

‘Let us drink, as the Medicine of Life,
the Blood which flows from His side’
*Development of Eucharistic Thought from the Second
century to the fourth*

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Introduction

While the early history of the Eucharist remains a complicated and contentious matter, some details can be sketched out. The following essay will do so briefly, from the second century to the fourth. Three church fathers have been chosen, representing the span of history, geography and linguistics, one from each of the three dominant traditions of Christianity.¹ From the Latin West we will discuss the Eucharistic thinking of Justin Martyr. From the Greek East, we will address the Eucharist in the theology of the Cappadocian Gregory of Nyssa. And finally, from the oft neglected Syriac tradition, we will discuss the Eucharist from the perspective of Ephrem the Syrian. A conclusion will be drawn that the Eucharist has been central to Christian thought for centuries, and the presence of Christ in the elements has not been at doubt. The richness of differing theologies and language used to articulate the mysteries is of great benefit to Christian communities.

This approach aids the brevity of what could easily fill several books worth of historical analysis. From the earliest time there was significant regional variance in practice, leading to what we today know as distinctive rites – Western², Alexandrian³, Antiochene⁴ and East Syrian⁵. We can sketch out an early history only in the broadest of details, and with some necessary generalities. Texts of prayers are often scant, and we are reliant on the works of fathers and mothers of the church, such as the three below.

A Brief Outline of the History of the Eucharist

One of the most enduring questions in historical liturgical studies is the question of the Agape Meal. Traditionally it was held that the Agape split from the Eucharist around the beginning

¹ Although this is in some sense an artificial segregation, with neither of the three exclusive to one tradition.

² Latin, that is the Roman Rite

³ The Coptic and closely related Ethiopic rites

⁴ Which includes the Byzantine Rite, as well as the Armenian and West Syrian

⁵ Or Assyrian. Formerly known as Nestorian or Chaldean

of the first century became a secular meal, while the eucharist maintained the cultic practice of thanksgiving within the church. This has been shown as an inadequate assessment of the facts, and by the beginning of the third century, at least in North Africa, the Eucharist had become a morning ritual.⁶ Until the fourth century, the Eucharist took place within *Domus Ecclesiae*⁷, the earliest being unearthed in Syria, dating to the third century.⁸ These were people's homes reconfigured or renovated for the purpose of church life.⁹ For Senn, architecture of Jewish Synagogues is relevant – the earliest churches that were built for purpose features one would expect in a Synagogue, except in one key respect. Where early synagogues would have a table in a side room for celebrating sacred meals, churches now had an altar in the centre of the apse, indicating that the meal had become the primary rite.¹⁰ In Asia Minor, it looked like a synagogue service followed by a meal. Senn argues this morphed into the Eucharist due to restrictions on clubs and associations, and thus a ritual meal took place instead of an actual meal.¹¹ This is the form of the Eucharist described by Justin Martyr in 155 CE¹². Another early example is in the Didache. This text, likely Antiochene in origin, lacks several elements one would expect of Antiochene liturgy (predominantly an institution narrative)¹³, yet it contains other elements reminiscent of a Synagogue service.¹⁴

⁶ Andrew McGowan, "Rethinking Agape and Eucharist in Early North African Christianity," *Studia Liturgica* 34, no. 165-176 (2004).

⁷ House Churches

⁸ Michael Peppard, "Dura-Europos and the World's Oldest Church," in *The World's Oldest Church: Bible, Art, and Ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria, Synkrisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 16.

⁹ Anscar J. Chupungco, "History of the Roman Liturgy until the Fifteenth Century," in *Introduction to the Liturgy*, ed. Anscar J. Chupungco, vol. 1, *Handbook for Liturgical Studies* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 132.

¹⁰ Frank C. Senn, "Early Christian Liturgy," in *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*, ed. Frank Stoldt (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 73.

¹¹ Senn, in *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*.

¹² Lawrence J. Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, vol. 1, 4 vols. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 66.

¹³ Senn, "The Patristic Liturgical Synthesis," in *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*, 119.

¹⁴ Senn, "Early Christian Liturgy," in *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*, 64-65. For an outline of the early Jewish sources, see Alistair Stewart-Sykes, and Judith H. Newman, "Meals and Graces," in *Early Jewish*

After Constantine's Edict of Milan, as a *religio licita* the Christian Church could now build its own buildings and practice its rites in public. It adopted court customs: processions, choirs, candles, and incense.¹⁵ Key differences emerged between the East and the West, due to the structuring of the empire. The Eastern church had become, by virtue of association with the emperor, almost another department of the empire. Senn offers the amusing anecdote of Emperor Theodosius being escorted from the sanctuary of the cathedral in Milan under the orders of St Ambrose. In Constantinople, the Emperor was accustomed to attending at the altar with the clergy.¹⁶ As the church grew, by the fifth century there were distinctive rites in Patriarchal Sees of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Jerusalem.¹⁷

The oldest liturgical prayer still in use is the Assyrian Anaphora of Addai and Mari, which likely predates the third century.¹⁸ The theology of the anaphora predates the Council of Nicaea.¹⁹ In maintaining the Syriac language there are similarities with Jewish Blessings. Until the sixteenth century, it did not include an institution narrative or Sanctus. There is thus preserved in the Syriac tradition some of the earliest liturgical ideas, allowed to remain in practice for over a thousand years due to the early separation of the Church of the East.²⁰

Case Study 1: Latin Tradition (Justin Martyr (100-165))

The Eucharist that Justin Martyr refers to in Chapter 65 of his First Apology is as follows: The people gather. There are reading, preaching, intercessions, kiss of peace, gifting of the

Liturgy: A Sourcebook for Use by Students of Early Christian Liturgy, vol. 51, *Joint Liturgical Studies* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2001).

¹⁵ Senn, "The Patristic Liturgical Synthesis," in *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*.

¹⁶ Senn, "The Patristic Liturgical Synthesis," in *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*.

¹⁷ Considered one of the oldest liturgical rites still in use, which may reach back to the fourth century, the Liturgy of St James was born out of the Jerusalem Church, falling into the Antiochene tradition. See Daniel Galadza, "The Liturgy of St James," in *Liturgy and Byzantinization in Jerusalem* (2017).

¹⁸ Senn, "Early Christian Liturgy," in *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*.

¹⁹ Senn, "Early Christian Liturgy," in *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*.

²⁰ Paul F. Bradshaw, and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Eucharistic Liturgies: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 138-39.

elements, the great thanksgiving, distribution of the communion elements to those present, and to those who are absent.²¹ Justin's context is important to keep in mind here: his Apology is intended to persuade the emperor of the validity of Christian faith. With this audience in mind, Justin provides information in simple terms for those outside the faith.²² That being said, Justin does not shy away from describing the presence of Christ in the elements in Chapter 66: 'We do not receive these as if they were ordinary bread and ordinary drink, but just as Jesus our Savior was made of flesh through God's word and assumed flesh and blood for our salvation, so also the food over which the thanksgiving has been said becomes the flesh and blood of Jesus who was made flesh, doing so to nourish and transform our own flesh and blood.'²³ Justin goes on to quote the words of institution, explaining that they came from the writings of the Apostles. The words here seem to be linked intrinsically with the transformation of the bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Christ. An interesting parallel from a similar time, but a different place, is the Didache, the 'thanksgiving' text for which does not include the words of institution. One can conclude that at least in Rome, the words of institution were seen to affect the consecration. Some disagree on the grounds that the words are not here connected with any specific prayers.²⁴

There is a sense in which the elements, for Justin, are spiritually nourishing and healing. Already we see the mingling of wine and water, although there is no mention of any symbolism behind this. There is some confusion regarding whether there is a separate cup with water only at the end of Chapter 65, mentioning 'eucharistic bread and wine and water'²⁵

²¹ Senn, "Early Christian Liturgy," in *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*.

²² Bryan D. Spinks, *Do This in Remembrance of Me: The Eucharist from the Early Church to the Present Day, Scm Studies in Worship and Liturgy* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 31.

²³ Johnson, 68.

²⁴ Spinks, 32.

²⁵ Johnson, 68.

where everywhere else he states explicitly 'a cup containing water and wine'²⁶ McGowan has suggested that perhaps water was used instead of wine.²⁷ Justin describes Sunday as the day for the Eucharistic gathering, and there is no mention of an Agape meal. Already we have present in Justin the rudiments of a liturgical rite that would be familiar to Christians today, but nothing by way of texts of prayers that could clarify the use of the institution narrative.

Case Study 2: Greek Tradition (Gregory of Nyssa (332-395))

For Gregory of Nyssa, many of the same themes are present. The Eucharist is truly Christ and is in some sense vivifying. Gregory and the other Cappadocians have been considered as founders of Byzantine²⁸ theology.²⁹ In Chapter 37 of his Great Catechism, he gives a medical metaphor. For Gregory, the Eucharist is the antidote to a poison, the poison of sin. For what the antidote is, he asks and answers: 'What, then, is this remedy to be? Nothing else than that very Body which has been shown to be superior to death, and has been the First-fruits of our life.'³⁰ As Christ's human body was able to defeat death in resurrection, in a similar way consumption of the Eucharist is able to help us to defeat death also. More than a symbol, the Eucharist affects a real change in the believer, or something of a nudge towards theosis.³¹ Some have seen a move towards language of transubstantiation that would be taken up by the scholastics. The debate revolves around the way that at the end of the chapter, Gregory

²⁶ Johnson, 68.

²⁷ Spinks, 31.

²⁸ That is to say, Eastern Orthodox

²⁹ David Bradshaw, "The Cappadocian Fathers as Founders of Byzantine Thought," in *Cappadocian Legacy: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Doru Costache and Philip Kariatlis (Redfern, NSW: St Andrew's Orthodox Press, 2013).

³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, "The Great Catechism," in *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc.*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 5, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1893).

³¹ Ilaria Ramelli, "The Eucharist in Gregory Nyssan as Participation in Christ's Body: And Preparation of the Restoration and Theosis," in *The Eucharist - Its Origins and Contexts: Sacred Meal, Communal Meal, Table Fellowship in Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*, ed. David Hellholm and Sanger Dieter, vol. II: Patristic Traditions, Iconography, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Jorg Frey et al. (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

refers to the fact that the bread and the wine 'transelement'.³² Whatever terminology is used, Gregory plainly states that: 'Rightly, then, do we believe that now also the bread which is consecrated by the Word of God is changed into the Body of God the Word.' Gregory points towards consumption by which the communicant is able to become part of the same body of Christ, and to become deified. The elements become Christ, and by partaking, we ourselves can become heightened spiritually.³³

Case Study 3: Syriac Tradition (Ephrem the Syrian (306-373))

Ephrem the Syrian was born around the year 306. He spent most of his life in Nisibis³⁴, and later Edessa.³⁵ The majority of his theological work is done through poetry, which was written to be sung by a women's choir.³⁶ All his writings are in Syriac, and it is unlikely that he knew Greek.³⁷ The Eucharist is, for Ephrem, the 'medicine of life'³⁸ and it is with medicinal metaphors that he approaches eucharistic theology.³⁹ Ephrem approaches the eucharist not in philosophical terminology, but through poetry characteristic of the Syriac tradition.⁴⁰

³² Anthony Meredith, "Gregory of Nyssa," in *The Cappadocians, Outstanding Christian Thinkers* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 96.

³³ Meredith, in *The Cappadocians*, 95-96.

³⁴ Paul S. Russell, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," *Hugoye* 8 (2005).

³⁵ Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, *Cistercian Studies Series* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 16-17.

³⁶ Kees den Biesen, "'A Drop of Salvation': Ephrem the Syrian on the Eucharist," in *The Eucharist - Its Origins and Contexts: Sacred Meal, Communal Meal, Table Fellowship in Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*, ed. David Hellholm and Sanger Dieter, vol. II: Patristic Traditions, Iconography, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Jorg Frey et al. (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

³⁷ Brock, 16.

³⁸ Brock, 82.

³⁹ Sebastian Brock, "St. Ephrem in the Eyes of Later Syriac Liturgical Tradition," *Hugoye* 2, no. 1 (1999).

⁴⁰ Spinks, 77-81.

In the Assyrian Church, there are seven sacraments⁴¹, however they differ significantly from the rest of Christendom by including 'Holy Leaven' and the Sign of the Cross.⁴² The Holy Leaven is powder added to the eucharistic bread, containing some of the bread from the previous batch. The original is said to have been provided by St John who kept a fragment of bread from the Last Supper and mixed it with Jesus' blood.⁴³ Thus, the Eucharist is quite literally Jesus' blood. Therefore, when Ephrem writes of the Eucharist: 'Let us drink, as the Medicine of Life, the Blood which flows from His side'⁴⁴, he sees within the elements the 'true food' and 'true drink' of John 6:55. In the sense that Christ became incarnate in the Virgin, he becomes incarnate again in the eucharist. 'The Holy One took up residence in the womb in bodily fashion, now he takes up residence in the mind, in spiritual fashion.'⁴⁵ The way he does this is through the Eucharist. When referring to the Eucharist in a different hymn, he writes: 'The Medicine of Life flew down from on high to reside in those worthy of it.'⁴⁶

Bearing in mind the lack of an institution narrative in the Anaphora of Addai and Mari, rather than at the words 'this is my body' and 'this is my blood'⁴⁷, the consecration occurs at the epiclesis which in the Anaphora reads: 'AND MAY THY HOLY SPIRIT, O MY LORD, come and

⁴¹ Specifically, they hold the sacraments of Holy Orders, Baptism, Unction, the Eucharist, and Confession in common with the rest of Christendom, but add Holy Leaven and the Sign of the Cross instead of Marriage and Confirmation

⁴² George Percy Badger, "A Translation of the Jewel, Written by Mar Abd Yeshua, Nestorian Metropolitan of Nisibis and Armenia, A.D. 1298.," in *The Nestorians and Their Rituals: With the Narrative of a Mission to Mesopotamia and Coordistan in 1842-1844 and a Late Visit to Those Countries in 1950; Also, Researches into the Present Condition of the Syrian Jacobites, Papal Syrians, and Chaldeans, and an Inquiry into the Religious Tenets of the Yezedees* (London: Joseph Mathers, 1852).

⁴³ Badger, "Of the Sacraments," in *The Nestorians and Their Rituals: With the Narrative of a Mission to Mesopotamia and Coordistan in 1842-1844 and a Late Visit to Those Countries in 1950; Also, Researches into the Present Condition of the Syrian Jacobites, Papal Syrians, and Chaldeans, and an Inquiry into the Religious Tenets of the Yezedees*, 151-52.

⁴⁴ Brock, 82.

⁴⁵ Brock, 113.

⁴⁶ Brock, 112.

⁴⁷ Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, trans. Sebastian Brock, *Popular Patristics Series* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990).

rest upon this oblation of Thy servants, and may He bless it and hallow it...'⁴⁸ This seems to be in agreement with Ephrem, who writes of the Holy Spirit being 'mingled in bread for an offering'.⁴⁹ It is likely that this was the liturgy known by Ephrem, being the fourth century liturgy of Edessa.⁵⁰ The absence of an institution narrative has not been a stumbling block in ecumenical dialogue⁵¹ between the Assyrian Church of the East⁵² and the Chaldean Catholic Church.⁵³

Ephrem's Hymns on Faith include a cycle of five Hymns on the Pearl. The Pearl is, among other things, a metaphor for Christ's body – the bread.⁵⁴ He writes of the Pearl that 'In its purity [I saw] a great mystery: the body of our Lord, unsullied, without division.'⁵⁵ His metaphor for the Holy Spirit is that of 'fire': 'The fire of compassion has come down and dwelt within the bread.'⁵⁶

Some other particulars can be gleaned from St Ephrem's poetry. He seems to view the Eucharist as something which is to be taken daily: 'in it *each day* is plucked the fruit of Him who gives life to all'.⁵⁷ Therefore we can conclude that for St Ephrem, Christ is truly present

⁴⁸ Assyrian Church of the East, *The Liturgy of the Holy Apostles Adai and Mari Together with Two Additional Liturgies to Be Said on Feasts and Other Days: And the Order of Baptism* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1893), 26. Emphasised in the original.

⁴⁹ Ephrem the Syrian, *The Hymns on Faith*, trans. Jeffrey T. Wickes, vol. 130, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 227.

⁵⁰ Andrew Palmer, "The Fourth-Century Liturgy of Edessa Reflected in Ephraim's *Madroshe* 4 and 5 on Faith," in *The Eucharist in Theology and Philosophy: Issues of Doctrinal History in East and West from the Patristic Age to the Reformation*, ed. István Perczel, Réka Forrai, and György Geréby, *Ancient and Medieval Philosophy: De Wulf-Mansion Centre, Series 1* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2005).

⁵¹ Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, "Guidelines for Admission to the Eucharist between the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church of the East," (2001), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20011025_chiesa-caldea-assira_en.html.

⁵² The modern descendent of the original Church of the East

⁵³ A church *sui generis* in communion with the Roman Catholic Church

⁵⁴ Brock, 106.

⁵⁵ Ephrem the Syrian, *The Hymns on Faith*, 377.

⁵⁶ Ephrem the Syrian, *The Hymns on Faith*, 123.

⁵⁷ Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, 111. Emphasis mine.

in the elements. His is incarnate in the elements through the epiclesis of the Holy Spirit on the table.

Conclusion

While the Eucharist has meant different things to different theologians across the breadth of history, at least throughout the first to the fourth centuries, it has been the primary liturgical rite of the church. Evidence is often scant, particularly early on. Ultimately, a few things have never changed in this period: The Eucharist was seen to contain Christ's real presence, and the Eucharist was seen to affect some kind of change in the communicant. The language used to describe this may differ, but the end result was the same throughout the period.

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