

The Sacraments of the Assyrian Church of the East

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First and foremost, in the Western theological jargon the word ‘sacrament’ is spoken of. It comes from the Latin *sacramentum*, which originally denoted a sacred oath; in general, it was the oath that a Roman soldier gave to Caesar upon the soldier’s inscription in the Roman army.¹ It had, therefore, a sacred tone to it—one solemnly vowed to uphold and defend Caesar and the Roman Empire. In the Greek-speaking East, the word for sacrament is *mysterion*, and in its origins, it refers to the sacred, secret Mystery Cults of the Greek religion (the secret rites of ‘Bacchius’ come immediately to mind). Only those inducted into these sacred rites would be able to know the ‘mystery’ and what it entails.

The Assyrian Church of the East makes use of the term *rāzā* to denote ‘sacrament’ or ‘mystery.’ It comes from the Middle Persian (Pahlavi) term ‘raz,’ meaning something concealed; hidden.² It must have made its way into Assyrian and then Aramaic sometime in the 4th or 5th century B.C.³

A *rāzā*, or sacrament, is essentially a mystery through which God acts to impart to us his grace, but we don’t know how this happens. However, we do feel the

¹ The first Christian writer to use the word ‘sacrament’ was Tertullian (3rd century), who explained that through Baptism we are ‘enlisted’ into the army of Christ.

² In the Proto-Aryan or Sanskrit form it is pronounced *rahas*. It occurs in Daniel 2:18, 19, 27-30, 47; 4:9. Interestingly, the term *raz* also occurs in the Qumran texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls some 55 times! Middle Persian, which made use of the Aramaic script, is dated from about 300 BC to 800 AD.

³ For more on the understanding of *Raza* and its etymology, see: J. POOVANNIKUNNEL, *The Concept of “Mystery” (Raza) in the Syro-Malabar Holy Qurbana* (Kottayam, 1989), pp. 5-9 and *passim*.

operation (i.e. working) of the Holy Spirit in us through these signs of God's love and mercy. In essence, the sacraments are "outward signs of God's inner grace." We may further define the sacraments as being the material means through which God communicates to us his divine grace, of which we are in need on a daily basis in our lives for our edification, sanctification and utter salvation, and a share in everlasting life, made efficacious by the Paschal Mystery completed in and by Christ.

'Mystery' (*Raza*) in the Old & New Testaments

The word *mystery* (Aramaic *rāzā*, Greek *mysterion*) occurs first in the Old Testament, and specifically in the Aramaic portions of Daniel 2:18; 2:27-30, 47; 4:9).⁴ The *rāzā* in this context is the meaning of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, which only the man of God was able to interpret and 'reveal' (Syr. *gāle*). In the New Testament, the word 'mystery' is mentioned some 28 times. It is to be found in: Matthew 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10; Romans 11:25; 16:25; I Corinthians 2:1; 2:7; 4:1; 14:2; 15:51; Ephesians 1:9; 3:3; 3:4; 3:9; 5:32; 6:19; Colossians 1:26; 1:27; 2:2; 4:3; II Thessalonians 2:7; I Timothy 3:9; 3:16; Revelation 1:20; 10:7; 17:5; 17:7.

The first and most important understanding of 'mystery' (*rāzā*) is the one given by the Lord Jesus himself, that is, in conjunction with the Kingdom of Heaven/God. Christ first uttered the word 'mystery' (*rāzā*) in Matthew 13:11 to the disciples: "*To you it is given to know the mystery of the Kingdom of God, but to them it is not given...*" (see also Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10). Jesus openly declared the mysteries of God's kingdom to the disciples, but to others he spoke in parables concerning this same Kingdom so as to clothe and hide his teaching from his opponents. Thus, in these three occurrences of the word 'mystery' (*rāzā*) in the Gospels (i.e. Matthew 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10), it refers

⁴ Some of the mysteries of God were revealed to the king Nebuchadnezzar and the prophet Daniel.

to an unveiling of the truth or truths of God's Kingdom by Christ exclusively to his disciples.

The more frequent use of the term 'mystery' (*rāzā*) in the New Testament is made by St. Paul. For Paul, 'mystery' (*rāzā*) is first and foremost a "revelation of the plan of Salvation of God the Father, in Jesus Christ." Further, the Gospel itself can be termed a 'mystery' (see Romans 16:25), hidden before the beginning of the worlds. Further, for Paul the resurrection of the faithful departed in Christ is also a 'mystery' (see I Corinthians 15:51), and the "summing up of all things in Christ" (see Ephesians 1:9).⁵ Also, for Paul the 'mystery' (*rāzā*) usually referred to a hidden truth about God, his Christ or his Kingdom, but as revealed (to some extent) in the Gospel. For Paul, once again, the following notions of 'mystery' (*rāzā*) exist:

1. the 'mystery of salvation' revealed to all nations (Romans 16:25; Colossians 1:25-27; Ephesians 3:2ff)
2. the 'mystery of God' (I Corinthians 2:1)
3. the 'mystery of the wisdom of God' (I Corinthians 2:7; Colossians 1:26; Ephesians 3:8-10)
4. the 'mystery of Christ' (Colossians 2:2)
5. the 'Mystery of Faith' — *Mysterium Fidei* (Romans 16:25-27; I Timothy 3:9)
6. the 'mystery of the Church' (Ephesians 5:32)
7. the 'mystery of the Gospel' (Ephesians 6:19; Colossians 1:26; 4:3; II Corinthians 4:4-5)

We may sum up, therefore, and say that in the New Testament, the understanding of 'mystery' (*rāzā*) can be defined as the hidden/secret will of God the

⁵ In technical theological terminology, this is referred to as the 're-capitulation' of all things in Christ (or, in Greek *anakephalaesis*).

Father and of his Christ, for our salvation and our final perfection unto the glory which was revealed and proclaimed to the whole world, but will be perfected at the end of time, or, the *Parousia*. Therefore, the mystery originates with God the Father, was hidden until it was revealed (in part) in and through the Son for our salvation, and will finally be revealed in its fullness for our final perfection and glorification, though *now* it is only partially revealed (only that which is necessary for our salvation) in the Gospel proclaimed to all peoples.

The Theology of 'Mystery' (*Rāzā*) in Scripture

The way that we can enter into that 'mystery of salvation' noted above, which is given by the Father and completed in Christ, is through the grace of the Father which we receive in the holy Mysteries. It is important to state at the very outset, that the material aspect of all of the sacraments *in and of themselves* and *apart from Christ* do not have any efficaciousness which perfects us spiritually unto salvation. That is to say, the water and oil in the sacrament of Baptism *apart from Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit* do not carry any spiritual power or authority; the Oil of the Chrism of the apostles *apart from Christ and his power* does not have any spiritual importance; the bread and wine of the Eucharist *apart from the Eucharistic action of Christ himself and operation of the Holy Spirit* do not give us the grace of God necessary for salvation. Rather, it is the materia (material of the sacrament) in conjunction with the operation of the Holy Spirit that works in and through the sacramental matter, but it is the grace of the Spirit that makes the sacrament efficacious.

In Jesus Christ, the unseen 'face of the Father' (cf. John 14:9) has become visible to us by the Lord's taking-on of our human flesh and existence. God the Word, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, by taking on our humanity and becoming truly

revealed and demonstrated the humbling of God for the sake of our salvation. The Son took on corporeal, human matter (i.e. our human body) so that by it he would dispense to us God's unseen grace and give us salvation. Thus, we may say even further that Jesus is the 'Sacrament of God the Father'!

The theological foundation of the sacraments is indispensable in order to correctly understand and speak about them. Generally, for the Greek-speaking East and the Eastern Orthodox Churches at large the theological foundation of the sacraments lies in the Incarnation. In the mystery of the 'Word become flesh' (see John 1:14), the second person of the Holy Trinity takes unto himself our complete humanity. What this means is that the hidden God has now become uncovered and revealed in the divine person Jesus Christ—true God and true Man. Even as Christ stated to Philip one of the Twelve: "*He who sees me, has seen the Father*" (John 14:9). Christ, "*...in whom dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily*" (Colossians 2:9), has made present in creation through his Incarnation the God who cannot be seen, yet is known through his creations; God is present in creation and among humanity in a way that has never been known and experienced all throughout human history.

However, by way of contrast, for the Assyrian Church of the East the theological basis for the existence of sacraments lies not primarily in the mystery of the Incarnation—which is indeed the beginning of any theology of the sacraments—but in the mystery of Christ's Resurrection! For the Fathers of the Church of the East, the mystery of the Incarnation is the beginning of the divine Economy (*Mdabbrānūthā*), but its fulfillment is found in the mystery of the Resurrection. In Christ's Resurrection, his material, earthly body was transformed into the glorified body (also known as the 'body of the resurrection'); this is the body that we will receive at the general resurrection of the dead when our former existence is transformed into that which

Christ had promised us—he who is the ‘firstborn’ from among the dead. In the Resurrection, the earthly, mortal and human body of corruption is transformed and glorified—mere human flesh is turned into spiritual glory. The body of the Lord which the disciples witnessed in the 10 recorded ‘Post-Resurrection’ appearances was the glorified body of the Resurrection. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, therefore, there is ‘power,’ for if we participate in his death, we will also glorify in his resurrection. St. Paul proclaimed in this regard: *“So that through his righteousness, I may know Jesus and the power of his resurrection, and be a partaker of his sufferings, even to a death like his, that I may by any means attain the resurrection from the dead”* (Philippians 3:10). To sum up, in the mystery of the Incarnation the Godhead took on humanity, and thus declared it ‘salvageable’ (i.e. not beyond hope of salvation). However, in the mystery of the Lord Jesus’ Resurrection humanity was lifted up to the highest heights—even to the sitting at the right hand of the Father in glory with the Lord’s ascension into heaven—and was given a transformed, glorified existence. Mere corporeal, fleshly matter now becomes glorified and transformed in Jesus’ bodily resurrection from among the dead!

After giving the major theological foundation of the sacraments—that is, the mystery of the Resurrection—let us now move on to looking at how the ‘sacraments’ existed in the Scriptures. Of course, we use the term ‘sacrament’ at this point by theologically reflecting on the Scriptures (here, the Old Testament in particular).

In the Old Testament Economy or dispensation (*Mdabbrānūthā*), we may count two major ‘sacraments’ observed by the Israelites. What these ‘sacraments’ did—as outward signs of God’s inner grace and will—was to allow the Israelite as a member of the covenant with God to participate in events of salvation which God had prepared. First, let us look at circumcision. This was the commandment of God to Abraham:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him, and said to him, ‘I am the Almighty God; walk well before me, and faultless. And I will

make my covenant between me and you and will multiply you exceedingly.' And Abram fell on his face; and God talked with him, saying: 'As for me, behold, I am establishing my covenant with you, and you shall be a father of many peoples. Neither shall your name any more be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many peoples. And I will make you fruitful, and multiply you exceedingly; and I will make you father of many nations, and kings shall come out of your loins. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, and I will be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you, and your descendants after you, the land in which you sojourn, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting inheritance; and I will be their God.'

And God said to Abraham, 'You shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant between me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, who is not of your descendants. He that is born in your house, and he that is bought with your money, shall be circumcised; and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; for he has broken my covenant...And Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin (Exodus 17:1-14, 24).

With the establishment of the everlasting covenant between God and Abraham—and Abraham's descendants for that matter—the Lord commanded Abraham to circumcise himself, as well as his son and all of his male servants, etc. Further, the new-born child was to be circumcised on the eighth day of his birth as an outward sign of the inner covenant between God and Abraham. Later, the circumcision of every male child in Israel on the eighth day was stipulated under the Law: "*And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised,*" Leviticus 12:3.

In the dispensation of the Lord in the New Testament, on the other hand, the baptism of water replaces the circumcision observed by the Israelites. In fact, St. Paul refers to this baptism as *“the circumcision of Christ”* and the *“circumcision which is not made with hands”* (Colossians 2:11). The outward act and sign of circumcision, therefore, constituted one to be an heir in the everlasting covenant between God and Abraham, and whoever was not circumcised was to be *“cut off from the people of Israel.”* Those, however, who did circumcise would be blessed by God by enjoying the blessings of the covenant, which was an everlasting one that the descendants of Abraham would enjoy as well.

The other major theological event in the Old Testament which acts as a forerunner and Old Testament basis for our New Testament, Christian understanding of the sacraments is the observance of the Passover feast. It was the major event of salvation under the Old Testament Economy (*Mdabbrānūthā*) for the Israelites, which would later be reinterpreted and ‘re-theologized’ by the Lord Jesus himself under the New Testament dispensation.

The Passover celebration was not just another feast for the Israelites, rather, it was a mighty demonstration of God’s saving power (in light of the economy of salvation for all peoples) that freed the People of Israel from servitude and enslavement to the Egyptians for 430 years. Under Moses, the ‘Firstborn of the Prophets,’ the Lord God led the people of Israel out of Egypt, and gradually into the land of Canaan (called by the Old Testament Scriptures the ‘Promised Land’). According to the ordinance of the Lord recorded in Exodus 12, the Israelites were to take a male lamb, one year old and without blemish, on the 10th day of the month of Nissan. They were to keep it until the 14th day, at which point the whole congregation of Israel was to gather and slay the lamb and roast it whole; the blood of the lamb was to be sprinkled on the two door

posts, the lintel and the house in which the lamb would be eaten. All of this was to take place in haste:

And thus you shall eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste; for it is the Lord's Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and all the firstborn of the land of Egypt shall die, both man and beast; and against all the idols of Egypt I will execute judgment; I am the Lord. And the blood shall be to you for a sign upon the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will make you glad, and the plague shall not be among you to destroy you when I smite the land of Egypt. And this day shall be to you for a memorial; and you shall keep it a feast to the Lord, a festival throughout your generations; you shall keep it a feast by an ordinance forever (Exodus 12:11-14).

The following seven days after the observance of the Passover on the 14th of Nissan (referred to as the 'first month') were to be the days of 'Unleavened Bread.'

The feast of the Passover was not simply one of the three major feasts of the Israelites (i.e. those that had to be celebrated in Jerusalem—Passover along with Yom Kippur and the Feast of Tabernacles), for the Passover feast was the most important. The reason was this: this feast celebrated the deliverance of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, and it initiated the process of the entrance into the Promised Land; it was the feast celebrating the salvation of the Jews from bondage, slavery and death at the hands of the Egyptians—made possible through a marvelous intervention by God himself!

The sacramental character of the feast, therefore, is seen in that the participation of the Israelites in the eating of the flesh of the Passover lamb and the unleavened bread was a true and real participation in the salvific event of the Exodus, brought about through the intervention of God himself. How would, therefore, the many generations of Jews participate, first as seen above, in the covenant with Abraham almost 1,850 years before Christ, and in the salvation of the People by God in the Exodus event, almost 1,450 years before Christ? In the former, by observing circumcision each Hebrew

would participate in the mystery of the Covenant of the Lord with Abraham; in the latter, by eating of the Passover lamb the generations of Israelites would be truly participating in the salvific event of the Exodus from Egypt. Therefore, both circumcision and the participation in the eating of the Passover would make each Israelite truly and really participate in that mystery depicted in both, namely, in the Covenant and in the salvific event of Exodus!

The Ecclesial Understanding of the Sacraments and their Septenary Number

The sacraments, as defined by Mar Abdisho of Nisibis (d. 1318 AD), one of the last major theologians of the Assyrian Church of the East who first defined the seven sacraments, in his 'Book of the Pearl' (*Margānīthā*), are the following: 1) priesthood 2) baptism 3) Oil of the Apostles 4) Eucharist 5) absolution 6) Holy Leaven (Syr. *Malka*) 7) sign of the living Cross. This order of the sacraments, beginning with the priesthood, indicates the *existential* order of their institution, for without the apostolic and sacramental priesthood there could be no other sacraments. Before this time (i.e. ca. 1318 AD), the Fathers of the Church of the East had not defined or limited the sacraments to the number seven.⁶ Later, Patriarch Mar Timothy II (1318-1352?) adds a different list of the sacraments in his theological work *The Book of the Seven Causes of the Ecclesiastical Mysteries*.⁷ Formally, many other acts were considered to be 'sacraments' at

⁶ In the Latin Church, the seven sacraments were only formally declared at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274, and later re-affirmed in the Council of Trent held in the mid-sixteenth century. The Eastern Orthodox adopted the number seven (seemingly under the Roman Catholic influence) only in the seventeenth century; see: Anthony M. Coniaris, *These Are the Sacraments: The Life-giving Mysteries of the Orthodox Church*, (Minneapolis, 1981), p. 9.

⁷ This work exists in manuscript form only, though three chapters of it have been translated and/or edited in English. First, his chapter on baptism see: Blaise Kadicheeni, *The Mystery of Baptism: The Text and Translation of the Chapter 'On the Holy Baptism' from 'The Causes of the Seven Mysteries of the Church' of Timothy II, Nestorian Patriarch (1318-1332)*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation (Rome, 1972); on the Eucharist see: Jose Matthew Kochuparampil, *The Mystery of Christ. Syriac Critical Text, Translation and Studies of the Chapter 'On the Mysteries of the Body and Blood' from 'The Book of the Seven Causes of the Mysteries of the Church' by Catholicos-Patriarch Timothy II (1318-1332)*, Doctoral Dissertation at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome (Rome, 2000); and on the Consecration of the Altar see: William Toma, *The Mystery of the Church. Syriac Critical*

one time or another, but the number seven became universally popular since the Scriptural septenary number seven denotes perfection and wholeness.⁸

There are three basic influences on the Church of the East's adoption of the septenary system for counting the sacraments. First, it seems to be the case that the treatises of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Celestial Hierarchy* and *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, had entered the sacramental theology of the Church of the East, likely via the West Syrian maphrian of Tagrit, Gegorius Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286).⁹ Presumably, the Church of the East polymath Mar Abdisho of Nisibis (d. 1318) would have been familiar with the works of Bar Hebraeus, particularly his *Candelabrum Sanctuarium*, which discusses the sacraments. This influence is especially seen in the work on the sacraments of Mar Timothy II, Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East and a younger contemporary of Abdisho, titled *The Seven Causes of the Sacraments of the Church*.¹⁰

The second influence for enumerating the sacraments is generally traced back to the Latin influence exerted over rather much of the Christian East during the Second Council of Lyons (1272-1274). During this Western council's fourth session, an *ad hoc* union was forged between the Latin and Greek Churches—the Greek position being

Edition and Translation of the Rite of the Consecration of the Altar with Oil and the Chapter 'On the Consecration of the Church' from the 'Book of the Seven Causes of the Mysteries of the Church' by Patriarch Timothy II (1318-1332), Doctoral Dissertation at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome (Rome, 2007). The Patriarch Mar Timothy II numbers the following sacraments: 1) Priesthood 2) Consecration of the Altar 3) Baptism 4) Eucharist 5) Perfection (*Shumlaya*) of Monks 6) Perfection (*Shumlaya*) of the Faithful Departed 7) Marriage and its Perfection (*Shumlaya*); the sacrament of Absolution (*Khusaya*) is added as an appendix to this treatise. However, in its Holy Synod convocation of 2001, the Assyrian Church of the East officially adopted the seven sacraments as listed by Mar Abdisho of Nisibis.

⁸ For example, the early 12th century master of Yokhanna bar Zo'bi, the monk Šem'ōn of Šenqalābād (modern-day Šeqlāwā), enumerates some twelve sacraments, among them the Cross and Gospel. For his biography, see: Anton Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur, mit Ausschluss der christlich-palästinenschen Texte* (Bonn 1922) 310.

⁹ For a recent critical edition of these two important texts of Pseudo-Dionysius, see: G. Heil & A.M. Ritter (eds.), *Corpus Dionysiacum II. Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita: De coelesti hierarchia, De ecclesiastica hierarchia, De mystica theologia, Epistulae*, Berlin 1991.

¹⁰ Cf. W. De Vries, *Sakramententheologie bei den Nestorianern* (Orientia Christiana Analecta 133: Rome 1947) 49-50 (footnote 1), 55. For the Syriac text of the *Candelabrum*, see Vatican Syriac Manuscript 186.

forced by the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Paleologos. It was the *confessio fidei* of the emperor submitted to Pope Gregory X during the fourth session of the council that contained an enumeration of the seven sacraments, held in common by the Greek and Latin Churches. The Byzantine emperor declared:

The same Holy Roman Church also holds and teaches that there are seven sacraments of the Church: one is baptism, which has been mentioned above; another is the sacrament of confirmation which bishops confer by the laying on of hands while they anoint the reborn; then penance, the Eucharist, the sacrament of order, matrimony and extreme unction which, according to the doctrine of the Blessed James, [James 5:14-15] is administered to the sick. The same Roman Church performs [*conficit*] the sacrament of the Eucharist with unleavened bread; she holds and teaches that in this sacrament the bread is truly transubstantiated into the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the wine into His blood. As regards matrimony, she holds that neither is a man allowed to have several wives at the same time nor a woman several husbands. But, when a legitimate marriage is dissolved by the death of one of the spouses, she declares that a second and afterwards a third wedding are successively licit, if no other canonical impediment goes against it for any reason.¹¹

However, the theologians and hierarchs of the Church of the East would have somehow heard of the Latin list of sacraments as found in the confession of faith of Emperor Michael VIII through the Latin missionaries (particularly those of the Dominican order) who had already reached Baghdad and were preaching in the 'Nestorian' churches of the city during the Fourth Crusade. In fact, almost a decade before Mar Abdisho, the famed vicar of Mar Yahballah III (patriarch 1281-1317) Rabban

¹¹ H. Denzinger & A. Schönmetzer (eds.), *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (Freiburg, Basel, Rome & Vienna: Herder 1997) 860. These same seven sacraments would be officially recognized in 1439, at the Council of Ferrara-Florence. At this council, in the *Decree for the Armenians*, the seven sacraments were again treated in the bull of Pope Eugene IV, *Exsultate Domine* of 1439: "We have drawn up in the briefest form a statement of the truth concerning the seven sacraments, so that the Armenians, now and in future generations, may more easily be instructed therein. There are seven sacraments under the new law: that is to say, baptism, confirmation, the mass, penance, extreme unction, ordination, and matrimony. These differ essentially from the sacraments of the old law; for the latter do not confer grace, but only typify that grace which can be given by the passion of Christ alone. But these our sacraments both contain grace and confer it upon all who receive them worthily;" see Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion*, 1310.

Bar Sawma (ca. 1220-1294) travelled the major kingdoms of western Europe in order to muster support for the Mongol Arghun Khan by creating a Mongol-European alliance in order to secure control of the Holy Land from the Muslims. While in Europe, Rabban Bar Sawma had visited the major Christian shrines, and while in Rome he had conversed with the cardinals of his day concerning matters theological, particularly the liturgy and sacraments.¹² Slightly later, Mar Abdisho of Nisibis himself would have been privy to these confessions of faith, translated into Arabic by the missionaries, during his own lifetime. Further, we know that ambassadors of the Ilkhan Abaqa Khan were present at the Council of Lyons in 1274, and they too would have been another important source for bringing back the list of seven sacraments to the Church of the East, particularly under Mar Yahballah III who was residing at Maraga, in Persia.¹³

The Efficaciousness of the Sacraments

In order for the sacraments to be spiritually efficacious for sinners who are in need of God's grace, they must be valid; this means that the Church recognizes the Mysteries as true and genuine liturgical and sacramental acts, through which God acts. Mar Abdisho of Nisibis gives the criteria for the validity of sacraments in Part IV, Chapter I of his *Margānīthā*; they are:

1. "A true priest who has rightly attained the priesthood according to the requirements of the Church." This means that only one who is validly ordained into the priestly ministry of the Church, according to the canons, may attempt to administer the sacraments. For this reason, Mar Abdisho

¹² For the English text of the history of Rabban Bar Sawma (and the monk Markos—later Mar Yahballah III) see: J. Montgomery, *History of Yaballaha III* (New York: Columbia University Press) 1927. Cf. E.A.W. Budge, *The Monks of Kublai Khan* (London: Religious Tract Society) 1928.

¹³ Michael VIII's illegitimate daughter Maria Palaiologina was married to Abaqa Ilkhan of Persia. This relationship might have also served as a vehicle for disseminating the *confession fidei* of Michael given at Lyons to the Church in the Persian-Mongolian territory.

- numbers the priesthood as the first sacrament, for without it there can be no other sacrament;
2. "The *word* and command of the Lord of the sacraments." The foundation of the sacrament is the commanding and authoritative word of Jesus Christ, he who himself is the Incarnate Word of the Father. Through his command, the sacraments are established and made efficacious, by the operation of the Holy Spirit. In essence, it is Christ who has established the sacraments. St. Paul refers to this when he says to the Corinthian Church that he has "...received from the Lord that which I have handed down to you" (I Corinthians 11:23).
 3. "The right intention and confirmed faith on the part of the recipient of the sacrament, believing that the effect of the sacraments takes place by a heavenly power." Finally and ultimately, the reason for the sacraments is to edify the baptized faithful, to strengthen their faith and to sanctify them with God's grace. If one were not to believe this, what benefit would he or she reap from the sacraments? That would not make the sacraments inefficacious *in se*, rather the sinner would not reap spiritual benefit from it. For the sacraments to work in our lives, sanctifying and edifying us with God's grace, we need to believe that! If we doubt God's power, or that he works through the sacraments to give us his grace, then they become of no avail *to us*.

There are two constitutive aspects of each and every sacrament: 1) the outward material known as the 'matter (in Latin, *materia*) of the sacrament; and 2) the inner grace of the Holy Spirit which is expressed in the formula particular to that sacrament; this is known as the 'form' (the Latin *forma*). This is undoubtedly the influence of the hylomorphic system of the philosopher Aristotle, which philosophical language the Church of the East has adopted in regards the sacraments as well. In our faith, it is the inner power of the Spirit working through the material element of the sacraments that effects the grace of God being present for our sanctification and edification, as St. John Chrysostom states (with regard to baptism): "The eyes of the flesh see the flesh being washed; the eyes of the spirit see the soul being cleansed." In the *Margānīthā*, Mar

Abdisho also speaks of the sacraments (in Part IV) as to their matter (*mlō'aā*) and form (*'adhšā*).

Mar Abdisho defines a sacrament (or *rāzā*) as being spiritual remedies for our sinfulness. He uses the paradigm of a man being born, nurtured and growing in this world; as it were, it is a sort of organic analogy the sacraments. Thus, the sacrament of Baptism is a 'spiritual (re)birth;' the Chrismation is a 'perfecting in the Holy Spirit;' the Eucharist is a 'spiritual nourishment' for the man after his birth according to the Spirit; the sacrament of Absolution is a 'spiritual healing' or medicine for the one afflicted with sin:

Again, as every one who is in the body, through changes of the times, and bad conditions, is subject to sickness and disease, and is in need of physicians who will restore him to his former health if he follows their injunctions; so the man of God, through the effects of sin, and immoral living, falls into the disorders of iniquity, and receives health from the priests of the Church, the spiritual physicians, if he orders himself after their directions (*Margānīthā*, Part IV, Chapter I).

Undoubtedly, Mar Abdisho has in the background of this statement a well-known antiphon in the *Khūdrā*: "Our Lord has given the medicine of repentance to the skilled physicians, who are the priests of the Church. And the one whom Satan has stricken with the affliction of iniquity, let him come and show his sores to the disciples of the Wise Physician and they shall heal him with spiritual medicine." The paradigm that Abdisho is using is that the Christian (i.e. 'man of God') is stricken with a spiritual illness of iniquity called sin, and can only be healed by having recourse to the divine Physician who dispenses his medicines in the Holy Church—and these medicines are the sacraments.

There are three ways in which the sacraments have been established and instituted in the Holy Church:

1. those sacraments established by Christ himself and as recorded in Sacred Scripture (i.e. Eucharist, Baptism, Priesthood, Absolution);
2. those sacraments established by the apostles under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (i.e. the Holy Leaven or *Malka*, the oil of the Apostles or *Qarna*—the holy Horn);
3. those sacraments established by the Church, by virtue of its apostolic authority in conjunction with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (i.e. the Holy Cross and the nine-fold divisions of the priesthood).¹⁴

As such, the Church of the East does not have the formal distinction of ‘sacramentals,’ as in the Latin West (such as holy water, etc.), for those rites which are not of the septenary number of the sacraments but in some fashion share in their sacred nature.

The sacraments, being instituted by Christ, handed down by the apostles and observed/nurtured in the holy Church, are acts that pertain to the very nature and mission of the Church itself. Being the Body of Christ and the holy gathering of the baptized faithful, the sacraments edify and sanctify the members of that Body. Therefore, the place (*locus*) of the celebration of the holy sacraments is the Church itself; for this reason we refer to them as the *Rāze d-Edta* (‘the Mysteries of the Church’)—for they belong to and in the Church of Christ.

The sacraments are aimed at sanctifying the Christian in the various stages of his/her earthly life. We may call this the *organic* analogy of the sacraments. By ‘organic’ we mean that we look at man who undergoes various changes (or mutations) in his or her life, from birth to natural death. As an organism, the human body undergoes diverse changes at various stages of life; this is just how God has created us! Similarly,

¹⁴ Based on this third category, Mar Timothy II considered other liturgical acts as being ‘sacramental’ in nature, particularly: monastic tonsure, marriage, consecration of altars, burial rite of the faithful depart.

we need to be accompanied during these various stages with God's saving grace, so that we may be sanctified throughout our life unto salvation. The sacraments make present in our daily life the Kingdom of God by continuing the salvific ministry of Christ (particularly fulfilled in the *Mysterium Paschale*), which also included his sacred doctrine and the healing of mankind, even as the signs which Christ performed and as recorded in the Gospels were demonstrations of the might of God and of the divinity of Christ (especially in the Gospel of John—the *semeia*) and witnesses to the saving words of Jesus the Savior of men.

The Patristic Understanding of 'Mystery' (*Rāzā*)

It is important to understand the nature and content of the sacraments as the fathers and teachers of the Church of the East taught and understood them; our 'Theology of the Sacraments' is solely and entirely based on theirs! The most important patristic writer of the Assyrian Church of the East who profusely makes use of sacramental language and the sacraments in general is Mar Aprem the Great (St. Ephrem), who lived from 306 to 373 AD. St. Ephrem differentiates between the usages of 'type,' 'symbol' and '*rāzā*.' Let us look at each in some detail.

Ephrem develops an in-depth understanding of the universe and all things that are contained therein, and its relation to the Creator and his divine revelation by the use of the term *rāzā*. For St. Ephrem, Christ is at the center of the cosmos and of God's revelation itself, in particular and most importantly in the Scriptures. His understanding of the universe and its spiritual symbolism, therefore, is 'Christocentric' (Christ is at the center) and thus 'Christological' (it has to do with Christ). To put it simply, all things in creation point to Jesus Christ and some aspect of his revelation in the flesh. Therefore, everything that is found in nature (and really, the whole cosmos)

and in the Scriptures is ‘emblematic’ of Christ. If we stretch the significance of these ‘mysteries’ in creation and Scripture, they are also euphemisms for the sacraments (the ‘mysteries’ of initiation into the revelation of Jesus Christ). The symbolism found in the universe, therefore, is three-dimensional in that it pertains to: 1) the cosmos/creation; 2) the Scriptures; 3) the mysteries or sacraments.

This sacramental understanding of St. Ephrem is at the core and indeed the foundation of his exegetical hermeneutics as well. He looks at the text of Sacred Scripture (that which is interpreted literally, or rather the ‘rhetorical’ aspect of the sacred text), and this he refers to as *sūrānāith* (ܫܘܪܢܐܝܬ), or the figurative language. However, beyond the text there is a spiritual understanding which points to the ultimate mystery of Christ himself (which he terms ܪܘܚܢܐܝܬ *rūkhānāith*). This comes from the basic understanding of the physical and spiritual aspects of creation.

In English, quite often in our modern age, the word *rāzā* would be equated with ‘symbol.’ However, this does not convey the real meaning of *rāzā*. The correct correlative word for ‘symbol’ would be *remzā*. Symbol is also generally used by the fathers (such as Gabriel of Qatar and Abraham bar Lipeh of Qatar in the mid seventh and early eighth centuries respectively) to denote a thing or action which points to some other reality, but does not necessarily have a concealed meaning behind it. Further, the relationship between the symbol and the reality which it symbolizes may not necessarily be a rather tight one. For example, street signs and traffic signs which we all observe (or should, at least!) on a daily basis are symbols (or, ‘signs’ if you will) that point to a reality beyond the actual symbol—for example, they point to the authority of the state to regulate the safe and orderly flow of traffic for the safety of its citizens. Therefore, following the theological understanding of St. Ephrem, it is best to refer to them as ‘mysteries’ rather than ‘symbols.’ For Ephrem, the entire cosmos/universe

would be full of symbols and signs that point to a higher theological reality than the mere symbol can contain.¹⁵

Another important term that helps us to understand the sacraments (which is often made use of by the fathers of the Church of the East) is *type*. *Type* or *Tupsā* (from the Greek, *tūpos*), is an action or thing that looks to a reality older than itself as its foundation/origin. This technical term is particularly important when reading the Sacred Scriptures. In great part, those theological realities in the Old Testament which are ‘figures’ of those found in the New are similitudes which are called *typology*. The use of typology was widely used at first by the apostles in order to explain that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the Old Testament. St. Paul says in I Corinthians 10:11 that, “...all these things happened to them as a type, and they were written for our correction.” According to Paul, this was given for our disciplining and for the ‘consolation of the Scriptures’: “For all that which was written of old, was written for our knowledge, that by the forbearance and consolation of the Scriptures we might gain hope” (Romans 15:4).¹⁶

Because the Church on earth (up until the *eschaton*, or end of times) is the extension of the ministry and presence of Christ in the world, the Christological typology of the Old Testament is not only valid for the person of Christ (primarily), but for the Church as well, by way of extension. Now, we enter the realm of *sacramental typology*. For example, we could say that the Last Supper is a *type* for the Holy Qurbana; the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan is a *type* of our own baptism; the Tree of Life is a *type* of the Holy Cross, etc. In the celebration of the Holy Qurbana, for example, the actions of the liturgy *typify* some other Christocentric reality that directly deals with the dispensation of Christ and his mystery. As an example, and in reference to the

¹⁵ For a more in-depth study of symbolism and typology in St. Ephrem, see: Christopher Buck, *Paradise and Paradigm. Key Symbols in Persian Christianity and the Bahā'ī Faith* (Albany, 1999), pp. 85-96.

¹⁶ See Jean Danielou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, 1956), 4-5.

procession of the Holy Gifts to the altar by the priests and deacons, Mar Abraham bar Lipeh explains: “The Church depicts a type at this time in which she *typifies* the mystery of the Crucifixion of Jesus upon the Wood...” However, differently from *symbol*, the *type* may indeed participate in the ‘mystery’ (*rāzā*) to which it points and/or which it depicts in the liturgy (sacramental celebration) of the Church.

After Ephrem, Mar Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428 AD) is by far the most important theologian of the Church of the East (especially foundational for the School of Nisibis and her major theologians), particularly for our understanding of the sacraments. First, Mar Theodore posits the basic premise of the ‘Two Worlds;’ this is essential for his theology of the sacraments. Theodore explains:

According to that which the blessed Moses learned in the divine vision, he constructed two tabernacles, one which he called the ‘holy place’ and the other the ‘Holy of Holies.’ The first one was a type of life and the dwelling which we now live on earth, and the second one which they called the ‘Holy of Holies’ was a similitude of those regions which are above the visible heavens, that to which our Lord ascended and in which he remains and gave us to go there and dwell there with him.

In explaining the nature of ‘mystery’ (*raza*), Theodore defines the sacrament thus:

Every sacrament is the likeness of things that are not visible and unspeakable, through signs and symbols. Such things require interpretation and enlightening on account of the person who draws near to these mysteries so that he may know their power. But if they were only composed of visible matter, words for their interpretation would be for naught, for sight itself would be sufficient to show us, one by one, all the actions taken place. Therefore, words are necessary to interpret the power of the symbols and mysteries.

According to Theodore, therefore, the outward matter of the sacrament (e.g. bread, wine, oil, water) symbolizes the hidden and unspeakable power concealed in and underlying the sacrament. This hidden power ultimately derives from the Lord Jesus’ death, burial and Resurrection (i.e. the ‘Paschal Mystery’).

Because the sacraments are ‘pledges’ of everlasting life and the blessedness in eternity which is to come in the future, according to Theodore’s sacramental theology we still gain spiritual benefit from the sacraments while in this world, and yet also a ‘foretaste’ of the next world; we have not attained to the fullness of that everlasting life yet, though. He continues:

Paul demonstrates to us that when our Lord comes from heaven and openly shows the world which is to come and fulfills our resurrection from among the dead—through which we shall become immortal in our body and immutable in our spirit—the use of the mysteries and symbols shall necessarily cease, for we shall be in the truth of that reality itself and will not be in need of visible symbols that remind us concerning the things which shall take place.

The importance, then, and use of the sacraments in this world is to remind us and to make us participate in the reality of the world which is to come. Theodore puts this future realization of the gifts and benefits of the sacraments in this manner:

It behooves you now to make use of an intelligence consonant with these sublime things of which you have been rendered worthy, and to think well, according to the measure of the greatness of a gift such as this, what we were and into what we have been transformed: that we were mortal by nature and we expect to receive immortality, that from being corruptible we shall become incorruptible, from passable impassible, from mutable, forever immutable; and that we shall be transferred from the evils of the earth to heaven; and that we shall enjoy all the good and delightful things found in heaven. We have acquired this hope from the economy of Christ our Lord...

Elsewhere he states to the same effect: “We are commanded to perform in this world the symbols and signs of things which are to be, so that by the use of the mysteries we may become as people who symbolically participate in the joy and blessedness of heaven, and thus attain affinity and great hope of the things to which we look.”

The other important theologian of the Assyrian Church of the East who writes extensively on the sacraments of the Church is Mar Narsai of Nisibis (ca. 399-502). He was the great ‘Master’ (*Rabban*) at the School of Nisibis, which he helped found in 457

AD, after the expulsion of Ibas of Edessa. He later flourished during the episcopal tenure of Mar Bar Sawma of Nisibis. He is famous for his poetic exegetical and liturgical works, mostly commentaries on the Scriptures, general theology and on liturgical matters.¹⁷ His important liturgical works are Homily XVII (*An Exposition of the Mysteries*), Homily XXI (*On the Mysteries of the Church and on Baptism*) and Homily XXXII (*On the Church and on Priesthood*).

Narsai depends heavily upon Theodore of Mopsuestia for the formulation of his own theology, and with regard to the sacraments he adopts Theodore's concept of the 'Two Worlds' (i.e. the heavenly and the earthly realms), and that the earthly ministry is a mirror of the liturgy celebrated in heaven; he states: "The priests in the earthly sanctuary depict that dwelling place (heaven) as by means of a mystery, and as a mirror they show the likeness of those things which are to come."

Another important concept for Narsai's liturgical theology is that the priest, as the minister of the 'Mysteries of the Church' is a vessel utilized by the Holy Spirit, who really is the ultimate 'Celebrant' of and the one who perfects these mysteries: "By the power of the will of his (the Holy Spirit's) will the priest distributes life in the Bread, and he drives away iniquity and makes for the Spirit to dwell among the members (of the Body). The power of the Spirit descends upon the mortal man and dwells in the Bread and sanctifies it by the might of his power."

Regarding the signs and symbols of the sacrament, Narsai states (e.g. with regard to the sacrament of Baptism): "The oil is the symbol which proclaims the divine power, and by outward things (God) gives the assurance of his works completed in secret." He

¹⁷ For an English introduction to the general history and works of Narsai see: Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII (ed.), *Homilies of Mar Narsai*, vol. I (San Francisco 1970) iii-iii. For an introduction to Narsai's liturgical commentaries see: R.H. Connolly, trans., *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai. Translated into English with an Introduction*, (Cambridge, 1909), pp. ix-lxxv; for an in-depth study of Narsai's liturgical theology, see: Edmund Bishop, "Observations on the Liturgy of Narsai," in: *Ibid*, pp. 85-163.

further teaches that it is not the matter (Latin *materia*) of the particular sacrament which sanctifies man, but the power of the Spirit which is hidden in it: “This is the power which the oil (of baptism) imparts—not the oil, but the Spirit who gives it power. The Spirit gives power to the weak oil, and he strengthens by the operation which he works in it.” Narsai further states that priest invokes the Holy Spirit to descend and hover over the Offering (Eucharist) and to impart to it divine power through the Spirit’s operation.

By way of summary, the Assyrian Church of the East follows the Antiochene understanding of the role of the sacraments in salvation, departing God’s grace to the baptized faithful and the their role as ‘pledges’ (*rahbōnā*) of the Kingdom of Heaven, the benefthe full merits of which will be realized at the *eschaton*. I will conclude with the words of the ‘Great Expositor of the Divine Scriptures,’ Mar Theodore, as he comments on the sacrament of baptism:

While still on earth we have been inscribed in the awe-inspiring glory of the future world through these mysteries, but we (ought to) live as much as possible a heavenly life in spurning visible things and aspiring after future things. Those who are about to partake now of these awe-inspiring mysteries are inspired to do so by the grace of God. They do not do this in order to partake of small and ordinary gifts, but to be transformed completely into new men and to possess different virtues which they will receive by the gift of the grace of God: being mortal they will become immortal, being corruptible they will become incorruptible, being passible they will become impassible, being changeable they will become unchangeable, being bond they will become free, being enemies they will become friends, being strangers they will become sons. They will no more be considered a part of Adam but of Christ; they will call as their head not Adam but Christ, who has renewed them; they will not cultivate a ground that will bring forth thorns and thistles to them [Genesis 3:18ff], but they will dwell in a heaven which is remote and immune from all sorrow and sighing [cf. Isaiah 35:10]; nor will death rule over them but they will become themselves rulers in a new life where they will

not be slaves of sin but warriors of righteousness, not servants of Satan but intimate friends of Christ for all time.¹⁸

¹⁸ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Nicene Creed* in: Alphonse Mingana (ed. & English trans.), *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Nicene Creed* (Woodbrooke Studies 5, Cambridge 1932) 20.

Comparative Table of the Sacraments Among the Various Apostolic Churches

Assyrian Church of the East	Eastern Orthodox Churches¹⁹	Roman Catholic Church	Oriental Orthodox Churches²⁰
Priesthood	Baptism	Baptism	Baptism
Baptism	Confirmation	Confirmation	Confirmation
Oil of the Apostles	Eucharist	Eucharist	Repentance & Confession
Eucharist	Penance	Penance	Eucharist
Absolution	Anointing of the Sick	Anointing of the Sick	Unction of the Sick
Holy Leaven (Malka)	Holy Orders	Holy Orders	Matrimony
Holy Cross	Matrimony	Matrimony	Priesthood

¹⁹ The Eastern Orthodox Churches will also speak of the consecration of churches (altars), the monastic tonsure, Christian burial and holy water as ‘sacraments’ as well. These Churches include the Greek Orthodox Church (Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem), the Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Churches, Orthodox Church of Cyprus and the Orthodox Church of Greece (Archbishop of Athens).

²⁰ These include the Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, Ethiopian, Eritrean and Malankara Orthodox Churches (both Catholicates).
