

## Baptismal Themes in the Byzantine Blessing of Waters on Theophany

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### Abstract

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The blessing of waters annually celebrated in the Byzantine rite on January 6, the Theophany feast, contains many baptismal themes. Most significantly, the main prayer of the water blessing, “Great are You,” is also used to bless the waters for baptism. Other aspects of the Theophany water blessing such as hymns, prayers, and the submersion of the cross into the water as the main liturgical gesture demonstrate the liturgy’s baptismal origins. A study of liturgical history and structures convincingly shows that until the tenth century, baptism was once a prominent part of the Theophany festal celebration. Christian faithful who participate in the Theophany water blessing are not re-baptized, but receive renewed baptismal blessings by drinking the blessed water, and receiving it by anointing and sprinkling. Thus, participants in the Theophany water blessing have a unique opportunity to annually return to Christ’s lifegiving baptismal font.



### *Introduction*

For centuries, churches following the Byzantine rite have celebrated a solemn blessing of waters on the feast of Theophany on January 6. The contents of the ritual of the blessing of waters constitute a sacramental celebration related to baptism. The blessings requested by the epiclesis illustrate the significance of the blessing of the waters:

Make it a source of incorruption, a gift of sanctification, a remission of sins, a protection against disease, a destruction to demons ... that all who draw from it and partake of it may have it for the cleansing of their soul and body, for the healing of their passions, for the sanctification of their dwellings, and for every purpose that is expedient.<sup>1</sup>

The gifts received through participation in the blessing of the waters express the goal of the Christian life: protection from temptation, bodily and spiritual cleansing, and sanctification.

This article introduces the theology of the blessing of waters on Theophany in the Byzantine rite from the eighth through the fifteenth centuries and examines its unique relationship to baptism. The “Great are You” prayer constitutes the core of the ritual and synthesizes its theological expressions. It occupies a prominent position in the Theophany blessing, and also the blessing of waters for baptism. Not coincidentally, it also functions as a point of thematic intersection for the Theophany blessing and baptism.

The “Great are You” prayer’s unique structure and content, and its position as the apogee of the celebration of the blessing of the waters occasion this theological analysis. The following theological analysis will focus on the prayer’s emphasis on Christ, its Trinitarian theology, and the meaning of the spiritual blessings given to participants. An examination of the intersection of baptismal and theophanic themes in the rites

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<sup>1</sup> *The Festal Menaion*, trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 357. Unless otherwise noted, all English texts in this paper are taken from *The Festal Menaion*.

will clarify the presence of numerous baptismal motifs throughout the Theophany office, especially exorcism, regeneration, and the remission of sins, and will help define the meaning of the Theophany blessing. The plunging of the cross into the water, a staple of the office through its historical development, will be shown to elaborate the relationship between the ritual's festal anamnesis and its epiclesis.

### *The “Great Are You” Prayer*

The “Great are You” prayer appears in the blessing of waters on Theophany in the vast majority of eighth to fifteenth-century Byzantine euchologia. The Byzantine rite of baptism also employs the “Great are You” prayer for the blessing of baptismal waters. Its earliest occurrence at baptism is in the eighth-century *Codex Barberini gr. 336* (BAR), representing the patriarchal liturgy of Constantinople, and the cult of the church of Hagia Sophia.<sup>2</sup>

The following analysis organizes the baptismal and Theophany versions of “Great are You” into five sections with subtitles. Table 1 presents an English translation of the text of Theophany version of this prayer and illustrates its structural components by assigning section subtitles.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1: “Great are You” Prayer

A-1. Praise Anamnesis (In Theophany and Baptismal water blessings)
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Great are you, Lord, and marvellous are your works: no words suffice to praise your wonders. For you by your own will have brought all things out of nothing-
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<sup>2</sup> *L'Euclologio Barberini gr. 336*, 2d ed., eds. Parenti, Stefano and E. Velkovska, Bibliotheca *Ephemerides liturgicae*, subsidia 80, eds. A.M. Triacca and A. Pistoia (Rome: Edizioni liturgiche, 2000), no. 122. BAR hereafter.

<sup>3</sup> Theophany version (BAR 131), translation based on *The Festal Menaion*, 356–358. Baptismal Portion of A-2, ‘Epiclesis-Blessings’, from BAR 122.2 (translation based on Archimandrite Ephrem Lash, trans., “Baptism,” available from <http://www.anastasis.org.uk/baptism.htm>).