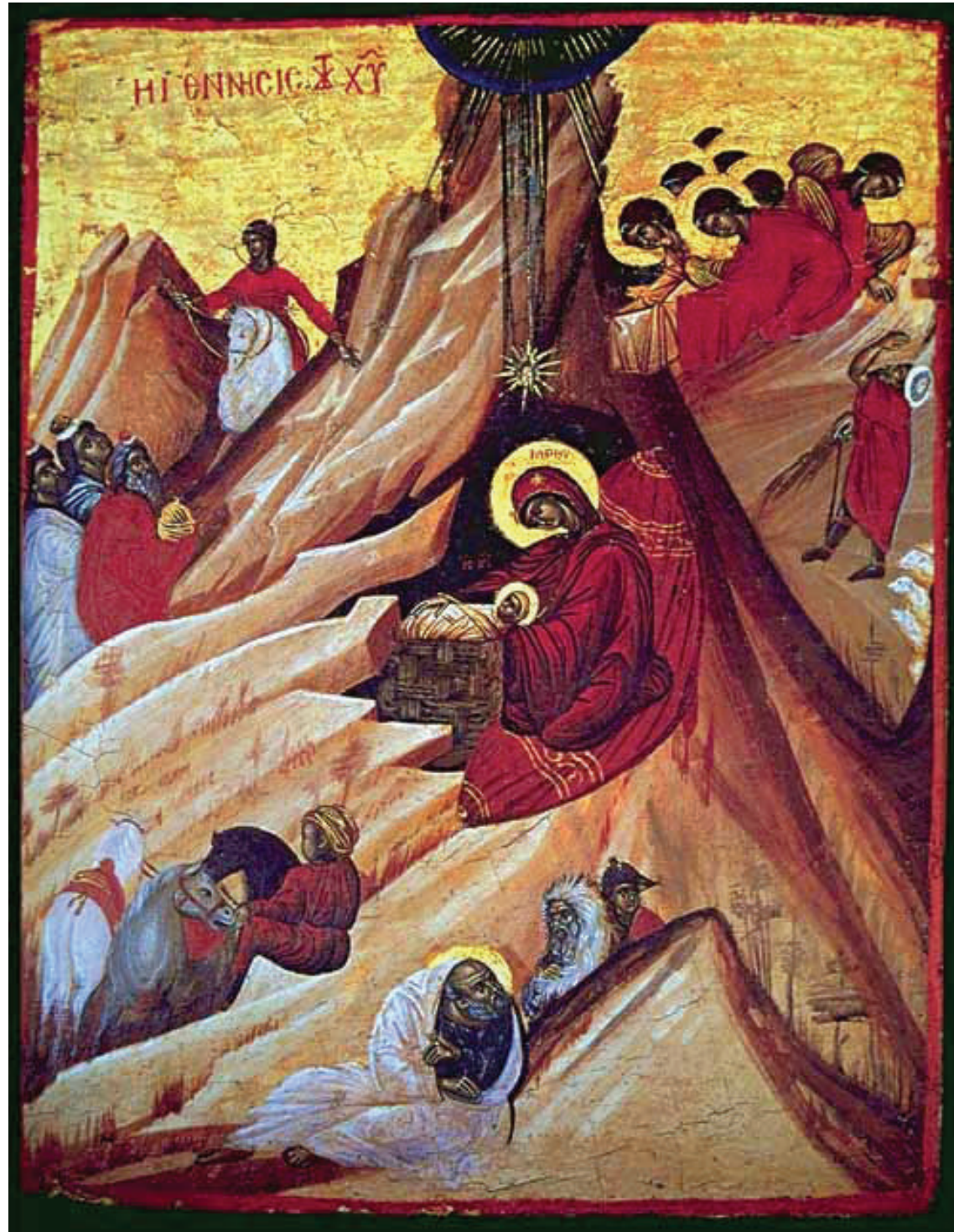


The Orthodox Icon of the Nativity







Two modern icons of the Nativity. Note the simpler composition of the triptych on the left, with its special emphasis on the angels, who are represented as supra-natural entities. The icon on the right is the traditional busy image, but note the pastoral scene and the cross at the top of the star-light that falls on the manger.



The Magi at San Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna





Mosaic of the Incarnate Logos at San Vitale, Ravenna





Mosaic of the Baptism of Christ at the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna



Two mosaics of the Baptism of Christ from Ravenna, Italy

The one on the left is from the Arian Baptistery (late 5th century), built by Theodoric, a Goth who ruled Ravenna at the time and who subscribed to the Arian faith, which had been declared heretical at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.

The mosaic on the right is from the Neonian Baptistery (middle of the 5th century), which is part of the Orthodox cathedral of Ravenna and was built by Bishop Neone.

Are the differences in Christ's depiction purely artistic or dogmatic?



THE MEANING OF THE INCARNATION

An Exploration in the Hymnography of the Feasts of Incarnation

The Beginning of Incarnation occurs in human time, though its point of origin is eternity: “Today is the Κεφάλαιον of our salvation and the manifestation of the mystery that is from all eternity. The Son of God becomes Son of the Virgin, and Gabriel announces the good news of grace. Therefore let us also join him and cry aloud to the Theotokos: Hail, you who are full of grace, the Lord is with you!” (*Apolytikion of Annunciation, March 25th*)

Gabriel the Archangel was sent from heaven to announce [εὐαγγελίσασθαι] to the Virgin the good news of her conceiving; and coming to Nazareth he pondered to himself with amazement about this wonder. “How shall he who dwells in the heights, whom none can comprehend, be born of a virgin? How shall he whose throne is heaven and whose footstool is the earth be held in the womb of a woman? He upon whom the six-winged seraphim and the many-eyed cherubim cannot gaze has been pleased at a single word to be made flesh of [through] this his creature. It is the Word of God who dwells within her. Why then do I stand here and not say to the Maiden: Hail, you who are full of grace...

Ο συναϊδιος Λόγος, τού προανάρχου Πατρός, μή χωρισθείς τών άνω, νύν επέστη τοίς κάτω, δι' άκραν ευσπλαγγνίαν οίκτον λαβών, τού καθ' ημάς ολισθήματος, και τού Αδάμ τήν πτωχείαν αναλαβών, εμορφώθη τό αλλότριον. (*From Matins of Annunciation*)

The coeternal Word of the Father without beginning, not being separated from the things above, has now descended here below, in his most extreme compassion taking pity upon our fall [slip, cause of our slipping]; and assuming the poverty of Adam, he has put on a form that is alien to him.

Hymns of the Nativity, Dec. 24-25

Let us celebrate, O people, the Forefeast of the Nativity of Christ, and raising our minds on high let us go in spirit to Bethlehem; let us look upon the great mystery in the cave. For Eden is opened once again, when from a pure Virgin God comes forth, perfect in his divinity as in his humanity. Therefore let us exclaim: Holy God, Father without beginning; Holy Mighty, Son made flesh; Holy Immortal, Spirit the Comforter. Holy Trinity, glory to you. [Note the invitation to contemplation of divine mysteries. This is an important aspect of the liturgical mindset.]

What shall we offer You, O Christ, upon your coming on earth as a man? Every creature gives you thanks. The angels offer you a hymn, the heavens a star, the Magi offer you gifts, the shepherds their wonder, the earth a cave, the wilderness a manger, and we offer you a virgin mother. O Lord of eternity, glory to you.

When Augustus ruled alone upon the earth, the many kingdoms of men came to an end; and when you, O Lord, were born of a virgin, the many gods of idolatry were vanquished. While the cities of the world came under one universal power, the Gentiles came to believe in one sovereign God. While the peoples of the world were registered in the name of Caesar, all who believed in you were registered in your divine name when you, O Lord, became man. Great is your mercy; glory to you! [A quite extraordinary hymn, with political overtones. Only an imperial church could sing a hymn like this!]

Ἡ γέννησίς σου Χριστέ ο Θεός ημών, ανέτειλε τῷ κόσμῳ, τὸ φῶς τῆς γνώσεως, ἐν αὐτῇ γάρ οἱ τοῖς ἀστροῖς λατρεύοντες, ὑπὸ ἀστέρος ἐδιδάσκοντο, σέ προσκυνεῖν, τὸν Ἥλιον τῆς δικαιοσύνης, καὶ σέ γινώσκειν ἐξ ὕψους ανατολήν, Κύριε δόξα σοι.

Your nativity, O Christ our God, has brought to the world the light of knowledge; for by it those who worshipped the stars were taught by a star to worship you, the Sun of Righteousness, and to know you the Dayspring from on high. O Lord, glory to you! (*Apolytikon of the Feast*)

Ὁ ἀχώρητος παντί, πῶς ἐχωρήθη ἐν γαστρὶ; ὁ ἐν κόλποις τοῦ Πατρὸς, πῶς ἐν ἀγκάλαις τῆς Μητρὸς, πάντως ὡς οἶδεν ὡς ἠθέλησε καὶ ὡς, ἠυδόκησεν, ἀσαρκος γὰρ ὢν, ἐσαρκώθη ἐκῶν, καὶ γέγονεν ὁ Ὄν ὁ οὐκ ἦν δι' ἡμᾶς, καὶ μὴ ἐκστάς τῆς φύσεως, μετέσχε τοῦ ἡμετέρου φυράματος. Διπλοῦς ἐτέχθη, Χριστός τὸν ἄνω, κόσμον θέλων ἀναπληρῶσαι.

How is he contained in a womb, whom nothing can contain? And how can he who is in the bosom of the Father be held in the arms of his mother? It was all according to his knowledge, desire and good pleasure. For being without flesh, of his own will he took flesh; and HE WHO IS, for our sakes has become what he was not. Without departing from his own nature, he shared in our nature. Desiring to fill the world above with citizens, Christ was born twice. [This is heavily theological, though some of its theology is of questionable meaning. The capitalized phrase in English represents the Divine name in the Greek text.]

Selections from the two Canons of Christmas at Matins of Dec. 25th

In old times, Habakkuk the Prophet was enabled to see ineffably the figure and symbol of Christ's birth, and he foretold in song the renewal of mankind. For a young babe, the Word, has now come forth from the Mountain that is the Virgin, unto the renewal of the peoples. Obedient to the decree of Caesar, you were enrolled as one of his servants, O Christ, and you set us free who were servants of the enemy and of sin. Sharing wholly in our poverty [see 2 Corinthians 8:9], you have made the clay of our nature godlike through your union and participation (κοινωνία) in it.

The Master, by his coming in the flesh, cut clean through the harsh enmity of the flesh against him [see Eph 2:14-16], and destroyed the might of the murderer of our souls. Uniting the world to the immaterial essences, he has made the Father merciful to the creation.

The people that before walked in darkness this day have seen a light from the beacon on high. The Son offers to God the nations as his inheritance, bestowing grace past telling where sin once flourished more abundantly.

God the Word, who was in the beginning with God, seeing our nature powerless to guard unharmed its ancient fellowship with him, now grants it new strength. Abasing himself, in a second act of fellowship he makes it once again free from the passions. [The word πάθη is used negatively, in accordance with monastic theology.]

Exapostilarion:

Επεσκέψατο ημάς, ἐξ ὕψους ὁ Σωτὴρ ἡμῶν, ἀνατολή ἀνατολῶν, καὶ οἱ ἐν σκότει καὶ σκιά, εὗρομεν τὴν ἀλήθειαν, καὶ γὰρ ἐκ τῆς Παρθένου ἐτέχθη ὁ Κύριος.
Our Savior, the Dayspring from the east, has visited us from on high, and we who were in darkness and shadow have found the truth; for the Lord is born of the virgin.

Entrance Hymn at the Liturgy:

Ἐκ γαστρὸς πρὸ Ἐωσφόρου ἐγέννησά σε, ὤμοσε Κύριος, καὶ οὐ μεταμεληθήσεται.
Σὺ Ἱερεὺς εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, κατὰ τὴν τάξιν Μελχισεδέκ.
“Out of the womb, before the morning star have I begotten You!” The Lord has sworn an oath and He will not change His mind: “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.” O Son of God, born of a virgin, save us who sing to You, Alleluia! [Heavy use is made throughout the Christmas services of Psalm 110.]

Instead of the Trisagion at the Liturgy:

As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia. [See Galatians 3:27. This baptismal Trisagion Hymn is used on some other feasts in the church year.]

Communion Hymn:

Λύτρωσιν ἀπέστειλε Κύριος τῷ λαῷ αὐτοῦ. Ἀλληλούϊα.
The Lord has sent deliverance to His people. Alleluia.

The Orthodox Icon of Theophany





Apolytikion of Theophany

When you, O Lord, were baptized in the Jordan, the worship of the Trinity was made manifest. For the voice of the Father bore witness to you, and called you his beloved Son; and the Spirit in the form of a dove confirmed the truthfulness of his word. O Christ our God, you have appeared and illumined the world; glory to you!



Nativity and Theophany are the two greatest feasts in the Orthodox calendar after Pascha. These three feasts also have the most complex liturgical celebrations.

The icons of the three feasts are also strikingly similar, with Christ descending into a background that is usually rendered with darkness. At Pascha the darkness is the darkness of death and Hell where Christ has gone to raise the dead. At Nativity the darkness is the cave in which he is born. This darkness is the darkness of the world that is caught in sin and death. At Theophany the icon depicts Christ standing on the waters of the Jordan, and the waters themselves are depicted as dark, representing the chaotic forces of life and creation when it is far from God.

Thus the waters of the Jordan become symbolic of Christ's descent into the realm of death where he "leads captivity captive" (Ephesians 4:8) and sets free those who have been held in bondage to death. (Matthew 3:10 source for image of axe and tree.)



Selections from the **Canons of Theophany** at Matins

The Lord, King of the ages, in the streams of the Jordan formed Adam anew who had fallen into corruption, and he broke in pieces the heads of the dragons that were hidden there [*cf. Psalm 74:13; mythological image of primeval conflict—but we all have “dragons” in our lives!*]; thus he has been glorified.

O Word without beginning, you have buried man with you in the stream [*cf. Romans 6:4*]. He was corrupted by error, but you make him new again, and the Father testified, saying with a mighty voice: “This is my beloved child, equal to me by nature.” [*Note the emphasis on renewal of human nature; typical of Orthodox imagery.*]

He who once assumed the appearance of a malignant serpent and implanted death in the creation, is now cast into darkness by Christ’s coming in the flesh; and by assailing the Master, the Dawn that has shone forth upon us, he crushes his own hateful and loathsome head. [*Whoa, this is fighting language!*]

The sea and cloud in which the people of Israel were once baptized by Moses the Law-giver, as they journeyed from Egypt [*cf. 1 Corinthians 10:2*], prefigured the wonder of the baptism of God. The sea was an image of the water and the cloud an image of the Spirit, whereby we are initiated and cry aloud: Blessed are you, O God of our fathers. [*Note the classic typology of water and the cloud.*]

Let the whole earthly creation clothe itself in white, for this day it is raised up from its fall from heaven. The Word who preserves all things has cleansed it in the flowing waters. Washed and resplendent, it has escaped from its former sins. [*Typical strong image of universal renewal and sanctification.*]

Kontakion and Oikos

You have appeared today to the inhabited earth, and your light, O Lord, has shone on us who sing your praises with knowledge. You have come, You have been revealed, the Light unapproachable!

Upon Galilee of the Gentiles, upon the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, a great light has shone. To those who sat in darkness a bright dawn has appeared like lightning from Bethlehem. The Lord, born of Mary, the Sun of Righteousness, sheds his rays of goodness and righteousness upon the inhabited earth. Come then, naked children of Adam, and let us clothe ourselves in him, that we may warm ourselves. You, O Lord, are a protection and veil to the naked, a light to those in darkness. You have come, you have been revealed, the Light whom no one can approach!

Exapostilarion:

Επεφάνη ο Σωτήρ, ή χάρις η αλήθεια, εν ρείθροις τού Ιορδάνου, καί τούς εν σκότει καί σκιά, καθεύδοντας εφώτισε, καί γάρ ήλθεν εφάνη, τό φώς τό απρόσιτον.

The Savior, who is grace and truth, has appeared in the streams of the Jordan and enlightened those that were asleep in darkness and shadow. For he has come and appeared, the Light whom no one can approach.

Instead of the Trisagion at the Liturgy:

As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia. [See Galatians 3:27. This baptismal Trisagion Hymn is used on some other feasts in the church year.]

The Great Blessing of the Waters

This is one of the most meaningful and popular rituals in the entire Orthodox calendar—perhaps *the* most meaningful and popular! It is celebrated throughout the world in whatever outdoor body of water is available, or, most commonly, inside churches — and throughout the year a shorter version of this blessing is done in people’s homes and places of work.





Ice and snow are no obstacles!







The Blessing of Waters at the Metropolis Camp in New Hampshire



Our own Christopher Makrides dove for and successfully found the Cross at the 2008 Open House at the Metropolis Camp





Above: A house blessing

Right: A fountain of holy water at Thessaloniki



Excerpts from the Great Blessing of the Waters, Jan. 5th & 6th

Two Introductory Hymns:

The voice of the Lord upon the waters cries aloud saying: “Come all of you, and receive the Spirit of wisdom, the Spirit of understanding, the Spirit of the fear of God, from Christ who is made manifest.” [cf. *Isaiah 11:2*]

Today the nature of the waters is sanctified, and the Jordan is parted in two; it holds back the stream of its own waters, seeing the Master wash himself.

From the Prayer of the Great Blessing:

O Lord Jesus Christ, the Only-begotten Son, who are in the bosom of the Father, True God, source of life and immortality, Light of Light, who came into the world to enlighten it, shine upon our understanding with Your Holy Spirit and accept us who offer unto You glory and thanksgiving for all Your great and wondrous works in all the ages and for Your saving dispensation (οικονομία) in these last times. For having clothed (περιβαλόμενος) yourself in our poor and weak nature, You submitted Yourself to the existence of a servant, though You are the King of all. Moreover, You accepted to be baptized in the Jordan by the hand of a servant, that having sanctified the nature of the waters, O sinless Lord, You might lead us to a new birth through water and Spirit and restore us again to our original freedom....

We glorify You, O Master who loved us, almighty, pre-eternal King. We glorify You, the Creator and Maker of all. We glorify You, the only-begotten Son of God. In the preceding feast we saw You as a child, while in the present feast we see You a full-grown man, appearing to us out of the perfection of the Godhead.

For today the time of the feast is completed. The choir of saints assembles with us and angels join with us in keeping festival. Today the grace of the Holy Spirit descended upon the waters. Today the Sun that never sets has risen and the world is filled with splendor by the light of the Lord. Today the clouds drop down upon mankind the dew of righteousness from on high. Today the Uncreated One accepts to be touched by His own creature. Today the Prophet and Forerunner approaches the Master, but stands before Him with trembling seeing the humility of God. Today the waters of the Jordan are transformed into healing by the coming of the Lord. Today the whole creation is watered by mystical streams. Today Paradise has been opened for us and the Sun of Righteousness shines down on us. Today the bitter water, which Israel once tasted, is changed to sweetness by the coming of the Lord. Today we have been released from our ancient lamentation, and as the Israel of God we have found salvation. Today we have been delivered from darkness and illumined with the light of the knowledge of God. Today the blinding mist of the world is dispersed by the Epiphany of our God. Today the whole creation shines with light from on high. Today error is laid low and the coming of the Master has made for us a way of salvation. Today the Master hurries toward baptism so that He may lift us up to the heights. Today we have received the Kingdom of heaven, and the Lord's Kingdom shall have no end. Today earth and sea share the joy of the world, and the world is filled with gladness.

The waters saw You, O God, the waters saw You and were afraid. The Jordan turned back, seeing the fire of the Godhead descending in the body and entering its streams. The Jordan turned back, seeing the Holy Spirit coming down in the form of a dove and hovering above You. The Jordan turned back, seeing the Invisible made visible, the Creator made flesh, the Master in the form of a servant. The Jordan turned back and the mountains

skipped, seeing God in the flesh, and the clouds thundered, marveling at the One who has come, the Light of Light, true God of true God. Today we see the triumph of the Master, as He drowns the death of disobedience, the sting of error and the chains of hell, granting to the world the baptism of salvation....

For You, O Master, could not endure to see the human race tormented by the devil, but You came and saved us. We confess Your grace, we proclaim Your mercy and beneficence. You have liberated our human nature and You hallowed the virgin's birth by Your nativity. At Your Epiphany all of creation sings Your praise. For You, O God, have appeared on earth and lived among us. You sanctified the streams of the Jordan, sending down from on high the Most Holy Spirit, and You crushed the heads of the dragons hidden therein.

Therefore, O loving King, be present now as then by the descent of Your Holy Spirit, and hallow this water.... *(The cross is immersed into the font containing the water and the sign of the cross is made in the water three times.)* And grant to all your people sanctification, blessing, cleansing and health, so that in this also You may be glorified, now and forever and to the ages of ages.

The church and all present are sprinkled with the holy water which is then distributed in plastic or glass bottles for people to take home and sanctify their homes.