
“An Address on the Holy Theophanies”

By Hippolytus of Rome

(PG 10:852-861)

Translated

by

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1. All things are good. But especially good are the created things of our God and Savior: whatever the eye sees, whatever the soul considers, whatever reason explains, whatever the hand touches, whatever the understanding comprehends. Indeed, whatever humanity possesses. For what is more multiform than the beauty of the heavenly expanse? What is more bedecked with flowers than the form of the earth? What is more dazzling in its course than the chariot of the sun? What carriage is more beautiful than the heavenly orb of the moon? What work is more marvelous than the music richly emitted by the stars? What is more serviceable for travel than the friendly winds? What mirror is clearer than the light of the day? What living thing is worthy of more labor than man? Therefore all things are good, especially the things created by our God and Savior.

But what gift (χάρισμα) is more necessary than the nature of water? For everything is washed and nourished, cleansed and irrigated by water. Water supports the ground; water brings for the dew; it gladdens the vine. Water brings the ear of corn to fruition. Water ripens the cluster of grapes. Water makes the olive tender. Water makes the date sweet. Water makes the rose red and dyes the violet with bright color. Water provides the lily with bright buds. Why should I go on? Without the nature of water no existing thing would be sustained. Thus the nature of water is necessary, for while other elements received their place underneath the vaulted heavens, the nature of water received its lodging above the heavens. And of this the prophet himself is witness: "Praise the Lord, O heavens of heavens and O water above the heavens" (Ps 148:2).

2. Not only does this present the trustworthiness of water, but also that it is more venerable than all things. For Christ, the creator of all things, came down as the rain, was made known as a well-spring, was spread abroad as a river, and was baptized in the Jordan. You have heard just now how Jesus went to John and was baptized by him in the Jordan. O, what wondrous events! How is it that the infinite River which makes glad the city of God was bathed in so little water?

The incomprehensible Source who gives life to all people and who has no end was covered by simple and transient water. He who is present everywhere and is absent nowhere, who is incomprehensible to the angels and invisible to men, comes to baptism so that he was pleasing. Hearing these things, beloved, do not understand those things spoken in a natural way (φυσικῶς) but receive these things presented according to the economy (οἰκονομικῶς). Therefore in the benevolence of his condescension the Lord was not unrecognized by the nature of water, which he had created in secret. "For the waters saw him, and they were frightened." They were amazed not a little and retreated from their banks. Therefore the prophet, having seen this a long time ago, inquired [of the waters] and said, "What is the matter, O seas, that you flee, and you, O Jordan, that you turned back?" (Ps 114:5). They answered and said, "We saw the creator of all things in the form of a slave, and not recognizing the mystery of the economy, we were moved from fear."

3. But now knowing the economy, we worship his mercy, for he came to save and not to judge the world. Wherefore John, the forerunner of the Lord, not knowing this mystery but then learning that he was truly the Lord, cried out and said, "You brood of vipers, why do you gaze so intently upon me? I am not the Christ. I am a servant and not a master. I am a common person, not a king. I am a sheep, not a shepherd. I am a man, not God. When I was born, I undid the barrenness of my mother. I did not make virginity barren. I was born from below; I did not come down from above. I lacked my paternal language; I did not proclaim the divine grace. I was announced by my mother; I was not declared by a star. I am worthless and the least. But he who comes after me is before me, after me in regard to time, before me in regard to the unapproachable and unspeakable light of divinity. He who is stronger than I is coming. His shoes I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. I am under authority (ὑπεξούσιος), but he is his own authority (ἀντεξούσιος). I am subject to sins, but he is

the one who remits sins. I kindle the Law, but he brings grace to light. As a slave I instruct, but as Lord he judges. I have the ground as a bed, but he has the heavens. I baptize with the baptism of repentance, but he gives the grace of sonship. He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Why do you come out to me? I am not the Christ.”

4. While John was saying these things to the crowd and the people were anxiously expecting to see some sight strange to human eyes and the devil was amazed at the witness of John, behold, the Lord appeared simple, alone, naked, unprotected, having the human body as a garment, but hiding the dignity of deity so that he would not be noticed by the deceit of the dragon. And not only as Lord did he come to John apart from any royal bodyguard. Also as a humble man bound by sins did he bend his head to be baptized by John. Therefore, John, seeing such humility and astonished at the fact, began to prevent him saying, “I have need to be baptized by you, and you come to me? What are you doing, O Master? You demand what is unlawful. I have announced one thing, and you seek another thing. The devil hears one thing, but he sees something else. Baptize me with the fire of divinity. Why do you wait for water? Enlighten me with the Spirit. Why do you wait for a creature? Baptize me who is the baptizer that your pre-eminence might be revealed. I, O Lord, baptize with the baptism of repentance, and I cannot baptize those who come to me unless they confess their sins. Command that I baptize you. But what [sins] do you have to confess? You are free of sins and you wish to be baptized with the baptism of repentance? Even if I shall dare to baptize you, the Jordan itself does not dare to come near. I have need to be baptized by you, and you come to me!

5. And what did Jesus say to him? “Let it be so now, for so it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. Let it be so now, John; you are not wiser than I. You understand as a man, but I foreknow as God. It is first necessary that I do and then teach accordingly.

I seek nothing improper, for I am clothed with propriety. Do you marvel, O John, that I did not come with my rank? Royal purple is not suitable for a private individual, but a soldier’s form is proper for a king. I have come against a tyrant and not against a friend—haven’t I? Let it be so now, for so is it fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. I am the one who fulfills the Law, and I wish nothing to remain undone for total fulfillment, in order that Paul may say after me, ‘Christ is the fulfillment of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes’ (). Let it be so now, for so is it fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. Baptize me, John, so that no one might despise baptism. I am baptized by you, a slave, lest king or person of prominence contemptuously refuse to be baptized by a poor priest. Allow me to enter into the Jordan so that they may hear the Father’s witness and recognize the power of the Son. Let it be so now, for so is it fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then finally John permitted him. “And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended in the form of a dove, and remained on him. And there was a voice from heaven, saying, ‘This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased’” (Mt 3:16-17).

6. Do you see, beloved, how many and how great are the blessings which we were going to lose if the Lord had yielded to the counsel of John and had declined baptism? Before this the heavens were locked and the region above was inaccessible. We would go down to the regions below and would not again attain to the regions above. But was the

Master baptized only? In addition he renewed the old man and entrusted to him again the scepter of the adoption of sons. For immediately “the heavens were opened to him.”

There was a reconciliation of things visible with things invisible. The army of heavenly angels was made joyful. Earthly diseases were healed. Things ineffable were made known. Things bound by enmity were made friends. For you have heard the evangelist say, “The heavens were opened to him.” And this for the sake of three wonders. For since Christ the Bridegroom was being baptized, it was necessary to open the radiant portals of the heavenly bridal chamber. Similarly, since the Holy Spirit was descending in the form of a dove and the paternal voice had gone everywhere, it was necessary that the heavenly gates be lifted up. And behold, the heavens were opened to him and there was a voice, saying, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.”

7. The Beloved begets love, and immaterial light begets unapproachable light. “This is my beloved Son.” He who appeared below yet without being separated from the Father’s bosom, he was manifested (ἐπεφάνη); he did not appear (ἐφάνη). For to “appear” (φανῆναι) is something else, since in respect to appearance (πρὸς τὸ φαινόμενον) the one baptizing was superior to the one being baptized. For that reason the Father sent the Holy Spirit down from heaven upon the one being baptized. For as the philanthropy of God was revealed in the ark of Noah through a dove, so now the Spirit coming down in the form of a dove as the one who bears the fruit of the olive alights upon the one of whom witness is given. For what purpose? In order that the surety of the Father’s voice might be known and that the prophetic foretelling through many ages might be believed. What sort of [prophecy] was this? “The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory, the Lord, thundered upon the waters” (Ps 29:3). What voice?

“This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.” This is he who is named the son of Joseph, but he is Only-begotten according to the divine nature. ‘This is my beloved Son,’ who hungers yet feeds thousands, who toils yet gives rest to the laborer, who has nowhere to lay his head yet bears all in his hand, who suffers yet heals sufferings, who is struck in the face yet gives freedom to the world, who is stabbed in the side yet makes right the side of Adam.

8. But, I beseech you, earnestly consider with me. For I desire to run to the fountain of life and to see the well-spring of healings gushing forth. The Father of immortality sent his immortal Son and Word into the world, who becoming a man to be washed by water and the Spirit implanted in us the Spirit of life, begetting anew for the incorruptibility of soul and body and clothing us around with the full armor of incorruptibility. If therefore man has become immortal, he shall also be God (ἔσται καὶ θεός). But if he becomes God through water and the Holy Spirit after the regeneration of the bath, he is found also to be a fellow-heir of Christ after the resurrection of the dead. Therefore, I proclaim and say (κηρύσσω λέγων), “Come, all you nations of the Gentiles, to the immortality of baptism. I announce the glad tidings of life to you who are perduring in the gloom of ignorance. Come into freedom out of bondage, to the kingdom out of tyranny, to incorruptibility out of corruption.” And how, does it say, we shall come? How? Through water and the Spirit. This is the water which partakes of the Spirit, through which paradise is watered, through which the earth receives increase, through which a plant grows, through which living things give birth, and—that I might sum all things up in a word—through which man, born anew, is preserved alive. In this water also the Christ was baptized and upon it also the Spirit came down in the form of a dove.

9. This is the Spirit who from the beginning was borne upon the waters, through whom the world moves, through whom the creation stands and all things are preserved, who acted in the prophets, who descended upon Christ. This is the Spirit who was given to the apostles in the form of fiery tongues. David sought this Spirit, saying, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right Spirit within me” (Ps 51:12). Concerning this Spirit also Gabriel spoke to the virgin, “The Holy Spirit shall come upon you and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you.” Through this Spirit Peter spoke that blessed word, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). Through this Spirit the Rock of the Church was strengthened. This is the Spirit, the Paraclete, who was sent on account of you in order that he might show you to be a child of God.

10. Come, therefore, be born anew, O man, unto adoption as a son of God (εἰς υἰοθεσίαν θεοῦ). And how? It says, if you no longer commit adultery, do not murder, nor render service to idols. If you are not ruled by pleasure, if the passion of arrogance does not dominate you, if you banish the filth of uncleanness and put away the burden of sin, if you put off the armor of the devil and put on the breastplate of faith, as Isaiah says, “Wash yourselves and seek justice; defend the oppressed, judge the orphan and vindicate the widow. And come let us reason together,” says the Lord. ‘And if your sins are as scarlet, I shall make them white as snow, and if they are as crimson, I shall make them white as wool. And if you are willing and you hear my voice, you shall eat the good things of the earth’” (Is 1:16-19). Do you see, O beloved, how the prophet foretold the cleansing of baptism. For he who goes down with faith into the river of regeneration is arrayed (διατάσσεται) against the Evil One but is arrayed (συντάσσεται) with Christ; he renounces the enemy but confesses that “the Christ is God” (θεὸν εἶναι τὸν

Χριστόν); he puts off servitude and puts on the adoption of sonship; he comes up from baptism bright as the sun flashing forth the rays of righteousness. But the greatest thing is this, he goes up a son of God and a fellow-heir of Christ.

To him be glory and power with his all-holy, good, and life-giving Spirit now and always and unto the ages of ages. Amen.