

The Adoption of Christmas in the Eastern Churches (Part II) (Thomas Talley)

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From the time of the restoration of orthodoxy with the accession of Theodosius, then, the observance of the nativity festival on December 25 extended smoothly and swiftly from Constantinople, across Cappadocia to Antioch. The older festival of January 6 continued to be observed with the theme of the baptism of Jesus. If between Constantinople and Antioch there continued some confusion as to which of these was the Theophany of Christ, we can suppose that this was an ambiguity already in the earlier unitive celebration of the birth and baptism on that day. The reference of the incarnation to a precise point in the life of Jesus is ambiguous, indeed, in the prologue of the fourth gospel.



It was otherwise, however, in Jerusalem and Alexandria. At Jerusalem the old festival of January 6 celebrated the nativity alone, without reference to the baptism. This was also true for Epiphanius, a native of Palestine (although he set

the Cana miracle on the same day). As did Chrysostom, Jerome argued in his commentary on Ezekiel that at his nativity, Christ was not manifested, but hid-den, contrary to this Palestinian tradition (PL 25.18C-19A). Still, that tradition continued firm at Jerusalem throughout the fourth century and beyond.

There are signs that the December festival was adopted at Jerusalem at some point in the fifth century, and the episcopate of Ju-venal (424-458) is indicated. We have two sermons for the feast by Hesychius, preacher in the Holy City from 412 to his death in 451 (PG 93.1449). Nonetheless, that institution of the feast proved to be only temporary, since around the middle of the following century Cosmas Indicopleustes (PG 88.197) comments that the church of Jerusalem is unique in celebrating the birth of the Savior on the Epiphany, commemorating David and St. James on December 25. That was also the situation earlier, in the lectionaries from between 417 and 439 preserved in Armenian, where December 25 is the feast of David and James.

However, a principal manuscript of that Jerusalem ordo (Jerusalem, arm. 121) adds to the title of that feast the rubrical note, «in other cities the birth of Christ is celebrated.» The editor shows conclusively that this note belonged to the Jeru-salem ordo itself prior to the introduction of the festival by Ju-venal.

Just when the December nativity feast was introduced in Jerusa-lem and just when it was given up cannot be more closely speci-fied. That it was no longer observed in the sixth century is testified to not only by Cosmas Indicopleustes but also Abraham of Ephe-sus (530-553) who, in a sermon on the Annunciation, indicated (as did Cosmas) that the Palestinians were alone in rejecting the feast of the birth of the Savior on December 25.

The celebration of the feast throughout the empire was ordered by the emperor Justin II (565-578), according to the historian Nicephorus Callistus (PG 147.292), and a letter of Justinian a few years earlier (561) had called upon Jerusalem authorities specifically to keep the Annunciation (previously not observed at Jerusalem) on March 25 and Hypapante on February 2, forty days after December 25, rather than February 14. That letter also makes it clear that by then the Epiphany at Jerusalem celebrated both Christ's nativity and baptism, an arrangement jealously defended by Monophysite forces against the separate celebration of the bodily nativity on December 25. Nonetheless, shortly after the death of the patriarch Macarius II (567/568), Jerusalem finally adopted the December festival, and the itinerary of Antoninus of Plaisance in 570 reports the observance of the Epiphany not at Bethlehem but at the place of Jesus' baptism on the Jordan.

In Egypt, also, the feast of December 25 was resisted for some long while. From the end of the fourth century we have the testimony of John Cassian that the content of the Epiphany in Egypt was both the nativity and the baptism, celebrated together. His testimony is the first secure notice we have of a liturgical observance of the nativity of Christ in Egypt. Cassian, writing at Mar-seilles between 418 and 427, says in the tenth of his Conferences (chap. 2) that the themes of birth and baptism are united in the one festival.

«In the country of Egypt this custom is by ancient tradition observed that-when Epiphany is past, which the priests of that province regard as the time, both of Our Lord's baptism and also of his birth in the flesh, and so celebrate the commemoration of either mystery not separately as in the Western provinces but on the single festival of this day-letters are sent from the Bishop of Alexandria through all the churches of Egypt, by which the beginning of Lent, and the day of Easter are pointed out not only in all the cities but also in all the monasteries» (NPNF II.XI, p. 401).

Since the writer's purpose here is to describe the issuance of the festal letters by the bishop of Alexandria, it is unlikely that he is describing a variation in the festal theme in different parts of Egypt, although it is certain that there were variant customs within that country. Cassian, nonetheless, evidently indicates a double theme in Alexandria itself. It is impossible to know how long that double theme had attached to the festival.

We can only say that the identification of the date as that of the nativity reaches back as far as Clement, as does its association with the baptism, but that earlier in

the fourth century the feast was focused on the baptism to such an extent that the Canons of Athanasius make no reference at all to any festival of the nativity. It may well be that while the strong Marean tradition at Alexandria made the baptism (with which Mark's gospel opens) stand out as the content of the celebration on January 6, the memory persisted that the gospel was begun on that day because it was the day of the Lord's nativity.

It was only in the fifth century, in any case, that the festival of December 25 was adopted at Alexandria. There, following the Council of Ephesus, Paul of Emessa preached before St. Cyril on December 25, 432, and again on the following January 1 (PG 77.1432). This marks the first celebration of the nativity on December 25 at Alexandria of which we have record. In view of its relation to the Council of Ephesus, it seems likely that the December festival's adoption in Alexandria was motivated by Christological concerns, as was the case earlier at Constantinople and through Asia Minor to Antioch following the death of the Arian emperor, Valens. The adoption of Christmas at Alexandria, again, may have contributed to the unsuccessful and temporary establishment of the feast a bit later in Jerusalem.

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