footnote-36) In contrast to the serpent, Jesus is man’s true friend. What Jesus offers is something sweet and He does not have to lie about the taste. Yet, it seems that the reason Jesus uses wine is for the fact that wine is sweeter than blood, and it was the very “accidents” of wine that he was interested in. While most medicine tastes bitter and is good for us despite its taste, Jesus’ blood tastes sweet, so that all will freely choose to partake of the medicine. The image of the medicine of life is common in the Syriac tradition although the medicine of life often refers to Jesus as an expectorant who causes Death to vomit up the living. Here the medicine of life refers to the Eucharist which gives life. The sweetness of the Eucharist is contrasted with the unpleasant taste of death which it overcomes. Continuing the image of the “medicine of life”, Jesus is called the “Good Fruit” who Mary places in the manger. Jesus as child is called fruit who is then put in a food trough served by “the sweet maid” for all. Cyrillona writes, “the nations ate it (the Good Fruit) and, by its savor, the serpent’s bite was healed.”[[37]](#footnote-37) The medicine of life is the antidote to the bite of the serpent mentioned in Genesis 3:18. This bite is not a major focus of the scripture verse,[[38]](#footnote-38) yet, Cyrillona runs with the idea just as he expands the idea of medicine of life even though it is not explicitly scriptural. The use of the term “the nations” by Cyrillona is contrasted with the term “the nation” not so much contrasting Jews and Greeks as expanding a small covenant into a universal covenant. The Passover of the Jews was about their deliverance, whereas the new Passover is about the deliverance of all. All people are offered a cure to the mortal wound each received.

John Chrysostom on the Eucharist

John Chrysostom, in his homilies on the Gospel of John, speaks about the Eucharist explicitly in his commentary on John 6. Chrysostom looks at the attributions of actions in the bread of life discourse. The people say that Moses gave their ancestors bread, yet, Chrysostom notes that it was God who gave them bread. Jesus attributed the Father as the giver of manna, and responds that He is the new manna which the same Father gives. The whole incarnation was manna, but also the Eucharist is the Manna and it is the Father who gives it (whether or not it was given through the Son or directly.[[39]](#footnote-39) However, the Eucharist/ Jesus is life to the world in the same way that manna was life to those in the desert. On a side note, when Chrysostom emphasized that Jesus and not merely the Eucharist is the manna, one may recall the meaning of manna “what is it” and see a relationship to the discourse between Jesus and the disciples around the question “who do people say that I am.

Chrysostom also has a high theological view of what is meant by “I am the bread of life”. This does not mean simply that the Eucharist is Jesus flesh or that Jesus’ flesh gives life, rather this is an allusion to the entire person of Christ especially His Godhead.[[40]](#footnote-40) What Chrysostom does with “I” is what others have done with term person.   
 The commentary continues with discussion of the resurrection. There is a universal resurrection, yet, some are raised to judgment while others are raised to life.[[41]](#footnote-41) Those who have Christ will not see judgment. Following this there is an allegorical interpretation of the bread of life as the teachings of Jesus although he also allows a literal interpretation.[[42]](#footnote-42) This is a position which like many positions listed above would be shunned in apologetic debates from the Catholic side, and yet Chrysostom was not a denier of the fundamental importance of the Eucharist. However, as at that time belief in the Eucharist was not controversial, he was free to interpret relevant texts allegorically as Isaac will later do.

Returning more directly to the Eucharist, Chrysostom assured of his knowledge of the Old Testament and of the authority it holds, makes note of the absurdity of eating someone’s flesh.[[43]](#footnote-43) Yet, the absurdity of Jesus claim makes sense only if it was a literal visceral claim. Yet, the Eucharist a corporeal as it is, is not limited to corporeal ends. Rather reception of the Eucharist has several spiritual ends which Chrysostom lists. The first end is that in being commingled with His Body through eating, one becomes a member of Christ’s body, the Church. Thus, the Eucharist is the source of the Church and the unifier of the Church. One also receives “noble birth” and the “seal of kinship”. Thus, the Eucharist is part of Christian initiation. Furthermore, the body “refreshes the soul”, “instills power”, and “chases demons”.[[44]](#footnote-44) Thus, the Eucharist is the strength of the spiritually mature. The blood “ordained priests”, “washed away sins”, inflamed souls, “brightened the intellect”, and “purchased and adorned” the Church.[[45]](#footnote-45) Thus, the Eucharist is the new sacrifice. Christ gives us many gifts through the Eucharist because of His love for us and because of the divinizing power of the Eucharist and because it was the goal of Christ to become man so that we might become like God.

Finally, Chrysostom ends his homilies on the Bread of Life discourse with a call to charity. He says that letting our neighbor starve or be left out in the cold is betraying Christ.[[46]](#footnote-46) Of the writings covered so far, this is the first explicit mention of the relationship between loving God and loving Christ in our neighbor. Christ told us that whatever one does to the least, one does to Him (Matthew 25:40). How can one claim to love Christ in his Body and Blood if one does not love Christ in one’s neighbor?

Isaac of Nineveh on the Eucharist

Isaac of Nineveh writes about the mystical supper several times in his ascetical homilies. We do not have any extant commentary, but we do have several references. In one section Isaac writes about God’s love for mankind. Isaac first writes, “God the Lord surrendered His own Son to death on the cross for the fervent love of creation. He could have redeemed us another way, but this way was a teacher unto us. By the death He made us near to Himself.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Isaac here speaks about revelation as teaching as well as redeeming as well as for the sake of love. In the Latin Church this would be called arguments of fittingness, however, what is important for the study of the Eucharist is the cause- because of love, the method- salvation and teaching, and the effect- making us near to God. Isaac continues explicitly with a similar pattern for the Eucharist, “For the sake of His love for us… the Lord said … ‘This is my body which is given for the world for life, and this is my blood which is shed for many for the remission of sins.’”[[48]](#footnote-48) For Isaac, the Eucharist is a profound act of love equal to the death on the cross and part of the same love. He also emphasizes the dual role of the Eucharist: life and forgiveness of sins. However, if we look at it in the light of the model of the death, we can see that the mystical supper (and the Qurbono) teaches mankind. What does it teach? That Jesus loves us, that Jesus saved us, that with the Eucharist we become near God.

Isaac continues his thoughts on the Eucharist and love in Homily 46. In the homily he gives a treatise on the spiritual life which he divides into three levels: faith, repentance, and paradise. Faith leads to repentance and repentance leads to paradise (or the internal state of paradise). In the first line about paradise he begins allusions to the Eucharist, “Paradise is the love of God wherein is the enjoyment of all blessedness, and there the blessed Paul partook of supernatural nourishment.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Isaac mixes the ideas of the state of paradise and Paradise (Heaven). One of the hallmarks of both is supernatural nourishment. This supernatural nourishment is an allusion to the Eucharist, although later Isaac clarifies that it is a reference to love as well. With the love of God comes overflowing joy and both are related to the Eucharist. Isaac continues, “When he tasted there of the tree of life, he cried out, saying, ‘Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him.'”[[50]](#footnote-50) Isaac like Ephrem sees a relationship between the mystical supper and the Garden of Eden, but he also sees a relationship to the heavenly Paradise. Thus while Isaac looks back from the mystical supper and sees a type, he also looks forward and sees a type. Yet, this participation in Paradise is not only something for the eschaton, but is something that Paul experienced in his lifetime, and something that all Christians properly prepared through faith and repentance can experience as well. Isaac emphasizes the mystical or equivocal or via negative aspect of Paul’s theology so fundamental to Syriac theology. For Paul says, “not seen” and “not heard.

Isaac continues his explanation of the typological relationship between Adam and Jesus and Adam and us which was present in Ephrem. First, Isaac reminds his readers (or hearers) that Adam lost paradise, “Adam was barred from this tree through the devil's counsel.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Where Ephrem speaks about Adam not blessing the fruit, Isaac mentions that Adam disobeyed God through following the devil. Isaac goes on to explain what the tree of life was, “The tree of life is the love of God from which Adam fell away, and thereafter he saw joy no longer, and he toiled and laboured in the land of tares, and in the midst of tares we both sow and reap, even if our seed is the seed of righteousness.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Adam’s disobedience was turning away from the love of God. Being removed from the tree of life resulted in a loss of joy and likewise, man without the Eucharist (and without the love of God) are removed from joy. Yet, the joy and the love await us in the Eucharist. Isaac contrasts the joy of God’s love with labour. This is a major theme for monks, to whom Isaac was writing/speaking, who are often spoken of as laboring in the dessert or of doing spiritual labours. Yet, he also connects the image of Adam’s labour with the parable of the wheat and the tares as well as that of the sower. Isaac makes clear that as long as we are in the world of laboring we will never find joy without some admixture of sorrow. He explains, “We are continually pierced by the tares, and however much we render ourselves righteous, we live by the sweat of our brow.”[[53]](#footnote-53) Here Isaac teaches that we cannot find joy (or at least full joy) by our own efforts. Yet, he shows us that with love (and with the Eucharist) we can find complete joy, “But when we find love, we partake of heavenly bread, and are made strong without labour and toil. The heavenly bread is Christ, Who came down from heaven and gave life to the world.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Here, Isaac has an allegorical interpretation of the heavenly bread in addition to the literal interpretation of the Eucharist. Yet, it is consistent with Isaac and Syriac theology in general to reverse his analogy so that if the love is the heavenly bread then the heavenly bread (the Eucharist) is also love. The Eucharist or love make us strong without any need of work on our own part. Furthermore, Isaac shows his belief in the real presence by further explaining that the Eucharist (and love) is Christ. Just as it is Christ who gave life to the whole world, it is Christ in the Eucharist who gives life to each believer. Christ is the heavenly bread is love.

Isaac goes on to talk about the consuming of the heavenly bread, “This is the nourishment of the angels. The man who has found love eats and drinks Christ every day and hour and hereby is made immortal. 'He that eateth of this bread', He says, 'which I will give him, shall not see death unto eternity.'” Here it is clearly seen that the Eucharist is what Isaac means, but he is not presenting a simple linear theology of the Eucharist. Rather Isaac is presenting the Eucharist in the light of unified theology mentioned above. In talking about the perfection of Paradise and love, Isaac uses Eucharistic imagery to describe the superabundance of the love. To find love is to be in constant communion with Christ. While physically one may receive the Eucharist once a week, spiritually with love one is constantly and eternally receiving the Eucharist. This love (and the Eucharist) is a gift from Jesus and one may claim neither love nor the Eucharist as resulting from one’s own efforts. The result of the Eucharist and of love is eternal life, which is emphasized even over the forgiveness of sins. Through the citation of Psalm 78:25, one finds an explicit reference to the type of the Eucharist which is the manna.

Isaac then continues tying up in the form of a beatitude the ideas about which he spoke of earlier, “Blessed is he who consumes the bread of love, which is Jesus! He who eats of love eats Christ, the God over all, as John bears witness, saying, 'God is love.'” Here one finds Christology, Trinitarian theology, Eucharistic theology and soteriology. One also sees that Isaac is simultaneously referring to the Eucharist and love as the source of perfection. The beatitude follows, the promise of what the blessing includes, “Wherefore the man who lives in love reaps the fruit of life from God, and while yet in the world, he even now breathes the air of resurrection; in this air the righteous will delight in the resurrection.”[[55]](#footnote-55) This passage shows that one can participate in Paradise on earth through being in the state of paradise acquired by love/ the Eucharist. Again life is emphasized this time with the related concept of resurrection.

The passage continues with a greater emphasis on love, while at the same time using more Eucharistic imagery, “Love is the Kingdom, whereof the Lord mystically promised His disciples to eat in His Kingdom. For when we hear Him say, ‘Ye shall eat and drink at the table of My Kingdom,’ what do we suppose we shall eat, if not love?”[[56]](#footnote-56) The Eucharist is a type of love and communion in which Christians will share in Paradise. Someone who lives in the post reformation may wonder why Isaac has what appear to be low Protestant interpretations of verses which Catholics so often use in apologetic debates as explicitly Eucharistic. Isaac was in a world where Christians considered the Eucharist a non-negotiable and so he has the freedom to use the text in allegorical ways. The Eucharist was a core dogma from which other doctrines (such as the nature of heaven and in this context, the nature of the spiritual life) could be derived and explored. Yet, the exploration of the texts for other purposes still leaves insights into the Eucharist and the Liturgy, even if those are not the primary insights.

Elsewhere Isaac speaks of the communal nature of the Eucharist, “come out to seek me, and lead me up to Thy pasture and number me among the sheep of Thy chosen flock, and nourish me with them on the verdure of Thy Divine Mysteries.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Jesus is the shepherd and the Church is His flock, and He feeds them of His body as well as spiritually nourishes them with the other mysteries. This passage shows that the divine life is dependent, primarily on the Shepherd, but also on the Church. It is Christ who seeks and leads, it is Christ who chose, and it is Christ who nourishes.

Finally, Isaac compares the highest form of personal prayer with the highest and visible form of communal prayer. Before the comparison he gives an account of the people’s demeanor and interior actions during the Eucharist, “For lo, we observe that when [we are offering the visible sacrifice] everyone has made ready and has taken their stand in prayer, seeking mercy from the Deity, making supplication and concentrating their intellect [upon God].”[[58]](#footnote-58) First, people both should and do prepare themselves. Second, people are standing during the Liturgy. Third, there is both an interior and an exterior element of prayer primarily focused on fear of the Lord/ wonder and awe. Isaac continues with an explanation of how the Holy Spirit comes in the Liturgy which he in the line of his argument wants to use to explain personal prayer, “then the Holy Spirit comes upon the bread and the wine which are set upon the altar table.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Isaac clearly emphasizes the epiclesis as the high point of the consecration. It is not clear whether or not Isaac intends to make the epiclesis rely on the prayers or on the fervency of the prayers of the people, but they are closely related and most likely the “ex opere” questions were not big issues in the Syriac Church. The “ex opere” questions are questions of minimalism and legalism which are not important in Syriac theology. Rather Isaac emphasized the pinnacle or the ideal of what should happen though well aware that the ideal may not often be met.

Conclusion

Unified theology, typology, and allegory, in the light of the scriptural, natural, and cultural surrounding unify the theologies of the four theologians. Moreover, there is a unity of thought about the mystery and reality of the Body and Blood of Christ, which while foreign to the western mode of theology is not contradictory to it. Most shocking to the Catholic west were the frequent spiritual interpretations of texts which the Catholic west wants to make exclusively literal and exclusively Eucharistic.

This paper took liberties in criticizing some of the interpretations found in the writers, mainly the isegetical nature of some allegorical interpretations and theology that seems based on shaky scriptural foundations. The author believes that a for Syriac theology to continue, one must know the sources, but one must also be in dialogue with the sources. The theologians above did not consider themselves infallible, nor did they likely fear challenging hypotheses which there fathers passed to them. Furthermore, they were open to insights from nature and culture and it would be inconsistent to their legacy to reject all outside thought. Yet, some images (such as the medicine of life), even if they came about by accident or misunderstanding are not to be rejected, for while the first half of an allegory may be faulty, the second half is often insightful and built on some other solid ground.   
 The author recommends continued dialogue with the Syriac fathers with the eventual goal of being like, “the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old.” (Mt 13:52 NAB) The neo-Syriac theologian should present what came before him as well as present what is needed for this age all out of love and with the goal of the good of his fellow Christians and for the sake of truth itself.

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1. By comparison the author has modern and post-modern tendencies which he cannot avoid which influence his asking of meta questions such as what influenced one to come up with something. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Louis Leloir, Chester Beatty Monographs no. 8'Saint Ephrem commentair de L'evengile concordant

   Text syriaque(manuscrit chester beatty 709), Dublin Hodges Figgis and Co LTD 1963 Index Biblique252-261. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ephrem,*Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ephrem, *Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ephrem, *Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ephrem, *Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ephrem, *Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ephrem, *Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ephrem, *Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ephrem, *Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ephrem, *Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ephrem, *Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 415. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 415. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 415. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 418. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 417. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 419f. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 421f. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For instance the institution narrative of the anaphora of the Twelve Apostles in the Syriac Orthodox Church. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 415. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 431. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 428 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 434 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 434. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 437. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 435f. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 440-446. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Cyrillona, *On the Institution of the Eucharist*, 437 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Cyrillona, *On the Pasch of Our Lord,* 460. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Cyrillona, *On the Pasch of Our Lord*, 437. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Cyrillona, *On the Pasch of Our Lord*, 475. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Cyrillona, *On the Pasch of Our Lord*, 475. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Cyrillona, *On Zacchaeus,* 525. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Cyrillona, *On Zacchaeus,* 526. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Cyrillona, *On Zacchaeus,* 528. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. The major focus seems to be the parallel between heel and head. The serpent would inflict a small wound and the man would inflict a mortal wound in response. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on St. John the Apostle and Evangelist*, 451. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on St. John the Apostle and Evangelist*, 453. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on St. John the Apostle and Evangelist*, 455. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on St. John the Apostle and Evangelist*, 465. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on St. John the Apostle and Evangelist*, 467. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on St. John the Apostle and Evangelist*, 468f. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on St. John the Apostle and Evangelist*, 470f. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on St. John the Apostle and Evangelist*, 484. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies*, 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies*, 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies*, 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies*, 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies*, 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies*, 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies*, 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies*, 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies*, 224 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies*, 224 [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies.* [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies*, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies*, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)