

Lucis Mysteriorum: Ignatius of Antioch on the Lord's Baptism

GREGORY VALL
Ave Maria University
Ave Maria, Florida

THOUGH Ignatius of Antioch (died c. A.D. 113) never uses an expression such as “the Christ Event,” it is clear that he views the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery as demarcating a single event within the divine economy. Indeed it is the culminating and definitive event, the event that somehow subsumes the whole, such that the entire redemptive plan of God can be described as “the economy concerning the new man Jesus Christ” (*Ephesians* 20:1).¹ Ignatius identifies Jesus Christ as “he who was with the Father before the ages and appeared at the end” (*Magnesian* 6:1). This remarkably compact formulation accomplishes three things simultaneously. First, while it distinguishes between the domains of *theologia* (that which eternally “was”) and *oikonomia* (that which *has happened* temporally), it places these alongside each other in such a way as to indicate their proper relation and the bond that unites them: he who is eternally with the Father is he who has appeared in time. Second, though only one event in the entire economy is mentioned in this statement, the essential struc-

¹ Here and in *Ephesians* 18:2 Ignatius uses the term *οἰκονομία* in what was already becoming its technical theological sense, that is, to designate the great “plan” or “arrangement” by which God dispenses graces to his creatures (cf. Eph 1:10; 3:9). The translations of passages from Ignatius’ letters throughout this article are my own and are based on the Greek text as presented in Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). All translations of biblical texts are also my own. I adopt the convention of italicizing the titles of Ignatius’ letters (and their abbreviations) and not italicizing the names of biblical books. This helps distinguish between Pauline and Ignatian letters that have the same title (for example, *Ephesians* and *Ephesians* respectively).

ture of the economy and the place of that one event within the whole are indicated. The economy has a teleological structure, and the appearing of the Son comes “at the end” (ἐν τέλει). Naturally, this is not strictly or merely a matter of chronology. It indicates that the Christ Event is the goal and point of perfection toward which the whole economy is oriented. Third, the specific nature and purpose of the economy is indicated: it is essentially a matter of the temporal *manifestation* of that which is eternal and invisible. Thus the entire Christ Event is summed up by saying that “he appeared” (ἐφάνη). This is spelled out explicitly later in the same letter. The “one God” has “manifested himself [φανερῶσας ἑαυτὸν] through Jesus Christ his Son” (*Magn.* 8:2; cf. *Eph.* 19:3).

Ignatius tells the Philadelphians that the gospel consists of three pillars: “the *advent* of the Savior . . . , his *passion*, and the *resurrection*” (*Philadelphians* 9:2). Similarly, he wants the Magnesians “to be fully convinced of the *birth* and the *passion* and the *resurrection*” of Christ (*Magn.* 11:1). This three-fold schema appears to be basic for Ignatius, but he can elaborate it in a variety of ways to suit his purposes. In one text, the reference to the Incarnation includes explicit mention of both the conception and the birth of Christ as distinct moments (*Eph.* 18:2). In another, the passion is broken down into three moments: persecution, crucifixion, and death (*Trallians* 9:1). In anti-Docetic contexts there are references to Christ’s eating and drinking, whether prior to his death (*ibid.*) or after his resurrection (*Smyrnaeans* 3:3). Specific events in the life of Christ occurring between his birth and his death are, however, mentioned only rarely. Despite Ignatius’s patent familiarity with the Synoptic tradition (in its Matthean form), we hear nothing of Jesus’ miracles, exorcisms, or controversies with the Jewish leadership. In fact, apart from a glancing reference to the anointing at Bethany (*Eph.* 17:1), the only event between the nativity and the passion that merits mention in Ignatius’s letters is the Lord’s baptism in the Jordan by John, which is twice included within creedal formulations (*Eph.* 18:2; *Smyr.* 1:1).

After a brief look at the way the Lord’s baptism is presented in the Gospels, the body of this essay will be devoted to a thorough theological exegesis of these two Ignatian passages. The primary aim of this study is to elucidate two important aspects of the divine economy: the interrelation of the distinct moments that comprise the Christ Event, and the relationship between the Christ Event and the events that precede and follow it in the temporal unfolding of the divine economy. With regard to the first aspect, the baptism of the Lord can be viewed as a kind of hinge between the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery, helping us to grasp the soteriological unity of the life of Christ. With regard to the

second aspect, the baptism of the Lord is suggestive of how the Christ Event is connected to the creation of the world, God's covenant with Israel, and the sacramental life of the Church. Pope John Paul II counted the Lord's baptism in the Jordan among the *lucis mysteria* because of its capacity to illuminate "the total mystery of Christ" (*totum Christi mysterium*).² More recently Pope Benedict XVI, drawing on both modern biblical scholarship and ancient exegetical and liturgical traditions, has suggested some of the links between the baptism in the Jordan and the broader economy of redemption.³ For Ignatius of Antioch the Christian life is fundamentally a matter of *χριστομαθία*, or "learning Christ" (*Phld.* 8:2; cf. *Eph* 4:20), that is, of entering into the mystery of Christ through a lifelong intellectual and moral process of personal discipleship. He places the Lord's baptism among the principal *mysteria vitae Iesu* in such a way as to suggest its mystagogical function, that is, its capacity to lead us into *the* mystery of Christ.⁴

From the Gospels to Ignatius' Letters

Aspects of the mystagogical capacity of the baptism in the Jordan are hinted at already in the New Testament.⁵ First, it is an event in which all three persons of the Trinity are manifestly involved and in which something of the Trinitarian mystery is disclosed. At the Jordan God calls Jesus "my beloved Son," thus revealing himself as Father, while the Spirit descends from the Father and comes to rest upon the Son. Second, the Synoptic narratives of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan make various allusions to the Old Testament. The Father's voice from heaven and the hovering of the Spirit in the form of a dove over Jesus and over the waters of the Jordan may evoke the creation of the world as narrated in Genesis 1:1–3.⁶ There may also be an allusion to the Flood here, especially if Mark's statement that Jesus saw "the Spirit coming down to [ἐλς] him like a dove" (*Mk* 1:10) is

² John Paul II, apostolic letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (October 16, 2002), §21.

³ Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 9–24.

⁴ On the relationship between the mysteries of the life of Christ (plural) and the mystery of Christ (singular), see Christian Schütz, O.S.B., "The Mysteries of the Life of Christ as a Prism of Faith," *Communio* 29 (2002): 28–38.

⁵ For an exhaustive historical-critical study of the presentation of Jesus' baptism in the Synoptic Gospels, see Fritzleo Lentzen-Deis, *Die Taufe Jesu nach den Synoptikern: Literarkritische und gattungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, Frankfurter Theologische Studien 4 (Frankfurt: Josef Knecht, 1970).

⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 79.

meant to recall the dove that came “to Noah” and “into [εἰς] the ark” (Gen 8:9, LXX).⁷ If so, we should perhaps compare Jesus both to righteous Noah and to the ark itself, for these passed through the waters of death in order to bring the human race to a kind of rebirth or new creation.⁸ The close narrative conjunction (especially strong in Mark) between the Lord’s baptism by John and his forty-day testing in the wilderness may hint that in these events Jesus in some sense recapitulates the founding events of Israel’s covenant with Yahweh: the crossing of the sea, the forty-year testing in the wilderness, and the crossing of the Jordan. The words spoken by the Father at the Jordan, which vary slightly in each of the Synoptic Gospels, contain clear Old Testament echoes that indicate that Jesus is the Servant of Yahweh and the Davidic Messiah.⁹ The brief allusion to Jesus’ baptism as God’s “anointing” of him “in the Holy Spirit and power” in Acts 10:38 points in a similar direction. The connection between Israel’s historical covenant and the baptism in the Jordan is thematized in Matthew 3:15, where the Lord’s words to John the Baptist—“Allow it for now, for it is fitting for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness”—serve to draw this event into Matthew’s programmatic theology of Old Testament fulfillment.¹⁰ Third, two dominical logia in which Jesus refers to his approaching passion as a “baptism” that he must undergo (Lk 12:50; Mk 10:38–39) intimate a close connection between his baptism in the Jordan and the Paschal Mystery. Finally, the words of the Baptist—“I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit” (Mk 1:8)—indicate the economic or salvation-historical relationship between John’s baptism on the one hand and Christian sacramental baptism and the grace of the new covenant on the other hand.¹¹ Jesus’ own submission to John’s ritual seems to transform it and in some manner prepares for or makes possible

⁷ Craig S. Keener considers it “likely” that “an allusion to Noah’s dove as harbinger of new creation” is present in the tradition that lies behind both John 1:32 and the Synoptics (*The Gospel of John: A Commentary* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003], 1:460). R. T. France notes that the Flood is a type of (sacramental) baptism in 1 Peter 3:20–21, but he regards any link between Noah’s dove and the dove-like Spirit of Mark 1:10 to be “obscure” (*Gospel of Mark*, 79).

⁸ Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XV, 26.

⁹ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 106.

¹⁰ See Mt 1:22–23; 2:5–6, 15, 17–18, 23; 3:3; 4:14–16; 5:17; 8:17; 11:13–14; 12:17–21, 40; 13:14–15, 35; 15:7–9; 21:4–5, 13, 16, 42; 22:43–44; 23:39; 24:30; 26:31, 64; 27:9–10, 46. Of particular relevance is 5:17–20, which (like 3:15) combines the notions of “fulfillment” and “righteousness.” Jesus’ fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets enables his disciples to live a life of righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.

¹¹ See also Mt 3:11; Lk 3:16; Jn 1:26–27, 33; 3:5; Acts 1:5; 11:16; 19:1–7.

Christian baptism. In sum, the baptism in the Jordan is a Trinitarian mystery that harkens back to the creation of the world, the Flood, and Yahweh's covenant with Israel, while it anticipates the death and resurrection of the Lord and sacramental baptism.

From early on, the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan gave rise to theological questions. Why did Jesus undergo a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk 1:4)? Had *he* sinned? Did his submission to John's ritual indicate the latter's superiority over him? Do the descent of the Holy Spirit and the Father's proclamation—"You are my beloved Son"—imply that Jesus was previously unaware of his divine Sonship, or even that he was not in fact the Son of God or Spirit-filled prior to this event? Further, it is evident that confusion over the relationship between John's ministry of baptism and Christian baptism continued for decades after the resurrection (Acts 19:1–7; Jn 3:22–30). The Gospel narratives were composed in such a way as to guide their readers toward a correct understanding of these issues. In Matthew, for example, the brief conversation between John and Jesus (3:14–15) indicates that the former was *not* superior to the latter and that Jesus was baptized *not* because he was a sinner but in order to fulfill the requirements of righteousness on Israel's behalf. Matthew's slight alteration of the Father's proclamation—from "*You* are my beloved Son" (Mk 1:11; Lk 3:22) to "*This* is my beloved Son" (Mt 3:17)—suggests that these words were not spoken for Jesus' benefit but for ours. Luke, for his part, notes that the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary at the Annunciation such that the child conceived in her womb was already "Son of God" (Lk 1:35). He also virtually removes John from the scene of Jesus' baptism (3:20–21). Finally, John the Evangelist explains that Jesus Christ is the Incarnation of God's co-eternal Logos (Jn 1:1–2, 14), sharply distinguishes between Jesus and the Baptist, and declines to narrate Jesus' baptism as such. Clearly the evangelists handled the whole affair with kid gloves.

It is, however, a crude reductionism to explain the Gospels' treatment of Jesus' baptism in terms of "embarrassment" and "damage control," as John Meier does.¹² The evangelists approached the Lord's baptism cautiously because of its potential for misinterpretation, but they also recognized its capacity to illuminate the mystery of Christ. Even the Fourth Gospel makes positive allusions to it (Jn 1:29–34). It is similarly unjustified to suppose, as Kilian McDonnell does, that Ignatius of Antioch found Jesus' baptism to be "problematic" and "a source of embarrassment" merely on the grounds that he alludes to Matthew 3:15 in one of his two references

¹² Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 2:101–3.

to this event (*Smyr.* 1:1) and hints at a relation to sacramental baptism in the other (*Eph.* 18:2).¹³ Does one explain only in order to explain away? Ignatius was under no compulsion to include the baptism in his creedal formulations (most of which lack any reference to it), and it is likely that he had some positive reason to mention it when he chose to do so.¹⁴ It is true that Docetic Gnostics beginning at least with Cerinthus (c. A.D. 100) interpreted the baptism of Jesus in a radically adoptionistic manner that cut at the very heart of the gospel,¹⁵ and it is probable that Ignatius is consciously guarding his readers from some such interpretation.¹⁶ But, as I will attempt to demonstrate, he also glimpsed theological riches in the Lord's baptism. After all, Ignatius polemicizes also against the Docetic interpretation of the passion (*Tial.* 10:1; *Smyr.* 2:1), and no one supposes that he viewed the passion as "problematic" or "a source of embarrassment"!

Before examining the two passages in which Ignatius mentions the baptism of the Lord, it will be helpful to attend to one further prolegomenon. Ignatius has acquired—somewhat undeservedly, in my opinion—the reputation of being an unsystematic thinker and of writing in a rambling and "turbulent" style.¹⁷ The point is arguable with respect to the overall character of his letters, but for present purposes we need merely point out that such a preconception is bound to mislead when it comes to those passages that contain his creedal formulations. And this is

¹³ Kilian McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 19. McDonnell's treatment of the New Testament evidence is insufficiently critical of Meier's dubious methodology. Michael D. Goulder also parrots this approach when he finds "increasing defensiveness" in the Gospel texts and "embarrassment" in Ignatius's two references to the Lord's baptism ("Ignatius' 'Docetists,'" *Vigiliae Christianae* 53 [1999]: 27).

¹⁴ According to Daniel Alain Bertrand, Ignatius was compelled to include two allusions to the baptism in the Jordan because he was citing traditional formulas; he was in fact entirely uninterested in—and did what he could to minimize the theological significance of—the Lord's baptism, which constitutes a "foreign body" in his argumentation (*Le baptême de Jésus: Histoire de l'exégèse aux deux premiers siècles*, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Biblischen Exegese* 14 [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1973], 26–32). The remainder of the present essay should serve to refute this thesis.

¹⁵ For Cerinthus's interpretation of Jesus' baptism, see Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.26.1; for that of the Valentinians, see 1.7.2 and 3.11.3; and for that of the Ophites, see 1.30.12–14.

¹⁶ Cf. Goulder, "Ignatius' 'Docetists,'" 26.

¹⁷ Cf. Cyril C. Richardson, trans. and ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 74. These alleged features are romanticized in P.-Th. Camelot, *Ignace d'Antioche, Polycarpe de Smyrne: Lettres, Martyre de Polycarpe: Texte Grec, introduction, traduction et notes*, 4th ed., *Sources Chrésiennes* 10 (Paris: Cerf, 1969), 16–18.

exactly what we are dealing with in the case of Ignatius's two references to the Lord's baptism. Ignatius's creedal formulations are carefully crafted and characterized by rhetorical symmetry. Typically he employs symmetry to emphasize both the divine and human origins of Jesus Christ. A good example is *Ephesians* 7:2, which I shall lay out schematically, following the Greek word order as far as possible.

- 1 There is one Healer,
- 2 fleshly and spiritual,
- 3 born and unborn,
- 4 in man God,
- 5 in death true life,
- 6 both from Mary and from God,
- 7 first passible and then impassible,
- 8 Jesus Christ our Lord.

This creedal formulation consists of eight phrases. The opening and closing phrases solemnly indicate who is spoken of and serve to frame six descriptive pairs (phrases 2–7). In each of these pairs the first element pertains to Christ's true humanity ("fleshly . . . born . . . in man . . . in death . . . from Mary . . . passible") while the second element pertains to his divinity ("spiritual . . . unborn . . . God . . . true life . . . from God . . . impassible"). Finally, this creedal formulation forms a chiasmus (a literary structure of inverted parallelism), such that phrase 1 is echoed by phrase 8, phrase 2 by phrase 7, phrase 3 by phrase 6, and phrase 4 by phrase 5. This example of manifest style and theological precision ought to alert us to similar features in *Smyrnaeans* 1 and *Ephesians* 18.

***Smyrnaeans* 1:1b–2**

Now let us consider the elaborate creedal formulation found in *Smyrnaeans* 1:1b–2. Having spent time with the Christians in Smyrna, Ignatius recognizes that they are "fully convinced" that Jesus Christ is

truly from the stock of David,
Son of God according to will and power,
truly born from a virgin,
baptized by John that all righteousness might be fulfilled by him,
truly, under Pontius Pilate and Herod the Tetrarch, nailed in the flesh
for us,

from whose fruit we are, from his divinely blessed passion,
 in order that he might raise a standard for the ages through
 his resurrection
 for his holy and faithful ones, whether among the Jews or among
 the gentiles,
 in one body of his Church.

Leaving aside for the moment the ecclesiological elements of this formulation, let us focus first on its Christological elements. Ignatius gives them in three pairs, introducing each pairing with the anti-Docetic adverb ἀληθῶς (“truly”). Simplified, they are as follows:

truly from the stock of David	(and)	Son of God
truly born from a virgin	(and)	baptized by John
truly nailed in the flesh . . . passion	(and)	resurrection

Once we recall that the Gospels associate the baptism in the Jordan with Jesus’ divine Sonship (Mt 3:17; Mk 1:11; Lk 3:22; Jn 1:34), and that the New Testament likewise associates the Resurrection with his divine Sonship (Acts 13:33; Rom 1:4), it is clear that once again Ignatius has used rhetorical symmetry to emphasize both Jesus’ humanity (“from David . . . from a virgin . . . nailed in the flesh”) and his divinity (“Son of God . . . baptized by John . . . Resurrection”). But this is not the whole story. Each of the three pairings potentially displays a *correlation* between its two items as well as a contrast. The first pairing contrasts Jesus’ human origins in the house of David with his divine Sonship; but since “Son of God” is also a title of the Davidic Messiah (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7; 89:27–28), the pairing may suggest a close correlation as well. Indeed, the fact that Ignatius qualifies the title “Son of God” with the phrase “according to will and power” suggests that he is thinking in economic rather than strictly theological terms here. The man Jesus is Son of God by virtue of an act of divine power that is part and parcel of the divine economy or “will” (θέλημα). But this affirmation need not be understood in an adoptionistic sense. In all likelihood the reference is precisely to the conception of Christ in his mother’s womb, when a concrete humanity derived “from the stock of David” was united to the Logos. If this interpretation is correct, the creedal formula of *Smyrnaeans* 1:1b–2 is very closely parallel to that of *Ephesians* 18:2, which likewise distinguishes between Christ’s conception and his birth. As we shall see, the latter text qualifies its reference to the conception of Christ with the phrases “according to the economy of God” (cf. “according to will and power”) and “from the seed of David” (cf. “from the stock of David”), while it

pairs off the birth of Christ with his baptism in the Jordan (just as *Smyrnaeans* 1:1b does).

The second pairing of *Smyrnaeans* 1:1b–2—“born from a virgin” and “baptized by John”—likewise suggests a close economic correlation between two events. The first of these phrases, following closely upon the reference to “the stock of David,” completes an allusion to the famous prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, which Matthew 1:23 explicitly indicates to have been fulfilled by the birth of Jesus Christ. As we have seen, Ignatius qualifies the second phrase—“baptized by John”—with an allusion to Matthew 3:15: “that all righteousness might be fulfilled by him.” This indicates the fulfillment of Old Testament law and prophecy in a more general or comprehensive sense. Ignatius’ formulation also sets up a suggestive parallelism between the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist as key role players in the unfolding drama of salvation. Both are situated at the threshold between the old and the new. Later authors of the patristic period will discern further points of correlation between Christ’s nativity and his baptism,¹⁸ but as Ignatius presents these events in *Smyrnaeans* 1:1b, the accent is on Christ’s fulfillment of the old covenant.

The third and final pairing of *Smyrnaeans* 1:1b–2—passion and Resurrection—is one found frequently in Ignatius’s letters, where it designates the two principal moments of what we would call the Paschal Mystery and suggests their close interconnection.¹⁹ Here Ignatius continues the strongly historical cast of his creedal formulation while he delicately transitions from Christological affirmations to ecclesiological and eschatological concerns. Having already mentioned David, Mary, and John, Ignatius now refers to Pontius Pilate and Herod the Tetrarch, thus grounding the story of salvation firmly in historical reality. The passion is the point at which the economy of redemption directly touches *us*—Christ endured the passion “for us,” so that “we” are its “fruit”—and through the Resurrection the Paschal Mystery and the whole historically particular economy opens out into a universal and eschatological dimension. The reference to Christ’s raising a “standard [σύσσημον] for the ages” alludes to a whole trajectory of prophecies from the book of Isaiah (5:26; 11:10; 49:22; 62:10).²⁰ According to these texts, Yahweh will raise

¹⁸ Cf. McDonnell, *Baptism of Jesus*, 103–6.

¹⁹ *Eph.* 20:1; *Magn.* 11:1; *Phld.* sal.; 9:2; *Smyr.* 7:2; 12:2; cf. *Phld.* 8:2.

²⁰ All four passages involve the Hebrew word סִימָן (“sign, battle standard”), which the Septuagint normally translates σύσσημον. This word is not used in the Septuagint of Isaiah 11:10, but it is found in the translations of that verse by Aquila and Symmachus (cf. Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament (including the Apocryphal Books)*

a standard for the gentile nations, summoning them to himself at Jerusalem. One of these passages identifies the standard as “the root of Jesse,” that is, the Davidic Messiah (11:10), while another notes that the ingathered gentiles will be charged with the duty of bringing along with them Yahweh’s scattered “sons and daughters,” that is, the children of Israel (49:22). The eschatological people of God will thus consist, as Ignatius perceptively notes, of Jews and gentiles. The “one body of his Church” takes up into itself, as it were, the two historical eras of redemption: the period of the old covenant, in which God sent his word to Israel; and the age of the new covenant, in which the gospel is proclaimed to all the nations. This is why Ignatius, like Paul (Rom 1:16; 3:29; 9:24; 1 Cor 1:23–24), mentions the Jews ahead of the gentiles.

It is his teleological view of the economy of redemption that enables Ignatius to grasp the unity of its temporal and transcendent dimensions. Formally the creedal affirmation of *Smyrnaeans* 1:1b–2 is concerned with the Christ Event, which Ignatius here presents as comprised of five moments: conception, birth, baptism, passion, and Resurrection. But through a series of carefully worded modifiers and biblical allusions Ignatius indicates that the Christ Event fulfills and takes up into itself God’s particular covenant with Israel while it opens out into a universal and eschatological reality: the Church of Jews and gentiles. This understanding of salvation is thoroughly biblical and, in particular, Matthean and Pauline. Anyone who supposes that Ignatius was not a skillful exegete of the Old Testament, that his understanding of redemption lacks a salvation-historical perspective, or that his eschatology was confined to the redemption of the individual and dominated by the “realized” dimension, ought to pause carefully over this passage.²¹

[Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987], 1323). Each of the other three passages (in the Septuagint) uses σύσσημον as well as some form of the verb αἴρω (“raise”), the same verb employed by Ignatius in *Smyrnaeans* 1:2. As recent scholars have noticed, the canonical book of Isaiah, which contains the work of several prophetic authors living centuries apart, achieves a certain literary and theological unity by means of such trajectories, which unfold Isaiah’s prophecies as they applied to Israel’s situation in subsequent generations (cf. Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, Old Testament Library [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001], 1–5). Ignatius’ skillful allusion suggests to me that he was not simply scouring the book of Isaiah for proof texts or cryptic passages that might be verbally referred to Christ but that he had a sense of the book as a whole and respected its literal meaning.

²¹ These criticisms are commonly leveled against Ignatius. According to William Schoedel, “Ignatius was obviously much less skillful than writers like the authors of Hebrews or *Barnabas* in finding [Old Testament] passages” to support his arguments (*Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985], 209). Hans Conzelmann maintains

For present purposes, let us note that in this very carefully constructed creedal affirmation Ignatius has chosen to include one and only one event situated chronologically between Christ's birth and his death: the baptism in the Jordan. This moment in the life of Christ may, then, in some sense mediate between his conception-and-birth on the one hand and his death-and-Resurrection on the other hand. As such, it may illuminate the relationship between Incarnation and Paschal Mystery and help us to grasp the unity of the Christ Event. Moreover, because John the Baptist is a threshold figure in the divine economy (Mt 11:13) and because Ignatius associates Jesus' baptism with "fulfillment" of the old covenant, it may even be that this *lucis mysterium* will shed light upon the relationship between "new things and old" (13:52).

Ephesians 18:2

Turning now to Ignatius's one other reference to the baptism of the Lord, we find yet another tightly woven creedal formulation.

For our God Jesus Christ
 was conceived by Mary according to the economy of God,
 from both the seed of David and the Holy Spirit;
 he was born *and baptized*,
 in order that by the passion he might cleanse the water. (*Eph.* 18:2)

This statement comprises most of the same elements that we saw in *Smyrnaeans* 1:1b–2, and in roughly the same order, except that it contains no reference to the Resurrection. In part, this is because Ignatius is concerned in this context with the mystery of the Cross in particular (cf. *Eph.* 18:1; 19:1). Once again he employs rhetorical symmetry, but just where we would expect to find a reference to the Resurrection, he mentions instead Christ's purification of the water. I shall defer for the moment the series of questions which this abrupt statement elicits (What water is meant? How has it become polluted? And how does Christ's passion effect its purification?). At this point it will suffice to note that

that "no salvation-historical perspective is apparent" in Ignatius's letters (*Gentiles—Jews—Christians: Polemics and Apologetics in the Greco-Roman Era*, trans. M. Eugene Boring [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992], 259). And Virginia Corwin holds that while Ignatius occasionally retains "the trappings of Jewish eschatology," he is "utterly certain that the matter is not an essential part of the Christian gospel" (*St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960], 173–74). All three criticisms are present (the first implicitly, the other two explicitly) on a single page in Sergio Zañartu, "Les concepts de vie et de mort chez Ignace d'Antioche," *Vigiliae Christianae* 33 (1979): 334 (cf. notes 69 and 73).

Ignatius here makes an oblique but undeniable allusion to sacramental baptism. Apparently he wishes to elucidate the relationship between this sacrament and certain events in the life of Christ, including the Lord's own baptism and his passion. A reference to the Resurrection might have disrupted the balance of his formulation and unnecessarily distracted from the point he is making.

In this passage Ignatius refers to four moments in the Christ Event: conception, birth, baptism, and passion. The cleansing of the waters is not presented as a fifth moment but as an effect of the passion. Jesus' conception receives a careful and fairly elaborate treatment, and once again Ignatius insists on both the human and divine origins of Christ. But our particular concern is with the very terse statement he makes about the birth, baptism, and passion, with its reference to the purification of the water and allusion to sacramental baptism.

We must note at the outset that Ignatius does *not* simply say that Christ cleansed the water by means of his baptism in the Jordan.²² Some later Church Fathers make that claim,²³ and Thomas Aquinas will hold that Christ instituted the sacrament of baptism when he himself was baptized.²⁴ Be that as it may, Ignatius ascribes no direct efficacy in this regard to the Lord's baptism. Instead, he subordinates it to the passion. The baptism in the Jordan, like the nativity, is *for the sake of* the passion, and it is by means of the latter that Christ cleanses the water. This is hardly surprising given the centrality of the Paschal Mystery throughout Ignatius's letters. Of course, Ignatius does draw our attention to the parallelism between the Lord's baptism and our own, and he wishes us to discern a close economic connection between the two. But whatever that connection may be, it is not one that bypasses the mystery of the Cross. For Ignatius, as for Paul, everything flows through the passion.

Ignatius says that Jesus Christ "was born and baptized *in order that* by his passion he might cleanse the water." It is relatively easy to appreciate the force of the word *ἵνα* ("in order that") with respect to Christ's birth. His nativity is in a very practical sense necessary to his passion and thus to his cleansing of the water. If he is not born, he cannot *do* the Father's will as man. It is less obvious how the same purpose clause applies to Christ's

²² Expecting Ignatius to say this, Kirsopp Lake offers a highly improbable translation by which τῷ πάθει (normally rendered "by the passion") would refer to Jesus "himself submitting" to John's rite (Kirsopp Lake, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers*, Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985], 1:193; cf. Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity*, 100, n. 12).

²³ McDonnell, *Baptism of Jesus*, 186, 197.

²⁴ *Summa theologiae* III, q. 66, a. 2.

baptism. Why is the latter necessary at all? By what sort of logic is Christ's baptism accomplished *for the sake of* his passion and his purification of the water? Perhaps the most straightforward and biblically defensible answer to this question comes through the simple recognition that the baptism in the Jordan inaugurates and empowers Christ's public ministry, a ministry which leads inexorably to Golgotha. If by means of his nativity the Son of God steps into the world of human action and historical causality, through his baptism he enters upon *public life*, so that what he does henceforth is done more fully in the sight of men and is in that sense more "on the record." This seems fitting for events that will be revelatory of the Father's universal redemptive will and that are to be proclaimed openly throughout the world and for all generations hence. Further, we might suppose that the descent of the Holy Spirit at the Jordan bestowed upon Christ's sacred humanity the particular charismata by which he would carry out his ministry of teaching, healing, and exorcism (cf. Acts 10:37–38). In short, Jesus Christ was baptized *in order that* he might carry out his public ministry, a ministry that culminates in the passion.

This answer is helpful as far as it goes but is not entirely satisfying. It begs the question why Christ's public ministry should begin with this particular gesture and why the Holy Spirit should descend in response to this particular action of Christ. And so we are led to consider the symbolic dimension of the event. Presumably John the Baptist, under the guidance of the Spirit of prophecy, chose a gesture that evoked key events in Yahweh's historical covenant with Israel (the crossing of the Red Sea and the crossing of the Jordan) while it also resembled the many ritual immersions required for "cleansing" by the priestly Torah.²⁵ And almost certainly John's ritual would have brought to the mind of the biblically literate Jew the story of Naaman, whose "baptism" in the Jordan—undertaken in obedience to a prophet—not only effected a cleansing from "leprosy" but signaled a profound conversion of heart and mind (2 Kings 5).²⁶ Coupled with John's proclamation of imminent judgment, immersion in the Jordan symbolized Israel's

²⁵ On the background to John's ritual, see Lentzen-Deis, *Die Taufe Jesu*, 59–76; Lars Hartman, "Baptism," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1:583–84.

²⁶ The New Testament's use of the verb βαπτίζειν to refer to quasi-ritualistic bodily immersion in the Jordan as a sign of repentance recalls the Old Testament use of the Hebrew verb טָבַל (which the Septuagint normally renders with a form of βάπτειν or βαπτίζειν) and its use in 2 Kings 5:14 in particular. This text says that Naaman "went down and dipped [וַיִּטְבַּל] (LXX ἐβαπτίσατο) in the Jordan seven times according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored, like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean." This is the climax of the narrative, after which Naaman acts with humility and confesses his knowledge of the God of Israel and his desire to serve him exclusively (cf. vv 15–17).

eschatological repentance from sin. The Jews who submitted to John's ritual, then, would be indicating their own repentance through a sort of symbolic recapitulation of Israel's historical covenant with Yahweh.

For biblical Israel, and second-temple Judaism in particular, repentance was fundamentally a communal and historical matter. It involved personal remorse and amendment of life, of course, but it was never a merely individual and private affair. In the great communal prayers of repentance composed during the post-exilic period, a righteous leader such as Ezra or Daniel speaks in solidarity with his sinful people, saying "*we* have sinned," and confesses the sins of Israel's past generations as well as those of the present generation (Ezra 9:9–15; Dan 9:3–19; Bar 1:15–3:8; Is 63:7–64:12). As John Meier notes, Jesus fulfills a similar role of leadership and solidarity with his sinful people when he submits to John's baptism.²⁷ Indeed, we would want to say that Jesus undergoes baptism not only in solidarity with Israel but with the whole human race and even on behalf of the entire creation. In any case, it is impossible to say how many of these biblical resonances would have occurred to Ignatius. At a minimum, his allusion to Matthew 3:15 (*Smyr.* 1:1b) suggests that relating Jesus' baptism to Israel's past would not have been foreign to his thinking.

We may safely make one further assumption. Since Ignatius views Jesus' life and mission as fundamentally a matter of obedience to the Father's will (*Magn.* 7:1; 8:2; 13:2; *Smyr.* 8:1), he would no doubt have viewed the baptism in the Jordan in those terms. This is important theologically because it unites the baptism with the passion at the level of Jesus' voluntary human action "for us." Ignatius subordinates the baptism to the Paschal Mystery, but this does not mean that the baptism is *merely* a prefigurement or visual aid while the passion alone is "the real thing." Whatever symbolic value Ignatius might or might not have recognized in Jesus' baptism, it seems likely that he would have viewed it first of all as an act of obedience to the Father and of love for man, an act having its own moral substance, so to speak. It has, to be sure, a type-antitype relationship to the Paschal Mystery, and its significance as type derives in large part from its symbolism: Christ's immersion in the Jordan anticipates his "immersion" in suffering (Lk 12:50; Mk 10:38), his solidarity with his sinful people, perhaps even his descent among the dead; and his reemergence from the water to receive the Father's proclamation and the anointing of the Spirit foreshadows the glorification of his humanity in the Resurrection. But it is crucial to view Christ's life as a unity and his saving action teleologically. His life and mission comprise a series of many acts of obedience and love that lead in

²⁷ Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 2:114–15. See also Martin Bieler, "The Mysteries of Jesus' Public Life: Stages on the Way to the Cross," *Communio* 29 (2002): 52–54.

a very definite direction and arrive at a "consummation" in his death. The act by which he lays down his life gathers up, as it were, all the "little" acts of obedience that precede and anticipate it and perfects them in an act of love εἰς τέλος, *in finem* (Jn 13:1), so that at the moment of death he can say τετέλεσται, *consummatum est* (19:30).

Lucis Misterium

The passion is the antitype of the baptism and the definitive act of salvation by virtue of its place within this teleological structure—a structure that is determined to some extent by the basic structure of human life as *vita usque ad mortem*—but the passion does not stand in splendid isolation as the only redemptive act. Its special soteriological efficacy does not place it in an extrinsic relation to the baptism or to any other event in Christ's life. Each of Christ's actions is characterized by obedience and love, and so each participates in the whole and, in a sense, contains the whole—though not as perfectly as the passion does. Of the events of Christ's life, which are far too numerous to record (Jn 21:25), the early Church preserved, and the evangelists narrated, a few that especially have the capacity to draw us into the mystery of the whole. These are events that indicate the direction of Christ's life, that show forth his revelation of the Father, that disclose the depth of his obedience and love. Among the events that fall between Christ's nativity and passion, the baptism in the Jordan arguably has this mystagogical capacity to an uncommon degree. It stands at a critical juncture in the life of Christ. As an act of divine humility and identification with sinners, it hearkens back to the Incarnation, disclosing the latter's character and purpose. As an act of filial obedience, it sets the Lord Jesus decisively upon the road that leads to the Cross and so has a clear intrinsic relationship to the passion. And it possesses a remarkable symbolic potency that reinforces its significance within the life of Christ while shedding light upon the whole mystery of Christ and even upon the whole economy of redemption. It is indeed a luminous mystery.

To fill out this sketch of the mystagogical significance of the Lord's baptism somewhat, we may now turn to the three questions elicited by Ignatius's reference to Christ's cleansing of the water in *Ephesians* 18:2: What water is meant? How has it become polluted? And how does the passion effect its purification? On one level these questions are easily answered. "The water" is the water of the whole world. It has become polluted by human sin.²⁸ And the Christ Event—which includes the

²⁸ According to many authors of the third and fourth centuries, the waters of the world were not only polluted by sin but infested by demons, who were vanquished when Christ descended into the Jordan (cf. Bertrand, *Le baptême de Jésus*, 31, n. 3),

Incarnation as foundation, the baptism as an integral element, and the Paschal Mystery as culminating moment—has a redemptive effect not only upon men's souls but upon the whole creation, such that the elements of the physical world may serve a sacramental role under the new covenant. At least something of this sort seems to be presupposed by Ignatius's elliptical statement: "He was born and baptized, in order that by the passion he might cleanse the water." But this interpretation hardly penetrates below the surface. We should make some attempt to unfold the deeper rationale by which an ancient Christian such as Ignatius might view the divine economy of creation and redemption in this way. And here we face a hermeneutical gap, for the "logic" that underlies Ignatius's statement is largely foreign to the modern mind. Thus William Schoedel speaks in this context of "the more or less magical idea that water was purified by Christ's baptism in the Jordan."²⁹ This smugly dismissive remark is characteristic of an approach that has no truck with metaphysical convictions. In what follows I will attempt to be a bit more empathetic.

Ignatius's statement presupposes the unity of creation and thus a kind of metaphysical solidarity among creatures. When man sins, his sin has an adverse effect on all creation, rendering it "defiled" before God. In the Incarnation the Son of God descends into his creation and unites it to himself in order to redeem and "cleanse" creation through the Paschal Mystery. Now, if we attend once more to the symbolism of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, we may view it not only as the middle term between Incarnation and Paschal Mystery but as a sort of epitome or "thumbnail sketch" of the entire Christ Event, which the New Testament sometimes presents as a mystery of descent-and-ascent (Rom 10:6–7; Eph 4:8–10; Phil 2:6–11; Jn 3:13–14, 31; 6:38, 50–51, 62), followed by the descent of the Spirit. In the Incarnation the Son of God descended from heaven *into* his creation—the *descensus de coelis* being, in a certain sense, completed in the *descensus ad inferos*—and when he had been exalted in his humanity through the Resurrection and Ascension, the Spirit descended upon the Church (Acts 2:32–34; Jn 6:62–63) to be the source of her sacramental life. And it is this schematic view of the Christ Event that draws our attention to similar contours in the Lord's baptism.³⁰ Christ's humble descent

but it is not clear that Ignatius is implying this much when he refers to Christ's "cleansing" the water.

²⁹ Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 85.

³⁰ "Jesus' descent into the river is at one and the same time solidarity with all who confess their guilt and dive into the waters of judgment and salvation, and—as solidarity—obedience to the voice of God which sounds forth from the prophet's voice, and thus obedience incarnated in history. Jesus' initiative attains immediately

into the waters of the Jordan (at a geographical point that is very nearly the lowest spot on the surface of the earth)³¹ recalls his Incarnation while it also anticipates his death for sinners and descent among the dead. Similarly, his ascent from the Jordan—which is immediately followed by the descent of the Spirit, anointing his humanity with power for the public ministry (Acts 10:37–38)—anticipates his Resurrection and Ascension, which make possible the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the Church. Moreover, the fact that the glorification of Christ's humanity constitutes the incipient redemption of all creation is reflected in the role now played by elements of the physical creation, such as water, in the new covenant's efficacious signs of God's grace. Thus Jesus' immersion in the *aqua Iordanis* purifies and sanctifies the waters of the whole world, not as an isolated event and certainly not by means of magic, but as an integral and revelatory moment within the broader mystery of redemption.

It should also be noted that Ignatius's view of the economy of redemption presupposes a hierarchical and teleological understanding of creation and implicitly identifies *man* as the creature in whom creation is summed up and reaches its telos. Not only is each creature ordered to its own end, but creation as a whole is ordered to a final end, an end which it cannot achieve apart from man. This end is the glory of God. The subhuman physical cosmos is not, of course, morally culpable for man's sin, but neither can it glorify God in the manner for which it was created as long as man remains alienated from the Creator.³² The biblical category of "uncleanness" or

to its fulfillment, for he 'rises up' out of the waters, and his act of 'coming up from beneath' is answered by the 'coming down from above' of the 'Spirit (of God)': here we see that Incarnation is the encounter, to the point of identification, of the Israel who has been made ready and the God of the covenant who descends to Israel." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 7, *Theology: The New Covenant* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 56.

³¹ The Jordan runs through the Rift Valley, a deep rut in the earth's surface that includes the Dead Sea basin and continues south to the Gulf of Aqabah. At nearly 1300 feet below sea level, the water surface of the Dead Sea is the lowest spot on Earth. The traditional (and likely) site of Christ's baptism is near the southern end of the Jordan, close to where it empties into the Dead Sea.

³² The unified and teleological view of creation that informs Ignatius's interpretation of the economy of redemption is eminently biblical. To cite but two obvious examples, it is presupposed in the account of the Fall in Genesis 3, where we read that the earth bears a curse "on account of" man (v 17), and also in the closely related passage in Romans 8, where Paul tells us that "the creation itself will be set free from the bondage of corruption for the glorious freedom of the children of God" (v 21). Anyone who wishes to describe the metaphysical convictions of Ignatius and the Fathers as "more or less magical" must say much the same with regard to the biblical authors.

“defilement”—implicit in Ignatius’s use of the verb “cleanse”—serves him nicely here, for it does not necessarily suggest moral culpability but designates the condition of having been impeded from being “holy,” that is, from being set apart for the purposes of God. Moreover, like all of Ignatius’s statements about the divine economy, the formulation of *Ephesians* 18:2 presupposes that Jesus Christ is the one in whom man is summed up and reaches *his telos*. Christ is the “Son of Man” (*Eph.* 20:2), “the new man” (*Eph.* 20:1), “the perfect man” (*Smyr.* 4:2).

Finally, let us note that the creedal formulation of *Ephesians* 18:2, like that of *Smyrnaeans* 1:1b–2, is fundamentally a statement about the Christ Event, but one which opens out into something that is suggestive of a comprehensive view of the divine economy. Specifically, Ignatius’s brief reference to the cleansing of the waters hearkens back to Creation and Fall while it also points forward to sacramental baptism and the life of the Church. The point is not simply to appreciate Ignatius’s lapidary and elliptical style but to see that his creedal formulations reflect his Christocentric view of the divine economy. He is able to grasp the unity of the whole economy precisely in the Christ Event with its interrelated moments. Moreover, it may well be that the baptism in the Jordan played an important role in the development of Ignatius’s thought in this regard. I do not suppose that he would have mentioned this event in the life of Christ at all—much less incorporated it into such carefully crafted statements—had he not previously devoted serious reflection to it. The baptism of the Lord is the sort of individual mystery into which one may gaze in order to espy something of *the* Mystery. N V