



THEOPHANES III OF NICAEA AND THE LIGHT OF GOD AS THE FIRE OF HELL FOR THOSE WHO REJECT HIM

The Wikipedia article on the “Light of Tabor” – the divine light seen by the disciples on Mount Tabor – mentions that “Theophanes of Nicaea” believed that “the divine light will be perceived as the punishing fire of hell”.^[1] This is indeed true, although Theophanes is actually merely following Gregory Nazianzen here.^[2]

But who is this Theophanes of Nicaea? There is no Wikipedia article on him; and even the Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium does not consider him worth a mention. He is sometimes confused with his predecessor bishop at Nicaea, Theophanes the Confessor, also known as Theophanes Graptos (d. 845). I thought that it would be useful to collect what I could on this minor figure as an orientation guide in case others have to work in this area.

In the late 14th century the works of Thomas Aquinas began to be known in the remains of the Byzantine empire. Translations were made by Demetrius Cydones. Naturally this instantly provoked one of those lengthy pseudo-theological quarrels so beloved of the decaying state, which are associated with the name of St Gregory Palamas and are known to us as the Hesychast controversy. A circle of intellectuals formed around the former emperor John VI Cantacuzene, who had resigned in 1354 and become a monk under the name of Joasaph. One of these young men was Theophanes, a very minor late Byzantine writer.

We know very little about Theophanes. We don’t even know the name that he was born with – Theophanes is his name in religion. We don’t know when he was born, where, or what family he came from. He was a disciple of the Patriarch Philotheus Kokkinus of Constantinople (1354-5, and again 1364-7), as appears in the compliments made in his *First Oration on the Light of Tabor*. Theophanes appears for the first time in 1366 in a legal act. This he signed as Theophanes, Metropolitan of Nicaea. But Nicaea had been occupied by the Turks since 1331, so the appointment was merely an honour. He was probably selected as bishop by his master after 1364. He was unable to visit Nicaea as he tells us in the third of his *Three Letters to Nicaea*. Instead he resided in Constantinople and busied himself with church business.

One part of this business was the task of responding to a letter from the Latin “patriarch of Constantinople”, Paul, bishop of Smyra. Pope Innocent VI had asked Paul to write to John/Joasaph for information about the hesychast controversy. The ex-emperor prudently deputed the task, and Theophanes wrote a *Letter to Paul* on the subject.

Philotheus placed Theophanes in charge of the investigation into the opinions of Prochorus Cydones about Hesychasm, and therefore many of his works are concerned with this. But he relinquished the role to concentrate on the reunion with the church of Serbia.^[3]

Between 1367 and 1368 Theophanes acted as ambassador for Philotheus to John Ugljesa, the despot of Serbia, to negotiate the reunion of the Serbian church with Constantinople. In consequence his signature is absent from the Tomos of 1368, in which Prochorus Cydones

was condemned.

Theophanes was the first Byzantine theologian to use the works of Aquinas, even prior to Scholarios. These he knew through the translations into Greek by Demetrius Cydones.

No further mention of Theophanes is known after June 1380, and in March 1381 a new bishop, Alexios of Varna, is consecrated to Nicaea.

The majority of the works of Theophanes remain unpublished and accessible only in manuscript. The following works have been printed:

- Three pastoral letters
- *Oratio Eucharistica*. The eucharistic prayer
- *Sermo in Sanctissimam Deiparam*. Oration on the most holy Mother of God (theotokos)
- *De lumine uiso in monte Thabor*. Five orations on the Light of Tabor.
- *De aeternitate mundi*. A treatise on the eternity of the world

Unedited works include:

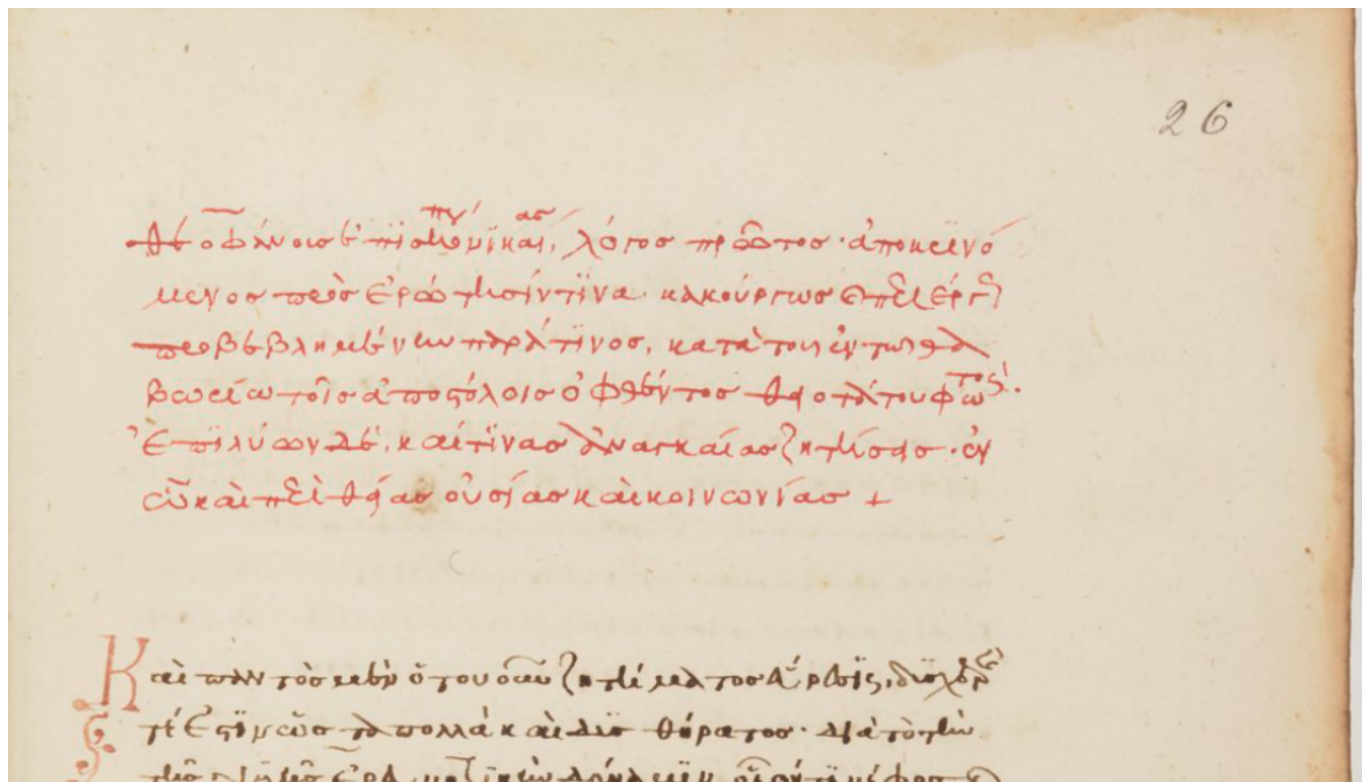
- *Contra Latinos*. Four orations against the Latins, rejecting the filioque.
- *Contra Judaeos*. Eight orations and twenty-five chapters against the Jews.
- *Epistola ad Paulum*. Letter to the legate Paul

A further work is not known to exist today:

- *Epistola ad Joannem Ugljesam*. Letter of John Ugljesa.

The oration on the theotokos recapitulates all his theological doctrine, and has been supposed to be the last work by our author.

The main manuscript used by Sotiropolous for the *Five orations on the light of Tabor* is BNF Paris gr. 1294 (P), which is online.^[4] It also contains two of the pastoral letters.



Here is a limited bibliography. The reader should start with Polemis' monograph on the subject.

Editions:

Χαραλ. Γ. Σωτηροπούλου, *Θεοφάνους Γ' ἐπισκόπου Νικαίας, Περὶ θαβωρίου φωτός λόγοι πέντε*, Athènes 1990. (= Ch. Sotiropoulos, *Theophanes III bishop of Nicaea, On the Light of Tabor, five books*). I have been quite unable to locate any copies of this, other than one in Athens in the National Library, and one in Bonn in Germany.

Geōrgiou Th. Zacharopoulou, *Theophanēs Nikaias (? - +/- 1380/1) : ho vios kai to syngraphiko tou ergo*. Series: Vyzantina keimena kai meletai ; 35. Thessalonikē : Kentro Vyzantinōn Ereunōn 2003. ISBN 9607856120. This contains an edition of the Orations on the Light of Tabor, and probably much else.^[5] Amusingly the editor disparages earlier editions in the way traditional with new editors, in order to promote his own new and improved one. Infuriatingly he does not print the page numbers of the *editio princeps*, rendering the readily-available volume less than useful.

The *Epistolae III* are printed in the PG vol. 150, cols 287-349.

The *oratio eucharistica* is in PG 150, 352-356.

Iōannēs D. Polemēs, *Theophanous Nikaias, Apodeixis hoti edynato ex aīdiou gegenēsthai ta onta kai anatropē tautēs*. Editio princeps. Athēna: Akadēmia Athēnōn ; J. Vrin [distributor] ; Ousia [distributor] 2000. This is the treatise that beings are not eternal.

Martin Jugie, *Theophanes Nicaenus, Sermo in Sanctissimam Deiparam*, Romae : Facultas Theologica Pontificii Aethenaei Seminarii Romani, 1935. Greek text and Latin translation.

Studies:

Ioannis D. Polemis, *Theophanes of Nicaea: His Life and Works*, Series: Wiener Byzantinistische Studien , Volume: 20. Vienna: 1996. ISBN13: 978-3-7001-2227-2.^[6] Revision

of 1991 Oxford DPhil Thesis supervised by Cyril Mango.^[7] Includes an appendix of corrections to the Sotiropoulos text. Polemis discusses all the works known to him, printed and otherwise, that the author was able to find, and the manuscripts for them all. The standard monograph.

Stephan, Christian, "Theophanes III of Nicea", in: *Religion Past and Present. Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*. Brill: 2006-13. ISBN: 9789004146662.^[8]

1. ^[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tabor_Light. The reference given is "Ioannēs Polemēs, Theophanes of Nicaea: His Life and Works, vol. 20 (Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), p. 99".↵
 2. ^[2] Polemis p.99: "The view that the light of God's glory is identical with the fire of hell is quite common among the Greek Fathers and can be traced back to Gregory of Nazianzos, who affirms in a passage quoted by Theophanes without acknowledgment that the punishment of sinners will be ὡς πῦρ ἰδεῖν, ὅν ὡς φῶς οὐκ ἐγνώρισαν" ("seeing Him to be fire whom he did not recognise as light"), and n. 109: "Gregory of Nazianzus *In laudem Athanasii*, PG 35, 1084D," i.e. the funeral oration for Athanasius, *oratio XXI*, chapter 2. English translation
http://www.tertullian.org/fathers2/NPNF2-07/Npnf2-07-40.htm#P4015_1195110 ↵
 3. ^[3] See review of Polemis at
https://www.persee.fr/doc/rebyz_0766-5598_1997_num_55_1_1946_t1_0348_0000_3↵
 4. ^[4] <https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc213184>↵
 5. ^[5] This contains a two-page summary in French from which the majority of the information above has been taken.↵
 6. ^[6] Publisher website:
<https://verlag.oeaw.ac.at/theophanes-of-nicaea-his-life-and-works>↵
 7. ^[7]
<https://www.history.ac.uk/history-online/theses/thesis/theophanes-nicaea-his-life-and-work>↵
 8. ^[8] Online version: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1877-5888_rpp_SIM_026024↵
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