Tertullian (d. 225AD) wishing, in the De Baptismo, to justify the use of water in Baptism from the unbroken witness of the Bible, turned first to the story of Creation in Genesis. In this narrative, the waters have two characteristics which Baptism reproduces: it is the primordial element in which life appears, and it is sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Tertullian develops this first aspect:

‘First of all, O man, you should have reverence for the antiquity of the waters as a primordial element’ (Bapt. 2).

It was in the midst of the waters that the earth appeared:

‘Once the elements of the world were set in order, when it was to be given inhabitants, it was the primordial waters which were commanded to produce living creatures. The primordial water brought forth life, so that no one should be astonished that in Baptism the waters are able to give life.’ (Bapt. 2).

And to this characteristic, another is added: the fact that the

‘Spirit of God was carried over the waters, He Who was to recreate the baptized. The Holy One was carried over that which was holy, or, rather, over that which could receive holiness from Him Who was carried. It is thus that the nature of water, sanctified by the Spirit, received the capability of itself becoming sanctifying. This is why all waters, by reason of their ancient original prerogative, may obtain the sacrament of sanctification by the invocation of God’ (Bapt. 2).
What is taught here is the consecration of the baptismal water, to which ancient Christianity attached great importance:

‘You have seen water. But all water does not heal, if the Spirit has not descended and consecrated that water.’ (Ambrose, De Sacr. 1, 15; Botte; 58).”

(Jean Danielou, S.J, The Bible and the Liturgy, pp 72-73)

The Theophany of Christ (2016) ON JANUARY 6, 2016 BY FR. TED

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386AD) taught about the Theophany of Christ:

“Jesus sanctified baptism when he himself was baptized.
Who then is in a position to belittle baptism and still retain the faith after the moment in which the Son of God was baptized? He was immune from sin. So he did not submit to baptism to obtain the forgiveness of sins. Despite being free from sin, he submitted to baptism in order to bestow grace and dignity on those who would be baptized after him. He shared our flesh and blood in order that we might be partakers not only of his bodily existence but also of his divine grace.

And in the end he conquered death so that all of us might win salvation and be enabled to say: ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’ [1 Cor. 15:55] In fact, the sting of death has been destroyed by means of baptism. When you go down into the water to be baptized, you take with you your sins. But the grace which is called down upon you marks your soul in a new way. You go down dead because of your sins: you come up given new life by grace. For if you were planted in the likeness of the Savior’s death, you were also thought worthy of resurrection.” (Drinking from the Hidden Fountain: A Patristic Breviary by Thomas Spidkik, pp 331-332)

Orthodox festal hymns are rich in imagery. As such they reveal a great deal about what hymnographers in past centuries believed and thought about. This in turn reveals a rich theological heritage – Christians not shaped by modern concerns and controversies revealed how they saw the world in the poetry they composed.

Below are a few hymns from the Prefeast of Theophany which offer glimpses into the mind of our Christian fore-bearers. The first hymn hones in on the idea that the saving deeds of Christ benefit ALL of humanity, not just those who believe. There is indeed a universalism to the salvation offered to humanity in Jesus Christ. Orthodox festal hymns frequently proclaim that there is one God who is both creator and savior of everyone. Obviously, not everyone is interested in this salvation. [The emphasis in the text below is mine and not in the original.]
Receiving Him who came to be washed,
That He might wash away the sins of all,
John forbade Him, drawing back in fear:
“It is I who need to be baptized by You!
How can the friend stand in the Bridegroom’s place?
I am only a word from Your voice; a moon reflecting You, the sun,
Whom we exult throughout all ages!

I also find in the penultimate line an interesting scientific reference – the moon’s light is simply reflecting the sun’s light. The hymn writer is able to incorporate in a metaphor comparing John the Baptist to Jesus the fact that the moon is not the source of its own light. Some think that the ancients, being pre-modern and pre-scientific, held only superstitious beliefs, but they were interested in the material world and science as they understood it. Understanding the moon to be reflecting sunlight requires some abstract cosmology as the fact would have been beyond what the ancients could prove. The hymn shows that this concept of the moon reflecting sunlight was so well established to the hymn writer that he could refer to it in a metaphor and trust that his audience would know the reference.

In a similar vein, a Patristic text on Christ’s baptism, Tertullian references the primordial waters from which life emerged. Obviously his understanding of the primordial waters comes from the book of Genesis and not from evolutionary science, but he does accept a notion that from the inanimate sea, life came into existence.

In another hymn, we are reminded that the Holy Feast Days in the Church are instances of the Master’s hospitality – an image used on Holy Thursday referring to the Mystical Supper of Christ. We (all Christians and all who attend the Feasts are the invited guests of God! We aren’t the hosts of these Feasts, we are God’s guests, enjoying the Master’s hospitality which we are supposed to share with others. Sadly, when we think we own the Feasts or the sacraments, we lose our proper place at the heavenly Banquet.

Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he marked how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, “When you are invited by any one to a marriage feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest a more eminent man than you be invited by him; and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give place to this man,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, go up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 14:7-11)

God is the Master who shows hospitality to all. As His invited guests, our task is to give Him thanksgiving and to share His abundant hospitality with others.

Come, O faithful,
Having enjoyed the Master’s hospitality:
The banquet of immortality
In the lowly manger,
Let us run to the Jordan,
There to see a strange mystery,  
Revealing light from on high.

The above hymn has us being invited by the Master from one Feast (Christmas) to another (Theophany). We are the guests, and should be awed and humbled that God invites us to these Feasts honoring His Son! And we have unlimited grace and divine love to share with all of our neighbors and indeed with the entirety of humanity.

And in the Feast of Theophany we see a strange mystery. Mystery is the normal word for sacrament in Orthodox writings. The strange mystery is of course Christ’s baptism. For usually baptism is understood as the spiritual means to wash away sin, but now the sinless Christ is baptized and it is Christ who is sanctifying the waters rather than the reverse.

In Orthodox theology Christ took upon himself the sins of the world. This is an action of His entire life, not just the short time He was on the Cross. So, in His baptism, Christ carried not His sins but ours into the River Jordan. He drowns our sins in His baptism, or in another image, He buries our sins when He goes beneath the waters of the Jordan. Baptism is a symbolic burial and resurrection to life. Christ dies on the cross and resurrects to a new life, but His baptism already prefigures this. Every significant event in Christ’s life was done for our salvation. Theophany, Christ’s baptism is also accomplished for our salvation, not His!

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:3-5)

So the hymns of Theophany give frequent reference to Christ doing away with our sins, and use several different metaphors to make the point:

In the midst of those seeking baptism,
You stood, a man in essence, not imagination,
The only sinless One by nature,
For You came to bury mankind’s punishment
In the baptismal waters.

In Canticle 1 of the Eve of Theophany, we find

Delivered from bitter bondage,
Israel crossed over the waters as if on dry land,
And seeing the enemy drowning,
They sang a song in gladness to God ...
Christ now buries our sins in the waters...
Jesus Christ comes forth to drown the rivers of sin in the streams of Jordan...

The hymns see the Exodus event of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea as prefiguring Christ’s own baptism. The real enemy of the Jews and of all mankind is sin. The crossing of the Red Sea has eternal significance because the Egyptians are just the symbol of sin. It does little good to escape a tyrant if you are trapped in sin.

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?” (Matthew 16:24-26)

Finally, all of the hymns are based in the theological truth that Jesus is God incarnate. That is the whole basis for understanding every Gospel story and for celebrating every Christian Feast.

Once You clothed the shameful nakedness of our forefather Adam;  
Now You are stripped naked of Your own will!       
You covered the roof of heaven with waters;  
Now You wrap Yourself in the streams of Jordan,      
Only merciful Christ.

The above hymn accepts the idea that it was the pre-incarnate Christ who clothes the naked Adam and Eve after they had lost the original glorious garment God provided for them in Eden and were expelled from paradise. Now in His own baptism, Christ stands naked on earth in the Jordan River taking upon Himself the sins of Adam and Eve and all their descendants. Christ is baptized for our salvation – he takes our sins into the Jordan to have those sins washed away.

Christ, who in creating the world covered the heavens with water, now clothes His naked humanity in the streams of the Jordan to heal us all. He restores all of humanity to its natural potential, giving all of us the chance to once again submit our lives to God.

Theophany and Theology

ON JANUARY 8, 2016 BY FR. TED

John Baggley writes in his book about the festal icons, that the Feast of Theophany and the Feast of Christmas are closely intertwined in Orthodox hymns and theology.
“The material creation is seen as ministering to Christ at his **Baptism** as it did at his **Nativity**; this text extends the ideas expressed in the **Kontakion** for Christ’s Nativity …:

O Lord, wishing to fulfill that which Thou hast appointed from eternity, Thou has received from all the creation ministers at this Thy mystery: Gabriel from among the angels, the Virgin from among men, the Star from among the heavens, and Jordan from among the waters; and in the stream Thou hast washed away the transgression of the world.

As in the Christmas liturgy there is a great stress on the humility and self-emptying of the Son of God in taking our humanity, coming to human birth and to his baptism, and following this path through to his death, **descent into Hades**, and **resurrection from the dead**. The influence of Philippians 2:5-11 is obvious: ‘Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men….’ As we have seen in earlier chapters this kenotic imagery and its paradoxes pervades a great deal of the Orthodox hymns for the feasts.

That Thou mightest fill all things with Thy glory, Thou hast emptied Thine own self, even unto the form of a servant. And now as a servant Thou dost bow down Thy head beneath the hand of the servant, granting me restoration and cleansing. Let us sing together the praises of Him who is beyond all understanding, who was in flesh made poor and came to baptism, working thereby our restoration, for He is God rich in mercy....”

(Festival Icons for the Christian Year, p 52)

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**God’s Spirit Hovering Over the Waters ON JANUARY 9, 2016 BY FR. TED**

One of the Old Testament readings for the feast of **Theophany** is Genesis 1:1-13 which describes the first three days of creation. **St. Basil the Great** comments on verse 2 of Genesis 1:

“‘And the spirit of God,’ he says, ‘was stirring above the waters.’” (Genesis 1:2)

If this spirit means the diffusion of the air, understand that the author is enumerating to you the parts of the world, saying that God created the heavens, the earth, water, and air; and this latter was spreading and flowing. Or, what is truer and approved by those before us, the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of God, because it has been
observed that it alone and specially was considered worthy by the Scripture of such mention, and there is named no other Spirit of God than the Holy Spirit which forms an essential part of the divine and blessed Trinity. Admitting this meaning, you will find the advantage from it great.

How, then, was it stirring above the waters? I will tell you an explanation, not my own, but that of a Syrian who was as far removed from worldly wisdom as he was near the knowledge of truth. Now, he claimed that the language of the Syrians was more expressive and because of its resemblance to the Hebrew language approached somewhat more closely to the sense of Scripture; therefore, the meaning of the statement was as follows. As regards the verb ‘was stirring above,’ they interpret in preference to that, he says, ‘warmed with fostering care,’ and he endued the nature of the waters with life through his comparison with a bird brooding upon eggs and imparting some vital power to them as they are being warmed.

Some such meaning, they say, was implied by this word, as if the Spirit were warming with fostering care, that is, was preparing the nature of water for the generation of living beings. Therefore, from this there is sufficient proof for the inquiries of certain men that the Holy Spirit is not wanting in the creative power.” (The Fathers of the Church: Exegetic Homilies, pp 30-31)

St. Basil turns to philology to help understand the imagery of the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters – he is told that in the Syrian language the words imply by this hovering over the waters a image more that of a mother bird nesting on her eggs to warm them and to bring them to birth. The Holy Spirit is seen as in some manner vivifying the inanimate waters so that they creatively bring forth life. God is able from inanimate matter to bring forth life.

Blessing Water: A Passage into the Kingdom ON JANUARY 10, 2016 BY FR. TED

Philip found Nathanael, and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” (John 1:45)
Jesus and Moses

_Then Jesus said to them, “These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures..._ (Luke 24:44-45)

And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:27)

One of the clear claims of the Gospels is that Moses in composing the Torah was writing about Jesus the Christ. Whatever insight Moses was given prophetically about the Messiah, no matter how little he might have understood it, he was preparing the people of God to recognize the Messiah when He appeared on earth.

_Jesus said: “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me.” (John 5:46)_

The notion that the Old Testament, the Jewish Scriptures, are really a foreshadowing of the reality of the Messiah, is well established in the New Testament as well as in the Patristic writers through the centuries. That one could search the Old Testament to find evidence that Jesus is the Christ, was how early Christians tried to convince their fellow Jews to believe in Jesus.

_These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so._ (Acts 17:11)

The early Christians saw throughout the words of the Scriptures and in the divine actions recorded there glimpses of the Christ. Nearly every action in the life of Christ was seen as foreshadowed in an event written about in the Old Testament. Thus the baptism of Christ described by all 4 evangelists (Mark 1:9-11; Matthew 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34) was understood to be foreshadowed in events of the Old Testament involving water. So Roman Catholic scholar Jean Danielou writes about the notion of typology and how events of the Old Testament foreshadowed, or were types of the baptism of Christ:

_“In all three cases a Divine judgement must strike a sinful world, sinners at the time of the Flood, Egyptians at the Exodus and the inhabitants of Jericho: in all three cases only those who have passed through water and are assembled in a dwelling-place will escape the judgement: in all three cases a man is selected by God to be the instrument of salvation. The three essential components of typology, the sacramental, the eschatological, the Christological are here united. They prefigure that salvation which will be finally secured when sinful humanity, secure in the ark of the Church under the leadership of Jesus Christ, will escape the coming judgement.” (From Shadows to Reality, p 286)
Every major event in the life of Christ was done for our salvation. We better understand how these events in Christ’s life (many which are celebrated as Feast days in the Orthodox Church) are saving for us, when we fully understand the events in the Old Testament that foreshadowed them. Noah’s ark at the time of the flood, the Israelite crossing the Red Sea during the Exodus, and the Israelite crossing of Jordan before taking the city of Jericho are all clear stories about God’s saving actions with His people. Whatever truth they tell us about history, their real significance is comprehended only in how they reveal Christ’s life to us. Jesus is the person in whom our salvation is accomplished. This is how Moses and the prophets and the Psalms were written about Jesus.