

Avedis

Աւետիս • The Good News

A Mini-Magazine on the Armenian Church for Adults • Volume Three January 1987 Number Five



THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

The next day, he saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Look there is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. It was of him that I said, 'Behind me comes one who has passed ahead of me because he existed before me.' I did not know him myself, and yet my purpose in coming to baptize with water was so that he might be revealed to Israel." And John declared, "I saw the Spirit come down on him like a dove from heaven and rest on him. I did not know him myself, but he who sent me to baptize with water

had said to me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and rest is the one who is to baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that he is the Chosen One of God."

John 1:29-34 (New JB)

January 6 is known as "Armenian Christmas", somehow suggesting that a distinction must be made between the Christmas celebrations of the rest of Christendom, and those of the Armenians. While we know this is not the case, that we too celebrate and rejoice in the birth of the Savior of the world, we can be confused over what it is that distinguishes the feast of the Theophany from Christmas celebrations of December 25.

On January 6, we observe the birth and baptism of our Lord and Savior, that is God's revelation of his divinity, or theophany. The Armenian word is *Asdvadzahaydnootyoon*. The baptism of Jesus served as a prelude to his ministry, and is recounted differently in each of the four Gospels. We shall look at John's description.

The passage begins with *the next day*. The previous verses tell us that John the Baptist himself had been mistaken for the Messiah by the religious authorities. John protests that he is not the One, but that *I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandal* of the Christ. So when he sees Jesus *the next day*, John proclaims boldly that he is *the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world*. The *lamb* is a term that Evangelist John uses frequently. It blends the idea of the "suffering servant" of Isaiah 53 who takes all sin on himself and offers himself as "lamb of expiation" (Lev. 14) with the "Passover lamb" (Ex. 12) in the ritual which sym-

bolizes Israel's redemption. In one word, *lamb* sums up the love, the sacrifice, the suffering and triumph of Jesus.

John claims that *I did not know him myself*. Since he was Jesus' cousin (Luke 1:36), he must have been acquainted with him. What John is saying is not that he did not know *who* Jesus was, but that he did not know *what* Jesus was. It had suddenly been revealed to him, at Jesus' baptism, that Jesus was none other than the Son of God himself.

Once again the Baptizer makes it clear what his only function was. After denying repeatedly that he was the Messiah (vs. 20-22), he states in vs. 31 that his job was to point humans to Christ. He was nothing and Christ was everything. He claimed no greatness and no place for himself; he was only the man who drew back and left Jesus, the Christ, occupying the center of the stage.

Something had happened at Jesus' baptism that convinced John beyond all doubt that Jesus was God Incarnate. At his baptism the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus, with power, in the form of a dove. John declares *I saw the Spirit come down on him like a dove from heaven*. John was familiar with the prophet who declared "The Spirit of God is upon me, because he has annointed me to bring good new to the captives... (Is. 61:1). Here was God revealing his only Son, here was God revealing the Savior of the world. The dove was the signal to John that Jesus' baptism was a theophany, a revelation of God. And John testifies *that he is the Chosen One of God*.

This is what the Armenian Church celebrates so beautifully on January 6. This is God making himself known for those who had *eyes to see and ears to hear*. At his baptism all present were given the opportunity to recognize Jesus as God Incarnate. John was one who did. Nineteen centuries later we too are given the opportunity of recognizing and acknowledging Jesus as God-made-human. Once we do, our relationship with him takes on a new dimension. In the person of Jesus Christ, God entered our human lives and took on himself all our limitations. At the celebration of Theophany we are reminded again what a marvelous event this is. Here is the *Chosen One of God* who has come to earth for our salvation.