On Christmas

Ananias of Shirak (c. AD 610–685)

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The Discourse of Ananias, called the Counter upon the Epiphany of our Lord and Saviour.

We have taken much trouble and pains about the holy festivals of God; and this is the result at which we have arrived, and which we are become worthy to set forth. First, the Festival of the Birth of Christ our God, which is the beginning of festivals, and of our yearly [cycles], and chief of the fixed feasts (= πανηγυρίδων), and of all commemorations of Christ. The Festival of the holy Birth of Christ, on the 12th day before the feast of the Baptism, was not appointed by the holy apostles, nor by their successors either, as is clear from the canons of the holy apostles. For it is written in the 6th chapter of the canons as follows: that the apostles appointed and laid it down firmly, that the Festival of the Birth and Epiphany of our Lord and Saviour, the chief and first of the festivals of the Churches [should be] on the 21st day of the month Tebeth, which is 6th of January, according to the Romans.

But many years after their fixing the canons, this |324 festival was invented, as some say, by the disciples of the heretic Cerinthus; and was accepted by the Greeks, because they were truly fond of festivals and most fervent in piety; and by them it was spread and diffused all over the world. But in the days of the holy Constantine, in the holy Council of Nice, this festival was not received by the holy fathers; but they appointed the festival to be held in accordance with the aforesaid canon of the holy apostles. And it is clear from the letter of the blessed Makarius, patriarch of Jerusalem, which he wrote to the country of the Armenians concerning the institution of the holy Baptism. For he was one of the 318 holy fathers of Nicaea. And it is written as follows in the sixth chapter of his letter of command and counsel (or encyclical).

”But there is the ordinance of baptism of the holy font, and there is the earnest observance of the three festivals. Wherein our race is most eager with genuine piety to cherish the observances dedicated to God, and to carry out the great pattern of the salutary mystery, which was fulfilled in the holy and famous days. And this celebration they are very zealous to keep in the holy places of Christ; and all Christians who fear Christ must also fulfil in them (? in themselves) the calling of

baptism at the holy epiphany of the birth of the Lord, and of the saving passover of the quickening passion of Christ; and of Pentecost full of grace, when the Divine descent of the vivifying overflowed among us. And of these several festivals, of the birth and baptism, you must understand the significance, in order that you may zealously carry out the same. For on the same salutary day with the illumining |325 birth of Christ is our expiatory birth of the holy font also fulfilled. For on the same day He deigned to be baptized because of His descent unto us. For it was not that He was Himself in need of cleansing; but He desired to cleanse us from the dross of sin, he that with a loud voice cried out, saying: ”Except a man be born of water and of spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God,” in order that, being born along with Christ in one and the same fashion, we may also be baptized along with Him on the day of His birth.

Next in the quickening resurrection of Easter by mortifying our sins in the waters of the font, we become imitators of the mortification by death of our Lord Jesus Christ; and by the triple immersion, being buried in the waters of the holy font, we symbolize in ourselves baptized the three-days’ burial of our Lord. And this also the divine apostle shows, when he says: Buried with Him in baptism, let us become imitators of the likeness of his death; that by the newness of the resurrection we may become participators with Him in life eternal. But on the grace-bestowing day of sanctifying Pentecost was the bright revelation of the quickening Spirit, which, in the form of fiery tongues, descended on the apostles; vouchsafing to them [that] laying hands on the baptized [these shall] receive gifts from the Spirit of grace. After the same pattern we also, on the same day, lay hands on the baptised and bestow the same spirit. Of this we fulfil the pattern with unfailing care, that we may become perfect. So far Makarius.

Gregory Theologus also bears witness with Makarius on this point in regard to celebrating the baptism in three feasts, in his discourse ”upon baptism,” in which he assails those who are supine about baptism, and says: ”Thou makest this and that a pretext, and allegest the excuse of |326 sins. Thou sayest: I wait for the epiphany of the Lord, for the resurrection of the Lord, which to me is more precious. I wait for the Pentecost. It is better to be illumined with Christ; with Christ to arise on the day of resurrection; to celebrate the manifesting of the Spirit. And then what? The last day will come on in a way which thou wilt not know, and in a season when thou art not thinking of it. Thou hast all thy time for baptism, because thou hast all of it also for death.”

But after him Saint Cyril succeeded to the patriarchal throne of Jerusalem, and to the throne of the holy Constantine succeeded his son Constantius, along with his brothers. They say that he believed in the heresy of Arius. However, he did not fight against the truth; but left both sides alone to do as they liked. Whatsoever any one pleased he kept, whether orthodoxy or kakodoxy. In his days this festival

was admitted in the royal court; and in all places where any one chose to keep it they kept it freely and openly, except in the metropolises of the four Patriarchs, who had the thrones of the holy Evangelists. For at that time they had not forcibly transferred the throne of St. John from Ephesus to Constantinople. And [this] is clear from the canonical disposition of lections of St. Cyril. For therein it is written thus: "That on the 25th of the month of December is the feast of David and Jacobus, which day in other cities they make the birth of Christ. About this the Greeks say as follows: that because the patriarch, with all the clergy and the bulk of the congregation, repair to Bethlehem and there keep feast, therefore the few priests who remain in the city celebrate the feast of David and Jacobus; as if the lections only belonged to the city. And they contend that this is why he wrote the words "in other cities," as if having Bethlehem in view. But this |327 argument no really sensible person ever adopted.

For if we admit it, for what reason did this same Cyril fix the canon of the birth on the 6th of January? For at the beginning of the canon we find it written thus: that "the feast of the holy Epiphany is kept in January, on the 6th of the month. They shall assemble in the shepherd's dwelling, and repeat the following canon; and then in Bethlehem and in the cave. Here then you see that he appoints both feasts to be celebrated on one day; and who will be so rash as to find any fault with the blessed Cyril or with his dispositions? And who [was ever] like him with Christ? And to whom else did such a sign ever appear [as to him]? and by whom else were so many myriads ever illuminated? Methinks not even by St. Paul. For on the day of the apparition of the luminous cross, countless myriads of myriads believed, of Jews and of heathen. For until the day of Constantius, son of Constantine, the Jews were prevented from going down to Jerusalem, but by him many Jews were freely allowed to congregate, and they fixed their abodes in Jerusalem. But also the Jews who were in Tiberias and in other cities were congregated there for the festival. And, moreover, many of the heathen were collected there because of the general concourse [who] were come to trade; and these, having seen the divine apparition, believed in Christ;

and all hastened to be baptized, so that the fonts and cistern tanks were not enough for them; till at last the blessed saint ordered the great baths which were called the public baths to be cleansed, that they might there carry on the saving rite of baptism. This was the third sign which happened in Jerusalem on the day of the holy Pentecost. But I think it was on a loftier scale than the first, in so far as, |328 though the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles was seen by all in the midst of a multitude of assembled Jews and men of many other races, who in the Acts of the Apostles are mentioned by name, yet on that occasion the Spirit was bestowed on the Apostles alone. But the occasion of this multitude being assembled for holy baptism was also much more sublime than the second occasion, which Josephus relates: how that on the day of Pentecost a quaking and panic took hold first of

the priests and then of the whole congregation. Then also on a sudden a voice was heard from the very depths of the temple, saying these words: We depart hence, we depart. But on this last occasion the powers of the Lord do not come forth from beneath our feet, but were plainly manifested to come from above, and were [? + not] bestowed in secret;

so much so that the blessed Cyril was prompt to write to the Emperor Constantius a letter of entreaty summoning him [to be] pious and instructed in the things of God. For he thought that by his supplication he would gain his salvation; by laying before him the divine sign which had occurred, and the multitude of those converted, as if to say, Why art not thou also with them?

So then, if the Greeks are resolved to despise this, they have no respect either for time or for the gospel, because of their not admitting the festival of the birth. For the one and the other show both the birth and the baptism of Christ our God to have been on one and the same day. For it is written in Luke's Gospel, in the mystery of the baptism, thus: that Jesus Himself was of about thirty years beginning. See how clearly it proves that on the same day with His birth He was baptised, and then made a beginning both of the thirtieth year of His age and of His teaching. This also do the Greeks say, that it is possible for the twelfth day to be the beginning of the year, and not its middle or end either; if we so understand, of the seventy |329 days also it is possible to say that it is not middle of the year or end. But in regard to the apostolic canon, the Greeks argue thus: that the Apostles had no leisure to narrowly seek out feast days, for their occupation was in preaching, and in separating and holding [men] aloof from heathen festivals. Will any one really be content to hear such a thing said of the Apostles as that they were certainly so careless as this about the appointing of festivals? Why, in that case, did they teach us to worship turning towards the east? Why, also, to meet together and feast Sunday, to honour it and be idle on it? Or to fast on the fourth day of the week and on Fridays? For all these are lesser points than the festivals of the birth and baptism.

However, we would waive this point with them if only they would be persuaded in regard to others. For they declare in regard to the holy fathers at Nice that God concealed this from them; for that He does not give all graces to any one person. If the usage had not been discussed by them----yes. But they were aware of it, and condemned it, and spoke "of the Birth which in other cities they think to celebrate." But I assent to those of whom the Greeks boast----I mean, to the blessed Basil and Gregory Anzianz (i.e., Nazianzen). Them I know to be holy, true, spiritual, and followers of the Apostles. And if they had any precept about this, I accept it, even as Paul commands, saying: If it be revealed to a second, let the first listen.

But I preceive no precept of theirs about this festival; but St. Cyril, who appointed the lections and psalms for the two festivals, I do not understand thereby to have

separated the two, but to have kept in full the rituals, and to have celebrated the feasts of both mysteries on one and the same day. But those who suppose St. Gregory to separate the feasts in his argument, are not able to point to any precept |330 of his about it, but derive some sort of evidence from his statements, and garble them to please themselves. They declare that in the discourse on the Birth he says as follows, ”A little later then thou wilt see Jesus cleansed in the Jordan” and they declare that he pronounced this discourse on the day of the birth. And a little later on he refers to the twelve days which precede the baptism. To this we shall make this answer. I understand it thus: he simply uses his expression ”a little later” in connection with the same passage, where he says, ”But if thou art scandalized by His being made flesh and debasing Himself, why, then, ’a little later’ thou shalt see Jesus cleansing the Jordan by His baptism, and not debasing but enriching the flesh by cleaving the heavens, and with divine grace testified unto by the Father and by the Spirit. In the second place, if you so understand the passage, then you must conceive Him as going to be baptized subsequently to His resurrection;

for previously to this passage He has been dwelling upon His passion and resurrection, and in connection with the same He uses the same words, and says, ” so then a little later. However, if you clear your mind, you will easily understand from this very discourse that He fixed both feasts on one day. For in another passage in the same discourse He speaks as follows: ”But now is the feast of the Epiphany of God, for God appeared as man by birth. So, then, he combines the two. This also do the Greeks allege, that the name epiphany is used of two feasts, both of the birth and of the baptism. I reply that this is notorious to all, that the name epiphany is applied to the 6th of January, and not to the 25th of December, either by the Greeks or by other races, and that no one ever heard of two epiphanies, but only of one. If, therefore, He uses the term epiphany, and is discoursing on the birth, He clearly appoints both on one day. |331

Then, again, the Greeks adduce as evidence of their case the following words from the discourse on the baptism: ”We have then celebrated the [things] befitting (= τὰ εἰκότα) the birth.” And pondering the same, he says: ”But on this occasion the action of Christ is one thing and the secret thought another.” Well, I assent. The action is one and the thought another. But not on another day. For the first words testify this to me. ”We have celebrated the [things] befitting the birth,” he says, and not the [fact] of the birth. For, had it been by twelve days later, he must have said the [fact] of the birth, and not the [things] of the birth.

Again, if it was not all on one day, why did he mention the day of the birth, and not simply say, ”the secret thought” (or mystery), as elsewhere he does of the economy and of the passion? But you mention the depredators while you pass over those who magnify and elevate, as the very same Gregory says. Come, then, mark me also that passage which in the discourse of baptism he utters as follows: ” Three

births our discourse knoweth, the one in the flesh, and the one by baptism, and the one by the resurrection." And, dwelling on the same, he adds: "All these births my Christ manifestly honoured, [the first] by the great afflatus, primal and animating; and the second by being made flesh and by the baptism, wherewith He was Himself baptised; but the third by the resurrection, which He Himself initiated. As he was the eldest among many brethren, so also He deigned to become eldest among the dead. But as touching two births----I mean the first and the last----the present is not the time to philosophize; but concerning the middle one and that which is now necessary to us; of the same name with which is the day of illumination.

See how he combines the two. Let them see, who have |332 intelligence; the being made flesh and the baptism are one birth upon one day, after which, he says, is even named the day of illumination. Bat let us see how the Greeks fit in with the dumbness of Zachariah the six-months-long lapse of days of the pregnancy of Elizabeth, at the end of which we must understand the day of the annunciation of Gabriel. This, however, is the arguments of the Greeks: On the same day on which Zachariah was dumbfounded, on that very day he approached his wife; and she conceived by him on the very same day. Then they count 180 days, which throws the day of the annunciation of Gabriel on to the 25th March. From that day they count 276 days of the Holy Virgin's pregnancy, to suit the ten months' gestation of the first-born child, and that throws the birth on the 25th of December.

Now I ask you to give me your best attention while we investigate the following passage. First the text, and then the Gospel. For the text runs as follows: "My festivals consecrated shall be called holy by you. Three times in the year shall ye keep festival. Every male of you shall be before me, and ye shall offer sacrifices to the Lord." And before that he saith: "In the seventh month, the first day thereof, let it be called holy by you. No work at all shall ye do on it. And the tenth day of the same seventh month, let it be kept holy by you. Humble yourselves from the ninth day of the month for three days. And every one who shall not humble himself, he shall be destroyed out of his congregation. And let the tenth day be hallowed by you; for it is a day of expiation for you. No work shall ye do upon it. A Sabbath of Sabbaths is it [and] a rest. Ye shall offer a sacrifice to the Lord in expiation for yourselves. And the fifteenth day of the same seventh month, called the Festival of Tabernacles, shall be |333 holy for you. No menial work shall ye do on it. In tents ye shall dwell for seven days at rest. Offer offerings to the Lord for seven days; and the seventh day shall be called holy, a Sabbath rest. No menial work shall ye do on it." So the text.

So then Zachariah's dumbness exactly fell on the tenth of Tisri; for that is the seventh month. And it was the day of expiation, on which the high priest entered the Holy of Holies, once in the year. To which also Paul bears witness. But on the same day it was not convenient that Zachariah should approach his wife; for

he was the high priest of the year, and the great Feast of Tabernacles impended, and all Israel was convoked there. For seven days they were to feast the Festival of Tabernacles, and it was impossible for the high priest to leave the congregation and go to his house; for it was far away, and he had not his dwelling in Jerusalem. And the holy Gospel is my evidence for this, for in it it is written: ”And the congregation was waiting for Zachariah, and marvelled at his tarrying in the temple. And when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they understood that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he conversed with them in signs and remained dumb. And it came to pass when the days of his ministration were fulfilled, he went to his house. And after those days Elizabeth his wife conceived. See how clearly he implies that after the completion of the days of the festival it came to pass that Zachariah approached his wife. And to make the statement more sure he repeats a second time the phrase, ”having completed the days of his ministry.

And again, ”after those days. And who can mistake their meaning, namely, that it was so long as he was enjoining the congregation to sanctify and respect, not only the feast, but also, because of the feast, the beginning of the month and the first day’s evening. How then between two chief festivals could the high priest leave the |334 congregation, and, going to his house, approach his wife? or [could he] on the very day of the feast? Be it not therefore ours to contradict and dispute, puffed up with our subtleties; but let us assent to the truth and to the Divine writings, which make it clear that it was on the tenth of the month Tisri that Zachariah approached his wife and that Elizabeth conceived. If we then count the 180 days of six months, that fixes the 16th of the month Nisan ----which is the 6th April according to the Romans----and at this date was the annunciation of the Holy Virgin. Then, counting the period of ten months’ gestation of the firstborn, we have a full 276 days, ending on the 21st of the month Tebeth, which is the sixth of January, according to the Romans.

Here let us take a firm stand, and one not to be overthrown. And heaven forbid we should divide it into two. But on one day let us keep the birth and the baptism, and, maintaining intact the appointments of both, let us follow the holy Apostles and blessed fathers of Nice and our own teachers. For it is not true that [the new Christmas] did not reach them, and that therefore they did not receive it; but a long time ago [this feast] came to our land, and was accepted as by men who were ignorant of the truth. And it lasted many, many years, until the blessed John Katholicos, who by family was a Mandakuni. And then he made search for the truth, and after inquiry and getting at the truth, he commanded it to be abandoned. And after him we too will follow and give this answer to the Greeks, that we are pupils of the holy fathers in Nice; and what we learned we keep firmly and will not twist it awry. As for you, if ye do not walk in the paths of your own fathers, it appears to me that the temper of the Jews has taken possession of you, as they taught the

Samaritans. And the Samaritans kept what they learned. But you resemble them. It does no harm to us. |335

But we are on surer ground than the Samaritans, and by far more sublime and divine; and for you we have no other answer. For you do not enjoin on us to do the truth, but impose always on us your own tyrannical and over-subtle fancies. I know a few of the Greeks who kept this feast until the Emperor Justinian; but all were constrained by him, and received it----Jerusalem, Rome, Alexandria, and every land. But be it not ours to feel any such dread of human commands as that we should over-ride the divine. And if it please you, I will utter Job's words: If I should go wrong, make me intelligent. But if they scorn the words of truth, at least let us not turn perversely from the path of the fathers. Let us then set forth clearly in what month and on what days of the month the several nations keep the holy Epiphany:----

A. The Epiphany, according to the Hebrews, falls in the month Tebeth, on the 21st day always. B. The Epiphany, according to the Syrians, in the month Kanoun, on the 6th day always. C. The Epiphany, according to the Arabs, in the month Arson (? Assam), on the 21st day always. D. The Epiphany, according to the Ethiopians, in the month Teras (= Tir), on the 11th day always. E. The Epiphany, according to the Egyptians, in the month Tubil, on the 11th day always. F. The Epiphany, according to the Macedonians, in the month Maimakterion, on the 21st day always. G. The Epiphany, according to the Greeks, in the month Eudineus (Αὐδυναῖος), on the 6th day always. H. The Epiphany, according to the Romans, in the month of January, on the 6th day always. I. The Epiphany, according to the Armenians, changes |336 its date every four years. And how this comes to be must be explained, and why it is not adjusted to [the dates] of other nations; this I will explain according to the order of the calendar. But many ask why was not the day of the holy Epiphany made clear? On what number of day of the month it falls, and we keep it, I will explain.

We have a tradition from the holy fathers. Inasmuch as it happened on the 20th day of the month, on the same day we also keep festival; the reason of which is this, That the feast of the holy Epiphany is no Jewish feast, but a Christian one only. And since there was no need to separate it from any other [feast], it was not fixed in a regular manner, nor was the day [of the week] signified; but it was fixed by reference to the number of the day in the month on which it occurred. But some have declared about the day [of the week] of the holy Epiphany that it happened on a Friday, because on Friday was the creation of the first man; and others assert on the Sabbath. But I am persuaded by the holy Polycarp, for he was a pupil of John the Evangelist, and heard with his own ears all the history of the Saviour. And he declares that the birth happened on the first of the week. And it was fitting that on this day on which was the beginning of creation----it was indeed portended----that

on this day the Saviour of all should come into the world by being born, but keeping the virginity intact.

And [he said] that the resurrection after the stay under the seal of the rock [was on the first day of the week], as also prior to that the entrance into Jerusalem on the day of the palms, and subsequently thereto the |337 descent of the Spirit on the Apostles. But he (i.e. Polycarp) declared that the day of the baptism fell, after thirty years, on the same number of day in the month, only on the fourth day of the week. And he declares that the creation of the sun on the fourth day was for a mystery and foretype. From the fourth tribe of Israel was the Saviour born, according to the Apostle, [who says] that from the tribe of Judah sprang our Lord. And because we feast both events on one day of the month, it was impossible to declare the day [of the week], because they (i.e. particular week days) fall, one on one day in the month, another on another. But we keep the number of the day of the month; and for seven days we purify ourselves and fast before it, and on whatever day [i.e. of the week] it falls, we feast seven days after it. For God is not limited by time or power of days, according to the Lord's utterance, that the Son of Man is Lord also of the Sabbath.

[Footnotes moved to the end and renumbered] 1. Words in square brackets have been supplied by the translator as being necessary to the sense. 2. In the Arm. Edition (Dashian, Vienna, 1896), and in the MSS. of these apocryphal canons the citation given by Ananias occurs in Can. vii. 3. I.e., the separate commemoration of the Birth----apart from the baptism----on the 12th day before the 6th January----Christmas Day as we now call it. 4. I.e., the Christians, who are commonly spoken of as a genus or race in the earlier fathers. The Arm. text has megazd, a vox nihili, for which I read mer azg, and render accordingly, 5. Heading mtermouthiun for the vox nihili mrtouthiun. 6. Such seems the meaning of an unusually cumbrous sentence. 7. I.e., the modern Christmas on December 25th as opposed to the older joint festival on January 6th. 8. Perhaps this was a building traditionally associated with the shepherds who watched their flocks by night.

9. I.e., baptised. 10. The Armenian has "demesosin," a misspelling of "dêmosios." 11. Perhaps render "are accustomed to celebrate," as if νομίζουσι underlay the Armenian. 12. Greg. Theol., Or. 38. In Theophania, p. 673. 13. See Gregory Naz., Discourse 39 on Holy Baptism, near the beginning. 14. Deut. xvi. 16. 15. Lev. xxiii. 24, foll. 16. Arm. has Makaterion. 17. The Armenian year contained 365 days only, or one quarter of a day less than the solar year. Consequently any day of any one month in this year of the Julian era will coincide with the day preceding it after a lapse of four years. E.g. the 4th June this year will answer to the 3rd June four years hence. For the Armenian calendar gains one day in four years upon the Julian. 18. As the Christian Easter was of set purpose altered from the 14th of Nisan, the date of the Jewish Passover.

19. The citation of Polycarp seems to end here. 20. I.e., if the 20th day of a particular month is a Friday in one year, it need not be Friday in another. 21. Ananias implies----though he does not expressly say it----that Polycarp put the Nativity on the 20th day of a month, which was a Sunday; and exactly thirty years later, also on the 20th day of the same month, but on a Wednesday, the baptism. The resurrection, the entry into Jerusalem, and the day of Pentecost, according to the same authority, all these occurred on the first day of the week, herein agreeing with the Syriac "Teaching of the Apostles." Ananias omits to say which of the Armenian months it was on the 20th of which the Epiphany fell.

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