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The Atemporal Plan for Union with God: Father Matta Al-Miskīn against the Backdrop of His Alexandrian Predecessors

Wagdy Samir

The Australian Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies (AIOCS), Sydney 2110, Australia;
wagdy.samir@gmail.com

Abstract: The present paper explores contemporary desert father Matta Al-Miskīn's views on humankind's union with God within the Paradise–Fall–Salvation schema against the backdrop of his Alexandrian Patristic forebears. He understood humankind's paradisaical perfection as an orientation towards God and access to the divine life. Through the Incarnation, Christ reclaimed humanity's access to the divine life. Based on Matta's *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, this paper shows that the Paradise–Fall–Salvation continuum confirms his assertion that humankind's union with God is the goal of Creation. The paper also demonstrates that Matta's vocabulary points to the fundamental difference between being God by nature and being God by adoption, with the latter state to be fully attained in eternity.

Keywords: deification; divine life; divine participation; Matta al-Miskīn; union with God; atemporal plan; Alexandrian predecessors

1. Introduction

Matta al-Miskīn (1919–2006), also known as Matta el-Meskin and Matthew the Poor (English translation), is a contemporary Coptic (Egyptian) Orthodox desert father. He left a considerable mark on his Church and those who knew of him around the world. He is credited with the theological revival of modern Coptic Egypt (Rubenson 1997, p. 43) and is referred to as “probably one of the greatest Coptic Orthodox spiritual leaders of the Middle East in modern times” (Watson 2006, p. 1). As with his Alexandrian forebears, the topic of union with God is paramount to his theology (Gross 2002; Russell 2004).¹ This paper aims to reconstruct his understanding of the relationship between God and humankind since before the foundation of the world, within the context of his *Commentary on the Gospel of John (Commentary)*² and his other writings. I show that the mutual orientation of God and humanity permeates his *Commentary* within the Paradise-Fall-Salvation plan. For him, God began to work for humankind's salvation by “writing” an atemporal plan (existing outside time and not subject to the constraints of time) for the entire economy. The continuity of God's plan to unite humankind to Godself in the Incarnation is evident in God's timeless orientation towards humankind and humankind's orientation towards the Creator. This reciprocal orientation—although unfolding from before the beginning of time—reaches full realization in the Word of God incarnate.

In exploring Matta's creational and incarnational narratives within the context of humankind's union with God, I aim to show—along the lines of arguments by Stephen Davis—that Matta “places himself in continuity with his late antique Alexandrian Greek Fathers in his emphasis on the dual themes of Incarnation and deification” (Davis 2008, p. 276). The significance of this conclusion is not negligible. Whether he quotes the early Fathers directly or not (Anonymous Monk(s) 2003a, 2003b),³ the comparison brings to the fore the Patristic



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antecedents of his thinking. What is evident, though, is that despite Matta being an adherent to the Alexandrian tradition, he is also an original thinker, offering novel interpretations to suit his theological argument. In exploring the aspect of continuity, as Davis aptly stated, “At stake is nothing less than the cultural legacy of biblical and patristic interpretation, the shape of intra- and interreligious apologetic encounter, and the ritualised ways that Coptic Christians continue to put their Christology into practice” (Davis 2008, p. 278).

This paper’s outline, couched in the context of the Creation/Re-creation continuum, is as follows. First, I discuss the relevance of the Creation/Paradise and the Fall narratives for the topic. Second, I tackle the role of the Incarnation in humankind’s attainment of union with God. Finally, I provide concluding remarks on Matta’s grasp of the relevance of the Incarnation and what it means to be human while attaining union with the divine. Throughout, I show that for Matta, like his Alexandrian predecessors, despite the realistic and transformative aspects of that union, there is a difference between the participant (humankind) and the participated in (God). Be that as it may, it will become obvious that, for him as for his Patristic sources, the soteriological dimension of the Creation/Fall/Re-creation continuum culminates in humankind’s real participation in the divine life.

2. The Creation/Paradise Narratives

The contemplation of the Creation and Paradise narratives is integral to Matta’s grasp of the Incarnation. For him, the Alexandrian interpretation of humankind’s creation in God’s image (Burghardt 1957, 1961) and of the breath of life God breathed into Adam’s nostrils (Boulnois 1989) are crucial to understanding humankind’s relationship with God since the beginning of time. In short, the Scriptural narratives supply the very purpose of the Incarnation, highlighting the continuity of God’s atemporal plan.

The birth from above, of water and the Spirit, conjures the Creation Re-creation framework in Matta’s mind. It is against this backdrop that he speaks of humankind’s orientation towards God:

It is a natural orientation (نزوع طبيعي) in humankind—according to the movement of the Spirit (حركة الروح) in it, which God breathed into its nostrils—so that humankind may aspire to immortality and continuance in life, to what is always greater and superior. Humankind’s nostalgia for God, the heavens, and holiness is never extinguished, irrespective of the measure of sin it accumulates. As humankind was initially created according to God’s image, the image desires to draw closer to its origin (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:217–18).

Even though John 3:6 refers to the Re-creation of humankind after the Incarnation, Matta relates it to the first Creation. The above passage implies three interrelated principles: (1) humankind’s orientation towards God is natural, inherent, and instinctive; (2) this orientation is due to a movement of the Spirit of God breathed on humankind at Creation; and (3) people’s Godward orientation never disappears in the fallen condition, as God created humankind in God’s image.

2.1. Natural Orientation Towards God

Matta establishes that humankind’s orientation towards God is “natural.” It is an instinct that exists in humankind to turn to God. He expands on this idea by proposing that God implanted in human nature the urge for perfection to reach what is divine (al-Miskīn 1988, p. 27). Proof of this orientation towards the good in humankind’s nature is its elation when adhering to righteousness and its sense of regret and sadness upon doing what is evil and contrary to its natural orientation (al-Miskīn 1988, pp. 28, 44). However, when evil prevails, it does so in the absence of good (al-Miskīn 1988, p. 32). He confirms that evil results from humankind’s choice and is not by nature (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:34;

al-Miskīn 1989, Introduction 120, 122). It was in Adam's abilities to be "like God," given that he was created in God's image (al-Miskīn 1988, p. 41).

Matta's view of humankind's natural orientation towards God mirrors the Alexandrine tradition. For Cyril, in *Contra Anthromorphitas* (*Against the Anthropomorphites*), God, having moulded the human being and animated it with a living and intelligent soul, "naturally" oriented it toward every good deed and knowledge, and since the human being is created in God's image and likeness, it "is therefore born with a natural penchant toward the good" (Costache 2015, pp. 343–44). Similarly, for Athanasius, being in the form of God's image, Adam had "his mind oriented towards God in the beginning" (Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* [ed. Thomson; using *Against the Gentiles*, trans. Newman (Nic. Post-Nic. Fathers vol. 4)] 2.12–13).

Moreover, Matta's rejection of evil as inherent in human nature echoes the Patristic tradition. Athanasius asserts that wickedness did not exist in the beginning and, even now, holy people do not have evil as part of their nature (*Contr. Gent.* 2.1–2). However, whereas Athanasius states that wickedness does not exist in holy people, Matta argues that evil does not exist by nature. His position here coincides with the argument of Cappadocian theodicy (as in Basil the Great's *Homily Explaining that God Is Not the Cause of Evil* [using trans. Harrison, pp. 67, 73, 74]). However, this position is not entirely different from Athanasius', who, within the aforementioned passage, states that by preserving its nature intact, the human being possesses the capacity to never depart from God (*Contr. Gent.* 2.11–12). Matta's argument is also consistent with Origen's, who adduces that no one is essentially evil, with humankind having the ability to be evil or holy (Origen, *De Principiis* [*On First Principles*, ed. Behr], 1.5.5). That is, like Origen, Matta emphasizes that doing good or evil is not by nature and that humankind can fall away from holiness only through the misuse of free will. Furthermore, Origen argues that wicked acts do not proceed according to the truth but have darkness as their basis (*Commentarium in Johannem* [using trans. Blanc (Sourc. Chrét. 120), vol.1] 2.25.158). Finally, Cyril taught that humankind is neither good nor evil by nature; instead, whatever it is, it is by free choice (Boulnois 2000, p. 67). By advocating that good is not a characteristic that is implanted in humankind's nature, Matta agrees with Cyril of Alexandria, with the former pointing to the orientation towards the good as being natural in humankind, while being good invariably is not.

2.2. Movement of the Spirit

Matta attributes this "natural" orientation to the "movement of the Spirit in humankind that God breathed into its nostrils." To grasp the "movement" of the Spirit before the Incarnation, we need to understand how Matta construed the role of the Spirit after it.

In exegeting John 3:16, Matta predicates that humankind can only accept the love of the only-begotten Son after being born again (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:231–38). This second birth differs from the first (creation) in that it is not just through a breath but through union with the Spirit of God (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:236). That is, Matta differentiates between Adam receiving the breath of life at Creation and attaining union with the Spirit of God through the new birth from above. Accordingly, he distinguishes "movement" and "union". The first began at Creation, while the second is an outcome of the Incarnation of the Word of God—the sending of the Spirit. This is an original contribution compared to Cyril's pneumatological discussion (Boulnois 1989). That said, while "movement" and "union" are distinct, they are aspects of one process.

Matta's paradisaic narrative proposes that humankind inherits flesh from Adam; yet together with eternal life and holiness through the Spirit God breathed into his nostrils; and that the divine breath is renewed in humankind through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (al-Miskīn 2002, p. 40). Although sin and death are active in the flesh of humankind, life and holiness dwell in its spirit (al-Miskīn 2002, p. 41). While the flesh is "of dust" and will

return to dust, humankind's spirit draws upon God's Spirit breathed upon human nature to make it a living soul (al-Miskīn 2001, pp. 3–4). He adds that the human being, through its own volition, can lean towards either the body or the spirit, thus rendering it either a physical or a spiritual being, respectively. However, consistent with his commentary on John 3:16, he connects the Spirit to a movement that points humankind towards becoming spiritual. Still, within the same passage, Matta injects a new concept: the reception of the Holy Spirit at the baptismal rebirth. Here, he contrasts the movement of the Spirit in humankind at Creation and the union with the Holy Spirit effected at baptism.

Matta ultimately asserts that the divine image is fully displayed in the person of Christ (al-Miskīn 1985, p. 6). The divine image was first actualized at God's breath, resulting in the human being becoming "a living soul" (Genesis 2:7). He extends the meaning of the breath to Christ's breathing the Holy Spirit upon his disciples to renew their lives. The full realization of the image of God is ultimately fulfilled through the stability the person of Christ brings.

Again, one can recognize a parallel between Matta's and Athanasius' views regarding the struggle between the flesh/body (physical life) and the spirit/mind (spiritual life) and that humankind can orient its mind away from the body and cling to the divine (Athanasius, *Contr. Gent.* 2–3). This parallels Matta's view of the human spirit as the cradle of all that is spiritual, leading to a deep relationship with God. Similarly, Matta's view of the self's leaning towards the flesh (carnal life) as leading to death echoes Athanasius' view that by cleaving to what is carnal, human beings become imprisoned in a life of pleasure, leading the soul to the fear of death and separation from the body. Moreover, Matta agrees with Cyril that the human being has the inclination and capacity to choose between the carnal and the spiritual, given that it is created in God's image (Boulnois 2000, pp. 64, 71).

2.3. *Loss of Holiness, but Not of Orientation Towards God*

As with movement and union, Matta differentiates between holiness and divine support. The loss of holiness does not include the loss of divine support. He considers this support a prerequisite for humankind to realize a condition "above nature" (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* II:848). He sees the breath at Creation as the infusion of a "supernatural" capability into the "natural being" that led to its orientation towards God through the "movement of the Spirit" (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* II:848). He, therefore, proposes an interplay between the natural and the supernatural since the beginning of Creation by emphasizing the supernatural role God's breath played then. Against the backdrop of connecting Creation and the Incarnation, he emphasizes the progress of the supernatural capability by explaining that, at Christ's resurrection, the breathing of the Spirit on the disciples denotes union with the Spirit. In other words, created as a "natural being," humankind was to progress (through the orientation, not the "good" implanted in it) into a "spiritual being," with the ability to ultimately become divine. Supremely, however, it is in Christ, as discussed below, that humankind attains union with God.

In other words, as Hani Hanna discerned, humankind finds stability through the supernatural component (Hanna 2010, pp. 258–62, 266). The supernatural component enables the possibility of deification since humankind was created in God's image, a state that Adam lost and which Christ restored through the Incarnation. Immortality (or deification) is God's image in humanity and was not totally lost after the Fall. In pointing this out, Hanna grasped the Creation/Re-creation continuum correctly while affirming Matta's insistence that the ultimate aim of Creation is the deification of humankind.

The idea of progress is anchored in the Alexandrine tradition. Norman Russell asserted that, for Clement Alexandrinus, Adam was called to progress in virtue when he was created (Russell 2004, p. 124). Likewise, as Doru Costache has shown, for Athanasius, Adam's

acquisition of divine knowledge was to occur gradually (Costache 2015, p. 328). This gradual progress requires humankind's continuous yearning for God. For Origen, when humankind yearns "to possess life in truth," it is made a "partaker of life," which leads to higher knowledge (*Comm. In Johan.* 2.156). Origen's view that progress depends on the Logos (Russell 2004, p. 143) also finds its echo in the writings of Matta. The dynamic interaction and interplay of the natural and the supernatural lead to humankind's divine participation.

The Fall changed humankind's paradisaical orientation towards God. Matta elaborates on the fallen condition, showing that Adam separated from God (which amounts to death) when he sought independence from God by disobeying the commandment (al-Miskīn 1988, pp. 36, 37, 39). In the beginning, Adam lived with God in a state of "knowledge of the truth" and "righteousness" derived "not experientially but from God himself" (al-Miskīn 1988, p. 36). Matta adds that before the Fall, Adam possessed freedom that allowed him to think willingly of virtue and truth. Adam's recompense was his constant presence and growth in virtue (al-Miskīn 1988, p. 36). In other words, Adam was created "complete (perfect)", but "his completeness (perfection) was through God and with God only" (al-Miskīn 1988, p. 37). Matta adds that he does not deny the vulnerability of Adam to falling if he separates himself from the Creator of his own volition.

Matta proposes that Adam did not seek to be "like God" from within his nature; the thought was implanted in him by external forces—the serpent (al-Miskīn 1988, p. 38). Indeed, God did not create Adam with a disobedient or contrary nature. Accordingly, "Adam desired the tree as if it were good" (al-Miskīn 1988, p. 39). This is not an attempt by Matta to minimize Adam's sin; rather, it is a way of saying that he had a good intention by virtue of being created with a nature-oriented towards the Creator. Thus, wrongdoing is exogenous to Adam's nature. However, Adam was misled to seek the good outside God and fell into the sin of self-reliance.

Matta argues that God desired Adam to progress in holiness by bestowing on him a capacity to eat from the tree of life at the designated time. Instead, before reaching the full stature of a perfected person, he disobeyed God by eating "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:17) before having the capacity to discern, thus siding with evil (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* II:895–96).

Despite Adam falling into disobedience, he still heard the voice of God (Genesis 3:9,10), but fear accompanied his hearing (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:626). For Matta, the separation from God that led to death did not amount to total deprivation of God's presence. As humanity refused to live in the light of the Creator, within the realm of the Creator's "truth, love, and holiness", the effectiveness of that light in humankind ceased (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:48). The fear of death reigned in people instead of the vivifying breath of God (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:440). Nevertheless, the orientation towards God was never wholly extinguished, irrespective of the depth of sin (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:217–18; Georgi 2003, pp. 62, 63). This indicates that God's image was not entirely erased from humankind after the Fall; the longing to be united to God through faith in Christ remained (al-Miskīn 1985, p. 9).

In summary, the coherence and interrelation of the three principles—the natural orientation towards God, the movement of the Spirit within humankind, and the loss of holiness without the loss of divine support—point to the inner connection between humankind and God since the beginning of time. This also paves the way for what might appear as an interplay of opposites: the dialectic of sin against God and union with God.

Given that in Adam, humankind was rendered unable to experience union with God; it needed to be born from above (John 3:3) to re-enter God's full presence. Therefore,

spiritual rebirth is necessary if humankind is to attain what is above nature (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:208–9).

3. The Incarnation Narrative

The Creation-Fall-Re-creation trajectory culminates in the Incarnation of the Word, or what Cyril consistently called a hypostatic union. For Matta, the Incarnation manifests eternity embracing time and God's turning towards humankind (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:78) before the foundation of the world, resulting in the "mystery of (our) seeing God" (Matthew the Poor 2003, p. 85). Through the Incarnation, humankind participates in Christ's divinity. Divine participation elevates the natural human being to supernatural status, exalting humankind's filiation, or adoption, to the "real" level of Christ's own sonship to the Father (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:81). Matta contends that the Word has flooded humankind's spirit with his Spirit to raise it, through love, above its nature to abide with him (Christ) in God, "spirit in Spirit (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:17)" (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:82).

Having referenced a battery of verses from John's Gospel (15:9–10; 16:15, 27; 17:8, 10–11, 20–23), Matta then highlights the outcomes of humankind's union with God:

May the reader now be convinced [through these verses] that the union with God, or the sharing in the union of the Father and the Son, is pivotal for John's Gospel. [Therefore, union with God] is the premise of salvation and eternal life that Christ came to declare in the name of the Father. And the last verse that we have adduced as a witness: "I in them, and you in me, that they may be made perfect in one," is the epitome of the significant mystery John's Gospel declares to the world, that is, the divine essence (الجوهر الإلهي) that unites the Father to the Son is the very same power/force that gathers us in them through grace. [. . .] thus, the divine union and the power of the divine love stored in the Father and the Son became effective in us through Christ (al-Miskīn 1989, *Commentary* Introd. 175).

This passage shows that Matta sees a direct relation between the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son and the Son's consubstantiality with humankind. The power of the former is communicated to humankind through the Incarnation. Through the divine flesh of Christ, humankind participates in and is united with God (Anonymous Monk(s) 2003a, p. 35; 2003b, pp. 25, 39). The mystery John declares is that the hypostatic union (الإتحاد الإقنومي) between the divinity and the humanity of the Word establishes the union between humankind and God. Nevertheless, Matta asserts that the latter union is through grace, though no less real and enriching for us. In short, while exceeding our limitations, humankind's adoption by the Father is not by nature but by grace.

For Matta, the hypostatic union forms the foundation of humankind's union with God. Having established that the Word is God (John 1:1), Matta ponders the incarnational phrase *par excellence*, "And the Word became flesh" (John 1:14), to draw out the realities of the hypostatic union (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:77–107). Above all, the union took place between a complete, real, and lasting humanity and a complete divinity such that the resultant union is a single subject without alteration to either the divinity or the humanity (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:88–91, 445–46, 448; II:802). Echoing Cyril, Matta insists that in Christ, no divine work took place separately from the flesh, nor did any human work take place without the divinity (McGuckin 2004, pp. 153–55, 166, 190–93). The Word lifted the curse of death the very moment he united himself with the flesh (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:91). Therefore, the hypostatic union led to humankind's union with the Father and the Son (John 17:21), attaining eternal life (John 11:25 and 5:24) and partaking of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). As highlighted by Matta's disciples, the hypostatic union is, for him, the foundation of humankind's union with God (Anonymous Monk(s) 2003a, p. 33;

2003b, pp. 24, 36). These disciples emphasized that Matta's writings show that "the ultimate aim of Christian life is the return to God through his Son and the power of the Holy Spirit and [...] the life of fellowship in the church" (Anonymous Monk(s) 2003b, p. 23).

Matta's understanding of the role of the hypostatic union in humankind's union with God echoes themes in Patristic theology. For Clement, the intimacy between God and humankind can only be achieved given that God first united himself to human nature in the person of Christ (Russell 2004, p. 121). Likewise, Athanasius speaks of the Word from heaven being born to transfer human nature into himself (becoming flesh) to attain what is beyond being human through sharing eternal life with the Word (Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* [ed. Newman; (Nic. Post-Nic. Fathers vol. 4)] 3.33). Finally, Cyril asserts that because Christ is both God and human, he becomes the bond between humankind and God (*Commentarius in evangelium Johannis* [using trans. Maxwell (Anc. Christ. Texts)] 11.1 [II:304]).⁴ For Cyril, without the hypostatic union, humankind could not participate in God.

In what follows, I explore three principles Matta deploys to argue the importance of the hypostatic union to humankind's participation in the divine life: (1) the fullness of the incarnate Word, (2) Christ as light and life, and (3) Christ as the true vine.

3.1. The Fullness of the Incarnate Word

Matta calls attention to the teaching of John 1:16 that the incarnate Word bestows his "fullness" on humankind. He explicates the dynamics of this bestowal by linking three Johannine verses (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:109): "the Word was God" (John 1:1c), "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14), and "out of his fullness [...] all received" (John 1:16). For humankind to receive the Word's fullness (v.16), the incarnate Word had to be one with God (v.1) and one with humankind (v.14).

Correlating the fullness in John 1:16 with five occurrences of the word in the Pauline epistles (Col 1:19, 20; 2:9, 10; Ephes 1:22, 23; 3:19; and 4:13), Matta asserts that Christ's fullness is the fullness of God and that humankind, through faith in Christ, can attain this fullness (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:110, 111). For Matta, the passage "(in Christ) dwells all the fullness of the Godhead" found in Colossians (2:9) refers to the fullness of the Son in the bosom of the Father (John 17:21). Although his fullness is unapproachable by humankind (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* II:1079), he adds a very pertinent point, saying that "the fullness of the Godhead [that dwells] *bodily*" (my emphasis) entails a "divine fullness that became flesh for our sake" (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* II:1080). Thus, the relationship between the Son of Man and the Father is "the supreme model" of the union between believers and God (al-Miskīn 1989, *Commentary* Introd. 199), enabling human beings to share in Christ's fullness. Again, Matta compares two unions: between the Father and the Son in the triune God and between believers and God effected through the incarnate Word. However, the first union is by nature, while the second is by grace. The first union is eternal and absolute, while the second is affected through relationships in history. Accordingly, while the divine fullness is absolute, humankind's sharing in it is an ongoing process that begins in the here and now and reaches into eternity (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:112–13). Still, believers are indeed rendered partakers of the divine nature. Christ's prayer (that all may be one in the Father and the Son, John 17:21) asserts humankind's right and calling to seek union with God, then and now, since this is the scope and aim of the Incarnation (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:112–13).

In summary, Matta's writings highlight the difference between the hypostatic and trinitarian unions and the union between humankind and God. The latter does not negate humankind's earthly nature but elevates it to the heavens. It is a union by adoption and grace, whereas the Son is of the very essence of the Father (Anonymous Monk(s) 2003b, pp. 22, 46–49, 53–57). Humankind's equality with the Son concerns his humanity, whereas

the Son is equal to the Father regarding his divinity. In other words, Matta does not believe that union with God, or participation in the divine life, leads to human nature's absorption into the divine one (Boctor 1995, pp. 62–66).

Matta's perspective on humankind's union with God echoes the Alexandrine tradition. Most notably, Cyril argues that humankind's union with each other and with God resembles the union between the Father and the Son, elevating humankind to an ineffable union with God:

Therefore, since the natural (physical) unity (φυσικῆς ἐνότητος) between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is acknowledged [...] let us consider how we too are found to be one with one another and with God both corporeally and spiritually (σωματικῶς τε καὶ πνευματικῶς). The only-begotten shone forth for us from the very essence of God the Father, [...] became flesh [...], mixed (ἀναμικγύς) himself, as it were, with our nature through the unimaginable coming together and union with this body from the earth. Thus, He who is God by nature is called and truly becomes the heavenly man. [...] He is God and a human being in the same person so that by uniting in himself, as it were, things that are different by nature and essentially distinct from each other he may make humanity share and participate in the divine nature. [...] The mystery of Christ, then, has become a beginning and a way for us to attain participation in the Holy Spirit and union with God (Cyril, *Comm. in Johan.* 11.11 [II:303,304]).

In the above passage, Cyril suggests that the unity within the triune God helps explain how human beings are united with each other and with God. Given that the only begotten became flesh while possessing the Father's very essence, humankind is able to partake of the divine nature. In addition, Cyril affirms that "the Son supplies of his natural fullness" to each soul worthy of receiving it (*Comm.* 1.9 [I:67]), thus emphasizing the interplay between divine activity and human response. Finally, Cyril asserts—which has been shown to be echoed by Matta—that the Son grants the Spirit (filling humankind) by participation, while he has it "essentially himself" (Cyril, *Comm. in Johan.* 2.3 [I:113]).

3.2. Christ as Light

Commenting on "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12), Matta proposes that human nature is but darkness in the absence of the divine nature. However, when Christ revealed within himself the divine nature and rendered people partakers of it, "light broke through our depths [allowing us] to discern God's nature and his mysteries, and his thought enlightened our minds, hearts, will, and words" (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:521). Thus, a renewal took place, allowing humankind to behold the Word's glory (John 1:14b). Here, Matta understands "the true light" as a characteristic of the Word's divine nature. The incarnate Word revealed in himself the divine nature, allowing people to partake of his light. The divine light, therefore, shone in humankind's being, rendering it a new creation. This idea becomes more evident in Matta's commentary on the utterance of the man born blind: "I am he" (John 9:9). He interprets it as the reflection of Christ's characteristics in the blind man. In gaining sight and saying ἐγώ εἰμι, "I am he," an utterance always associated with Christ in John's Gospel, signifying his divine identity, Matta proposes that the blind man is able to claim that "he is in Christ a new creation" (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:593). The blind man, therefore, in receiving outward sight, received inwardly the true light that rendered him a new creation in Christ.

One only has to recall the striking connection that Matta (and Cyril) make between breathing of Christ upon his disciples (John 20:21–22) and the breath of life in Genesis 2:7. He highlights that just as God created humankind according to his image, Christ, after his resurrection, recreated it towards righteousness and holiness by breathing his Spirit in the

image of the creator (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* I:1288–91; al-Miskīn 1985, p. 10). Thus, humankind regained the divine image with the disciples as the first fruits (al-Miskīn 1985, p. 6). Although humankind's actions can tarnish the image, it can now attain a better state (al-Miskīn 1985, p. 13).

Although Matta is clear that what Christ is by nature is unapproachable, he contends that the Incarnation has allowed humankind to share in Christ's characteristics. Sharing is not merely by moral imitation; it is existential, organic, and real (see Section 3.3 below). It enables believers to become a new creation in Christ, as did the man born blind who received his sight. Through his Incarnation, Christ has recreated humanity within himself. Being in him means that humanity shares in his characteristics.

Humankind's participation in Christ, who is light by nature, reverberates throughout the Patristic tradition. Cyril states that only Christ is light by nature while humankind when it renounces the light of the only-begotten Son, walks in darkness (*Comm. in Johan.* 5.2 [I:317]). Origen shows the same understanding when he says that humankind seeking "life in truth" comes to share in it the "foundation of the light of knowledge" (*Comm. in Johan.* 2.156).

3.3. Christ as the True Vine and Believers as the Branches

Matta contends, in agreement with Cyril, that John 15 points to the believers' "organic union" with Christ (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* II:892). But first, I must establish the significance of the vine regarding Christ's divinity. The following is Matta's explanation of "I am the vine":

[When he says] I am (ἐγώ εἰμι), Christ is speaking of the divine essence: "I am the self-existent (أنا الكائن بذاتي)." The context does not support any comparison or analogy here. What follows in the form of attributes does not support the notion that this is a parable. Here, the "vine" denotes the essence of Christ and his divine attribute, "I am." However, within the human reality, [it denotes] the Church!! This is the mystical equivalent to "And the Word became flesh." For the extension of the meaning is: And the Word became flesh that he might become Church! For the Church is the aim of the Incarnation—Ephesians 1:22 and Colossians 1:18 (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* II:894).

Matta insists that Christ's utterance "I am" signifies his divine attributes (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* Introd. 218–46). Adding the word "vine" to the title "I am," Christ points to an absolute reality that goes beyond any analogy or symbolism; the Incarnation made the symbol real, one would say. Matta then extends the meaning to highlight the effects of the hypostatic union (the Word became flesh) on the church as the body of Christ (alluding to Ephes 1:22; 5:30; Col 1:18; 2:9, 10; Rom 12:5; and 1 Cor 12:27). In doing so, Matta prepares the readers to understand the branches of the vine as members of Christ's body. He infers that the branches become the vine, saying, "Christ shows the extent of the diffusion of his divine nature as a true vine into the true branches, so that they and the vine may become one true vine" (Matthew the Poor 2008, p. 37).

When the Word became flesh, he enabled humankind to be mystically united to himself that it might become a living member in Christ as the branch is in the vine (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* II:895). Thus, Matta continues, "the vine here is heavenly, living, vivifying, and human-like, all at once. Through the branches, the vine exists in the world, while not being of the world, and has thus directly entered into God's care" (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* II:896). Although the vine (the Word) is divine (heavenly, living, and vivifying), in order to unite the branches to himself, he became flesh, thus rendering the vine "human-like." In all this Matta echoes Cyril (*Comm. in Johan.* 10.2 [II:211–12]), adding that the Father as the vinedresser also points to believers' union with Christ as deriving from a divine source.

The Son (the vine) carries in his flesh the believers (the branches) who abide in him, while the Father (the vinedresser) is the one who planted it from of old—an allusion to Psalm 80:8 (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* II:897). By abiding in the vine, believers gain the right to become children of God, becoming the offspring of the Beloved, not symbolically, but through the mingling with the blood and flesh of the incarnate Word of God (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* II:925).

Matta expands on the vine imagery to highlight the Creation–Re-creation continuum. When commenting on Christ being the true vine (John 15), Matta identifies a new paradisaical image. To him, the incarnate Word institutes in humankind a New Paradise through planting “the true vine, the true tree of life” in its midst, which is himself (al-Miskīn 1990, *Commentary* II:896). While humankind was warned not to eat from the tree of knowledge lest it should die, Christ now warns that it surely will die if it does not partake of the true vine (John 6:53). Matta weaves together the Paradise narrative and the Incarnation of the Word in an extended and complex metaphor. Here are its components: (i) the tree of knowledge from which Adam and Eve ate despite the commandment and hence were separated from God; (ii) they were allowed to eat from the tree of life but ate from the tree of knowledge instead; and (iii) the vine, which is Christ, is the true tree of life. Since the Word is the tree of life, to partake of the Word and to be united to him was always possible from the beginning. Humankind, having failed to partake of him at Creation, Christ came down and became incarnate to unite those who believe in him to himself.

The above discussion has many parallels with Cyril’s exposition on the vine and the branches. While Cyril’s focus on John 15 is in the context of his eucharistic theology, it still finds parallels with what Matta denotes as an “organic” union with Christ. Cyril employs the vine analogy to highlight the recipients’ corporeal participation in Christ through the communion of his holy flesh. In short, they receive “life out of and from him” (Cyril, *Comm. in Johan.* 10.2 [II:214]). Masterfully, Cyril connects John 15:1 with a battery of other verses to strengthen his interpretation. He uses Romans 12:5 to highlight participants’ unity with Christ “in the one body” and 1 Corinthians 10:17 to show that “we all partake of the one bread.” By participating in his holy flesh, communicants receive the mystery of the Eucharist in themselves and have Christ dwelling corporeally in them. He extends the blessings of the Eucharist to embrace the Gentiles (referring to Ephesians 3:6) as fellow members of the body of Christ by virtue of the embodiment that takes place due to their eucharistic participation. He refers to 1 Corinthians 6:15, 56 to point to the role of the Eucharist in making believers the members of Christ. This exposition’s key point refers to the necessity of participation of like-nature, a requirement well expressed by the analogy of Christ as the vine and believers as the branches. In this case, Cyril points to the ineffable manner in which participation takes place through the indwelling of Christ in the communicants. In other words, like Cyril, Matta expresses Christ’s vine image in the context of humankind’s union with God. The union is “organic,” just as the branch and the vine are organically one.

In summary, the Word removed the disconnection between divine and human by taking flesh and uniting it to himself. Through the hypostatic union or the Incarnation, all humanity is granted the ability to attain union with the Word incarnate. Although fullness belongs by nature only to the Son, he allowed humankind to share in it by uniting it with his humanity. The communicated fullness is the Son bestowing on humankind life and light to renew those who accept him and to enable them to behold his glory. As the true vine, Christ nourishes and maintains the branches that abide in him. The Word unites himself with believers by becoming flesh, granting them membership in his body, the church. Ultimately, the branches and the vine become one true vine. Clearly, for Matta, the hypostatic union, or the Incarnation, is the cornerstone of humankind’s participation

in the divine life. In this light, humanity's soteriological Re-creation culminates in the divine union.

4. Concluding Remarks

This paper has aimed to show that the Incarnation is the *milieu* of humankind's union with God in Matta's writings and that Matta's teachings are consistent with those of his Alexandrian forebears without being imprisoned in their tradition. The crux of the matter is that the Word, who is consubstantial with the Father before all ages, became flesh and tabernacled in humankind, filling humankind out of his own fullness. For Matta, however, God's plan to unite humankind to himself is atemporal, ordained before the foundation of the world. In essence, humankind's relationship with God is a single divine story from before the beginning of time. This relationship shapes what it means to be human.

Matta uses two Scriptural themes to highlight the Creation-Fall-Re-creation continuum: God's image and God's breath. These themes point to God's orientation towards humankind and humankind's orientation towards God. He deploys the Scriptural term "image" as an exegetical link connecting Creation and the new Creation, with the Word as the common agent. He argues that given that humankind is created in the divine image, the Word bestows his attribute, "light," on us. This is due to Christ being "light" before the foundation of the world. Yet, despite being granted the capacity to apprehend "light" since the beginning, humankind failed to accept its rightful share in this, resulting in death and darkness.

The continuity of the Creation-Fall-Re-creation narrative is reflected in the Incarnation. The incarnate Word inaugurated the new Eden, God's spiritual paradise, and reunited humanity with the Father. Thus, in the person of the incarnate Word, the divine image reaches perfect clarity, and humankind is once again restored to its share of eternal life. In essence, for Matta, the Word is the locus of both the first Creation and the New Creation.

Matta's second Scriptural theme within the Creation-Fall-Re-creation continuum is God's "breath." He sees the breath of God at Creation as orienting humankind towards God. Inclination towards God originates in the Spirit God breathed on humankind at creation, which gave it the urge and capacity to attain holy life. In other words, since Creation, God has provided humankind with divine support, breathing the supernatural capability of the breath into the natural being of humankind through the movement of the Spirit. Despite the fall, this natural orientation is never entirely extinguished.

The "movement" of the Spirit at Creation becomes through the Incarnation "union" with God. The "first birth" (Creation) is augmented by the "second birth" from above, enabling the attainment of union with God. Still, the "movement" and the "union" are aspects of the one process. Matta further highlights the continuum between "movement" and "union" by showing a parallel between God's breath in Genesis 2:7 and Christ's breath in John 20:21–22. While, at creation, humanity inherited flesh from Adam and holiness through the Spirit breathed by God into Adam's nostrils, Christ's breath upon his disciples, as the first fruits of humanity, created humanity anew. Therefore, through Christ, the divine image reaches its full manifestation. All barriers to participation in the divine life have been removed in Christ, and humankind's union with God transpires as a continuous and gradual process across the Creation–Fall–Re-creation continuum.

Matta paints a new paradisaical image through the incarnate Word, in whom humankind's union with God reaches its zenith. For Matta, the hypostatic union is the supreme model of the union between humankind and God. The Word, taking flesh from humankind, sanctifies it, granting it the vivifying power of God. In doing so, the incarnate Word's fullness is communicated to humankind. While the Son's fullness is the absolute fullness of God and is unapproachable, by taking flesh, the incarnate Word allows hu-

mankind to participate in his fullness. Through the single subject of Christ as *Godman* (الله-إنسان) humankind is thus able to reclaim its right to seek union with God. Without this union, humankind loses what it means to be human.

Finally, Matta is clear on the measure of humankind's participation in the divine life. While emphasizing the real nature of the union of humankind and God as the goal of the divine plan and of the Creation-Fall-Re-creation trajectory, he makes it clear that the union between the Father and the Son is by nature, whereas humankind's union with God is by gracious participation in the divine life. God is always totally other than the human being—even when humanity fully participates in the divine life.

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Notes

- ¹ For a review of the notion of union with God (deification) in early Christian theology, see the seminal works of Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers* and Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*.
- ² I refer to Matta's introduction and two volumes on the Gospel of John (in Arabic) as follows: *Commentary* Volume:pages. Introduction: pages denote the introduction volume followed by page numbers; and I: pages and II: pages denote Volume I and Volume II followed by page numbers, respectively. All translations from Arabic belong to me.
- ³ By way of an example, Matta quotes the early church fathers 262 times in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* alone. For a detailed discussion of Matta's adherence to the Alexandrian fathers, see the two volumes from Anonymous Monk(s), *The Orthodox Patristic Principles in the Writings of Father Matta al-Miskīn*.
- ⁴ I refer to Cyril of Alexandria's commentaries on the Gospel of John (edited by David Maxwell) as *On John* 11.11 means book 11, chapter 11 and (II:303–304) denotes (Volume II: pages 303–4).

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