"That by His Passion
He May Purify the Water"

Ignatius of Antioch and the
Beginning of Mark’s Gospel

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Ignatius Ephesians 18.2:

ὁ γὰρ θεὸς ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦς ὁ Χριστὸς ἐκυφορήθη ὑπὸ Μαρίας κατ’ οἰκονομίαν θεοῦ, ἐκ σπέρματος μὲν Δαυίδ πνεύματος δὲ ἁγίου· ὅς ἐγεννήθη καὶ ἐβαπτίσθη ἵνα τῷ πάθει τὸ ὕδωρ καθαρίσῃ.

For our God, Jesus the Christ, was carried in the womb by Mary according to God’s plan, the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit, born and baptized so that by his passion he might purify the water.¹

A basic question emerges in any consideration of the opening scene of Mark’s gospel (Mark 1:1–13), the appearance of John the Baptist in the Jordan wilderness and the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan river: why does Jesus, manifestly messiah the Son of God (Mark 1:1), have to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins (1:5)? From almost any traditional theological perspective, Jesus is without sin.² And from a narrative perspective—considering Mark not merely as a collector of traditions but as a truly creative author—why would Mark choose to begin his gospel with such a potentially embarrassing scene? He might just as easily, for example, have begun his story with a poetic prologue as we have in John or a version of the birth narrative as we have in the other two synoptic gospels (Matthew 1–2; Luke 1–2). Mark could also have begun his gospel with verse 14: “Now after John was arrested . . .” Even from a historical perspective it is hard to determine why the early Christian community would have chosen to include a story, despite John the Baptist’s protests within the story (1:7–8), that places Jesus in a position of being baptized by John and therefore portrayed as a disciple of John. So on a theological, narrative, or even historical understanding, the opening baptismal scene of Mark’s gospel does not make much sense.

2. See, e.g., Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Orations 3.11.
Modern commentaries on Mark provide a range of suggestions to explain this apparent dilemma. Augustine Stock cites Morna Hooker to the effect that the acceptance by Jesus of the baptism by John is a necessary link between John and Jesus and an acknowledgement of John’s preparatory role. Apparently combining theological, narrative and historical considerations, Stock argues that it is essential to have Jesus join John’s eschatological movement because it represents a break with Israel’s past disobedience and prepares for the advent of God’s kingdom. Offering a historical explanation, Ben Witherington follows many commentators by declaring that John figured prominently in Jesus’ life prior to his independent public ministry and that Jesus’ historical public ministry grew out of the public ministry of John. A comprehensive commentary by Joel Marcus discusses the early Christian embarrassment over the implication of Jesus’ sinfulness in this scene coupled with his subordination to John the Baptist. Making no attempt at explanation, Marcus quickly switches to a detailed discussion of Jesus’ baptismal vision. Mark Edwards, on the other hand, moves to explain the inconsistency by suggesting an original Hebrew or Aramaic narrative at 1:9. Edwards then appears to read the account of Jesus’ baptism by John as a straightforward literal and factual description of what actually happened. Finally, an expanded theological explanation of the scene is offered by C. E. B. Cranfield in his Cambridge Greek Testament commentary:

Jesus’ submission to John’s baptism of repentance was his mature self-dedication to his mission of self-identification with sinners which in due course would involve the Cross. In his baptism he became for men’s sake and in their place ‘the one great Sinner who repents’ — to use Barth’s daring phrase . . . it is by no means unlikely that already at the Jordan he was aware that his baptism by John foreshadowed another baptism, more bitter, without which his mission could not be accomplished.

All of the commentaries above, and others that could be cited, view Mark’s account of the baptism of Jesus by John as a potentially troublesome feature of the gospel. Yet it may well be that Ignatius of Antioch’s citation of an early Christian creed in Eph. 18.2 provides us with an ancient liturgical tradition of

3. Stock, *The Method and Message of Mark*, 52. Yet essential questions, narrative or historical, such as why Christ himself would have to be baptized into John’s movement or why Christ would need forgiveness of sins remain unaddressed in what otherwise is a valuable discussion of this part of the gospel.
baptism that helps us to explain why Mark begins his gospel with the awkward inconsistency of Jesus being baptized by John.

We should begin with an analysis of the creedal and liturgical quality of Ignatius’ reference at Eph. 18.2:

For our God, Jesus the Christ, was carried in the womb by Mary according to God’s plan, the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit, born and baptized so that by his passion he might purify the water.

As William Schoedel indicates, the passage here reflects the conception, birth, and passion of Jesus as the special mark of Ignatius’ incarnational theology. What one notices, however, is that the reference here is not just to the conception, birth, and passion (πάθος), but also to baptism as an integral part of the quoted formula. And in his citations of other creedal material (e.g., Smyrn. 1.1), Ignatius includes the emphatic “truly” (ἀληθῶς) when he refers to Jesus’ baptism, an emphasis not included here. So also in Ephesians 19 when Ignatius alludes to certain mysteries, baptism is not singled out. Baptism then is not one of the primary topics found in Ignatius’ authentic letters. So its abrupt appearance in Eph. 18.2 might well signal that it is part of an earlier creedal or liturgical tradition being quoted by the bishop of Antioch. So how might the content of such an early creedal tradition help us to understand the opening of Mark’s gospel?

No modern commentaries that I am aware of suggest this early tradition of “so that he might purify the water” as a reason, if not the reason, for the baptism of Jesus in Mark’s gospel. Scholars have long noted that the undeniable narrative focus of Mark is the passion. And of course the connection of baptism with the passion of Jesus and early Christian martyrs is made within the narrative of Mark itself at 10:38–39. So it makes sense that the opening scene of Mark reflects a liturgical understanding of baptism connected to the passion of Jesus. It is moreover highly likely that the story presented here at the outset of the gospel, Jesus coming up out of the water (1:10), directly reflects the liturgical practice of the Markan house churches.

10. See, e.g., Ign. Smyrn. 1.1.
11. Schoedel, Ignatius, 84, refers to 18.2 as “quasi-creedal material.” He suggests that Ignatius’ unique opening reference at 18.2 (“Jesus the Christ”) may well signal that such an ancient creedal tradition reflected a sensitivity to “Christ” as a title rather than a second name. And there are other qualities in this text that help us to confirm this hypothesis. The final clause of this verse, a ἵνα (“so that”) purpose clause (“so that he might purify the water”) appears nowhere else in Ignatius’ writing. It is plausible to assume, therefore, that Ignatius is quoting an earlier tradition.
12. As early as Kähler, The So-Called Historical Jesus, 80.
13. As numerous scholars have pointed out, there are many direct references to the passion narrative in the opening baptismal scene. Examples would include the depiction of John as Elijah (1:6) and the call to Elijah at the cross (15:35–36), as well as the “tearing” of the heavens at the baptism of Jesus (1:10) and the “tearing” of the Temple curtain (15:38).
From the standpoint of a liturgical practice that must have emerged prior to the writing of Mark and even Paul’s earliest letters, it may well be that Christians connected the ritual power of baptism to the apocalyptic defeat of demonic forces, the immersion ritual itself being the place of battle between the powers of Chaos (water) and the divine. In Mark, Jesus rises from the waters of baptism (1:10) in order to immediately engage the forces of Satan (Chaos) in the wilderness (1:13). It is only after this confrontation that Jesus begins his ministry in the gospel, often confronting demons, watery Chaos, and death and defeating them all (1:23; 4:35–41; 5:41; 7:5; 9:17). So from the beginning of the gospel to its end, the cosmic struggle between divine power and Chaos, inaugurated in the baptism, has been joined. And surely this is also the essential idea being expressed in the liturgical tradition cited by Ignatius: “that by his passion he might purify the water.” The liturgical tradition cited by Ignatius signals an apocalyptic victory by the death of Christ over the forces of Chaos.

The idea that the liturgical ritual of baptism was part of a greater apocalyptic drama that involved the battle between the forces of Chaos—water, demons, and death—and the powerful Spirit of God is prevalent across the early Christian spectrum of literature, both heterodox and orthodox. A few examples must suffice here. At the end of the second century ce, Tertullian read both the Old Testament and New Testament typologically. Christ was now part of the story of the Exodus and wilderness wandering while also being the “rock” of Horeb (Exod 17:6) from which the water, now Christian baptismal water, flows. Having himself been baptized, Christ was now the baptismal water used in the church, filled with power for the apocalyptic battle that lies ahead both in the gospel narrative and in the church of Tertullian’s day. Tertullian goes on to assert that the power of the baptismal font in the church is established through the passion and resurrection of Christ, no doubt in Tertullian’s mind the powerful means with which to engage in the cosmological struggle against demonic forces. Elsewhere, Tertullian even hints at what I think is a sound

14. Paul of course makes numerous references to both baptism (e.g., Rom 6:3; Gal 3:27–28) and the Lord’s supper (e.g., 1 Cor 11:17–34), and expects his audience to be familiar with the rites.
15. Tertullian writes: “This is the water which flowed continuously down for the people from the nearby rock; for if Christ is the rock without doubt we see baptism blest by the water in Christ. How powerful is the gift of the water, in the sight of God and his Christ for the confirmation of baptism. Christ is never without water if He is Himself baptized in water. He inaugurates in water the first rudimentary displays of His power” (De Baptismo 9). Translations from the Latin and emphases are my own.
16. “And thus it was with this baptism of John that his disciples used to baptize as ministers, the baptism with which John before had baptized as forerunner. Let none think it was with some other baptism because no other exists, except that [baptism] of Christ subsequently; which at that time, of course, could not be given by His disciples, inasmuch as the glory of the Lord had not yet been fully attained, nor the efficacy of the font established through the passion and the resurrection; because neither can our death be defeated except by the Lord’s passion, nor our life be restored without his resurrection” (De Baptismo 11).
reading of Mark’s opening scene as Jesus’ baptism into his own death, the entire subsequent Markan narrative being the inevitable dramatic denouement of that beginning apocalyptic struggle.17

Ironically perhaps, this interpretation of Jesus’ baptism in the Markan narrative as the ritual enactment of his own death might well be supported by what the second century Gnostics, quoted here in the Gospel of Philip, were arguing against: namely, the incarnational implications of the orthodox insistence on the reality of the passion and death of Christ enacted in baptism. For the orthodox apparently, the water of baptism really is Chaos and death and, one might surmise, the victory over death, rising from the water, was a victory for creation itself. This understanding of the water is precisely what the Gospel of Philip appears to fear:

By perfecting the water of baptism, Jesus emptied it of death. Thus we do go down into the water, but we do not go down into death, in order that we may not be poured out into the spirit of the world. When that spirit blows, it brings the winter. When the Holy Spirit breathes, the summer comes. (77) 18

Another gnostic text, the Paraphrase of Shem, uses graphic terms to depict the cosmological struggle behind the scenes of the baptism of the redeemer (Jesus). Whirlpools and flames rise up against the redeemer as he descends into the water, but he emerges victorious, and thus frees the spirit imprisoned in creation by the winds and the demons and the stars:

Then I shall come from the demon down to the water. And whirlpools of water and flames of fire will rise up against me. Then I shall come up from the water having put on the light of faith and the unquenchable fire in order that through my help the power of the Spirit may cross she who has been cast into the world by the winds and the demons and the stars. (32) 19

As Schoedel intimates in his commentary on Ignatius, the idea that the water was purified by Christ’s baptism—itself an enactment of the passion—is surely linked to the more ancient Near Eastern mythology of the defeat of the dragon of the deep.20

It is the important work of Jon Levenson in interpreting the Genesis creation narrative utilizing comparative material from ancient Jewish and Near Eastern mythology that places the mythology of the struggle of God against watery

17. “For, on Christ’s being baptized, that is, upon his sanctification of the waters by His own baptism . . .” (Adversus Judaeos 14).
18. Translations of Coptic Gnostic texts are slightly altered from James M. Robinson, The Nag Hammadi Library in English.
19. See also Testimony of Truth 30: “And John bore witness to the descent of Jesus. For it is he who saw the power which came down upon the Jordan River; for he knew that the dominion of carnal procreation had come to an end.”
20. Schoedel, Ignatius, 84; see also Odes of Solomon 22.5.
Chaos into its proper liturgical and ritual context. Ultimately, Levenson argues, it is the defining of ritual order within the Temple cult in ancient Judaism that marks out the order of creation amidst the constant assault of Chaos. Ritual action literally sustains the order of the cosmos. Such a role for ritual action in ancient cultic practice increases the likelihood the creedal summaries like those found at Ignatius Eph. 18.2 and depictions of ritual action like the opening baptismal scene in Mark share the cultic context of the early Christian communities, a context within which the crucified and risen Christ becomes the center of ritual order and perforce the antagonist to the forces of Chaos.

Further, Levenson argues that what is depicted in descriptions of the ancient Temple cult is the constant possibility, a cosmic threat, of a return to Chaos from the creation established by ritual action. Most important for my purpose here, however, is to note Levenson’s convincing argument that God’s sovereignty over Chaos in ancient Judaism was a liturgical reality, realized and enacted in the cultic system of the Jerusalem Temple on Mount Zion. With the performance of the cult, Zion becomes the phenomenological cosmic mountain. Creation proceeds from Zion, and Zion becomes the junction and conduit between heaven, earth, and hell. In the cult, moreover, primordial mythical time is present as opposed to what we might describe as time or temporality. The cosmic mountain is Eden, the order of creation itself, un tarnished by time, surrounded yet unaffected by threats of Chaos.

The two major seven day liturgical festivals, Tabernacles in the fall and Passover in the spring, also fit within this description of the cosmic mountain. Both celebrated the new year and the enthronement of God in battle tested victory over Chaos. In particular, the spring celebration of Passover celebrated the cosmogonic victory over watery Chaos (the Red Sea is pushed back just as in Genesis the chaotic waters at creation are pushed back) followed by the salvific appearance of dry land upon which the carefully ordered sanctuary was built. This sanctuary, with its intended cultic practice, seals and continues in that practice the victory of God in establishing the ordered creation (dry land) over Chaos (waters).

Early Christian texts depicting the baptism of Jesus and alluding to Christian baptism in general continued to depict this myth of the struggle of God against Chaos. The myth was enacted in the baptismal ritual wherein Christ literally (the body of Christ) became the embodiment of the struggle of divine order against the cosmic forces of Chaos. The water of baptism was death and Chaos—the passion of Christ—and the resurrection from the water was the establishment of divine order manifest in the sanctuary ritually enacted in the Lord’s supper (the body of Christ). This meal was the ritual space that manifested the proper order.
of creation itself. This ancient Christian understanding finds its most classic expression four centuries later in the description of bishop Cyril of Jerusalem:

According to Job, there was in the waters the dragon that drew up the Jordan into his mouth. Since, therefore, it was necessary to break the head of the dragon into pieces, he [Christ] went down and bound the strong one in the waters, that we might receive power to tread upon serpents and scorpions. The beast was great and terrible. No fishing-vessel was able to carry one scale of his tail: destruction ran before him, ravaging all that met him.

In the commentary on Ignatius’ letter to the Ephesians, Schoedel points out that the crushing of the head of the dragon of the deep still figured in the cultic rites of the ancient Syrian church for the blessing of the water or the benediction of the baptismal font. Moreover in the ancient Byzantine rite of water blessing, there is mention of “the opposing powers.” The exorcistic function of the water blessing rite is clear and the link with Christ’s baptism in the Jordan is explicit. Thus the tradition found in Ignatius (“so that he might purify the water”) most likely does reflect cultic practice and understanding of the place wherein divine power defeats Chaos. It is therefore almost certain that this understanding of ancient Christian baptismal practice undergirds the depiction of Jesus’ baptism at the opening of Mark. Jesus takes on the forces of Chaos and death in ritual action and so sets the stage for the dramatic confrontation with, and victory over, the forces of Chaos and death in the narrative that follows.

There was therefore a continuing tradition informed through ancient Jewish cultic practice and early Christian cultic practice that depicted a cosmological battle for the order of creation between the forces of God and Chaos. And so it stands to reason that both Mark and Ignatius would be influenced by such traditions. Jesus purifies the water; Jesus rises from the water; ritual practice enacts the story.

This consideration of the ritual power of baptism in the context of early Christian apocalyptic thought and practice points to a much more satisfying answer to our original question concerning the opening of Mark’s gospel: why does Jesus have to undergo baptism by John? Early Christians enacted their baptismal liturgy as an enactment of divine power over Chaos. They apocalyptically understood Christ’s passion as the final struggle with Chaos before the victory of Christ in resurrection. Coming forth from the midst of the water

22. The correlation between this Christian self-definition and the creation of the gospel narrative is clear. Paul declares that an ethical violation of the sacred space of the meal is the reason that some in Corinth have become sick and died (1 Cor 11:30). In Mark, Jesus, having risen from baptism, attends to the order of nature (Mark 4:35–41; 6:48) as well as sickness and disease throughout the gospel.
and death was life and creation, cosmic struggle and triumph enacted in cultic practice. The water was made pure. Chaos was defeated. In the Gospel of Mark the ritual baptism of Jesus, the defeat of Chaos and the triumph of order, encapsulates and gives meaning to the narrative that follows. Jesus in the narrative of Mark is the resurrected Christ who conquers, because he has already conquered in the opening baptismal scene, the forces of death and Chaos.

Works Cited


