

Dating Holy Nativity and Holy Theophany

Kreesdos Dznav yev Haydnetsav! (Christ is Born and Revealed!)

Orhnyal eh Haydnootyoonun Kreesdosee! (Blessed is the Revelation of Christ!)

Dear Reverend Clergy, Family and Friends,

On January 6th, the Armenian Orthodox Church celebrates what could be described as the second greatest feast of the Church's calendar. In the Feast of Theophany, called in Armenian "Asdvadz-a-haydnootyoon" (or "Revelation of God"), we celebrate the Nativity and Baptism of Christ our Lord, as one joint celebration of God's manifestation of Himself to the world. If interested, what follows is:

Have a Blessed Theophany!

Sub-Deacon Ghazar Der-Ghazarian

The calendrical differences regarding the Feast of Theophany.

Leaving the issue of "calendars" aside (which is not standardized throughout the Armenian Church), the Armenian Orthodox Church is the only Church which maintains the ancient dating of the Nativity of our Lord on January 6th. Some evidence that this is the most ancient dating of the Nativity of our Lord comes from the booklet of the Western Armenian Prelacy in the USA entitled, "Asdvadzahaidnutiun, Feast of Theophany-Epiphany" by H.E. Archbishop Moushegh Mardirossian. Bishop Moushegh writes,

"Armenians keep the oldest known date and the original fullness of the January 6 feast celebrating "*Asdavazahaidnutiun*" Theophany - the Revelation of God and "*Haidnutiun*"-Epiphany the Appearance and Manifestation of Jesus Christ at His Birth and Baptism.

The oldest historical evidence, of the feast, is of a early Christian community in Egypt, ca. 120 AD, gathering on the January 6 observance of the already ancient "Winter solstice on the Nile" to commemorate the coming of Jesus Christ -the Theophany and the Epiphany of the birth and "The mystery of the baptism," "spending the entire night preceding the Feast reading scripture," (as we do today, see the Order of the Lighting of the Lamps and the Course of Scripture Readings); celebrating "Jesus Christ the Light of Lights," "The true sun risen on the world," "A light come forth in the midst of the darkened earth," "A day more brilliant than any Sun."

Saint Clement of Alexandria ca 150-216 AD, writes of the January 6, commemoration and in his final years taught at the Church school at Caesarea Cappadocia, influencing the Armenian students there and the churches in Armenia Minor. Saint Gregory the Illuminator was raised in the Cappadocian Church School in Caesarea and began his Holy Orders there.

Between ca 285 and 311 AD. as Chief Bishop and Successor of the Holy Apostles in Armenia; Patriarch-Catholicos and successor of the Holy Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew, he set the already ancient January 6 day as the date for the Armenians to celebrate the Feast of the Revelation and the “Appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” and to commemorate His holy Birth and Baptism.

Another good explanation of the antiquity of our Feast of Theophany comes in the text, “Saints and Sacraments,” by the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, Shnork Kaloustian. Bishop Shnork writes, “The reason for changing [the observance of the Nativity from January 6th to December 25th] is given [by a Roman Catholic] author:

“The Lord was born in the month of January on the same day on which we celebrate the Epiphany, for, of old, the feast of the Nativity and Epiphany were kept on one and the same day. The reason why our Fathers changed the solemnity celebrated on the sixth of January, and transferred it to the 25th of December is as follows: It was the custom of pagans to celebrate the birthday of the Sun on this very day, December 25th. In these solemnities and festival the Christians too were tempted to participate. The leaders of the Church, therefore, decided that the Birth of Christ, be kept on this date (i.e. 25th of December) to overshadow the pagan festival and on January sixth, the feast of Epiphany. (cf. Catholic Encyclopedia: Articles, ‘Christmas’ and ‘Epiphany’) To paraphrase the great Latin Father, St. Ambrose of Milan, ‘On Dec 25, the pagans celebrate the Birthday of the Sun; why should not we celebrate the Birthday of the Sun of Justice on this day?’.”

Bishop Kaloustian continues:

“This change, having begun in Rome, spread very quickly to the East and all over the Roman Empire. The change did not penetrate into Armenia, because the Armenians, having no such pagan festival on December 25th to suppress, did not see any reason for following the new practice... the Armenians wanted to remain faithful to the ancient custom; so they have kept the old date throughout the centuries to the present day.” (pgs. 62-63).

It is also interesting to note that in addition to the separation of the celebration of the Nativity (moved to December 25th) from that of the Theophany (remaining on January 6th), the Latin Church went a further step and moved the Baptism of our Lord to a later date, now celebrating it on the Sunday following January 6th. Here is a chart documenting these liturgical differences (regardless of which calendar these Churches are on):

1. The Armenian Church:

The Nativity, Visit of the Magi, & Baptism called “Theophany”: January 6th

2. Other Orthodox Churches (Byzantine and Oriental Orthodox):

The Nativity (Birth) & Visit of the Magi: December 25th

Theophany (Baptism): January 6th

3. The Latin Roman Catholic Church:

The Nativity: December 25th

Epiphany (Visit of the Magi): January 6th (or the nearest Sunday in the U.S.A.)

Baptism of our Lord: January 13th (or the nearest Sunday in the U.S.A.)

Thus on the 6th of January (whichever calendar they are using) Armenians celebrate the Nativity and Baptism of Christ in one solemn feast known as Theophany as is the ancient tradition of the Church. I hope this helps to round out your information on the Eastern Churches’ dating and celebration of the Theophany of our Lord. Have a Happy New Year and a blessed celebration of our Lord’s Theophany!

Christ is Born and Revealed: Blessed is the Revelation of Christ!

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