

Breaking the Heads of the Dragons in the Water¹

Ye faithful, let us praise the greatness of God's dispensation toward us. For, becoming man on account of our transgressions, he who alone is clean and undefiled was cleansed in Jordan that we might be made clean, sanctifying us and the waters and breaking the heads of the dragons in the water. Let us then draw water in gladness, O brethren; for upon those who draw with faith, the grace of the Spirit is invisibly bestowed by Christ, the God and Savior of our souls.
— Idiomelon In Tone Six for the Parmon (Eve) of Theophany

Thou didst bow Thy head to the Forerunner, thereby crushing the heads of the dragons. And having stood in the streams, Thou didst illuminate the whole creation. Wherefore, let it glorify Thee, O Savior, Thou Illumination of our souls.
— Doxasticon for Theophany

For thou, the God Who is uncircumscribed, without beginning and ineffable, didst come down upon earth, taking on the form of a servant and being made in the likeness of man. For Thou couldst not endure, O Master, because of Thy tender mercy, to behold the race of men beneath the tyranny of the devil, but Thou didst come and didst save us.... For Thou, our God, didst appear upon earth and didst dwell among men. Thou didst sanctify the streams of Jordan, in that Thou didst send down from heaven Thine all-holy Spirit and didst crush the heads of the serpents that lurked there.
— From the Prayers for the Blessing of the Waters at Theophany and the Baptismal Service

And we pray thee, O God ... that no demon of darkness may conceal itself in this water...
— From the Baptismal Service

As you venerate the icon of the Baptism of our Lord today, you may notice two shadowy figures in the waters of the Jordan. Who are these figures and what is their role in this icon?

Previously we have mentioned that much of the Hebrew Scriptures are a polemic against the pagan myths in the world around Israel. This is especially seen in the Creation and Passover narratives; this trend is continued in the Gospels.

The Creation account in Genesis 1.1–2.4 shows a striking contrast to the pagan creation accounts of the nations surrounding Israel. The difference is first seen in Genesis 1.3 “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” These words have lost their salience through our familiarity. However, to the ancient Israelite, this was a bold, striking claim. Ancient Mesopotamian beliefs held that at the beginning the world was chaotic and covered in water as Genesis 1.2 reveals. “And the earth was without form and void², and darkness was upon the face of the deep.” However, the pagan mythos had the world was created by the battles of the gods against each other and against Chaos. However, the Scriptures stand in contrast to this, God merely speaks and it happens, the formless is shaped (days 1 through 3) and the void is filled (days 4 through 6).

¹ While I usually use Fr Stephen De Young's blog *Whole Counsel of God* as a reference, this article is mostly a condensed version of his article *Theophany and River Gods* (<https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/wholecounsel/2019/01/02/theophany-and-river-gods/>).

² “Without form and void” translates the Hebrew תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ (*tohu va-bohu*) which may be more idiomatically translated as “helter-skelter” or “pell-mell”, preserving some of the wordplay.

Equating water with chaos in continued in the Scriptures, see the passages on the Leviathan (sea dragon) in Job 41 and Psalm 103/104. In these passages, God shows his power over the dragons in that he is able to command them without struggle. In contrast, the Canaanites had a series of epic poems (The Ba'al Cycle) depicting the god Ba'al fighting and overthrowing the Sea God (Yam) and his henchman the River God (Nahar). The Scriptures and the Theophany and Baptismal services rightly counter this diabolical propaganda³ by declaring that Christ crushed the heads of the dragons, not after a protracted struggle, but by an act of humility. One of the Trinity bowed his head to a man, the Forerunner, and the dragons were crushed.⁴

Let us then remember our baptism, and walk humbly before our God, who set the pattern for us. As we often say the waters and the world became sanctified in the Baptism of Christ. Indeed his baptism enables us to live in this re-created world as Israel walked through the Red Sea and the River Jordan of old. But the only entrance to this new world is through humility: through dying to ourselves, and taking up our cross. The road to the Kingdom of Heaven always leads through the Cross, and we must participate in Christ's death before we can participate in his Glorious Resurrection.

But God is our king before the ages; He hath wrought salvation in the midst of the earth. Thou didst establish the sea by Thy might; Thou didst break the heads of the dragons in the water. Thou didst crush the head of the dragon;
—Psalm 73.12–14 (LXX)

O Son of God, Who wast baptized by John in the Jordan, save us who sing to Thee. Alleluia.

³ Instead of Yam and Nahar, some icons of the Theophany replace them with the fallen archangel and the dragon.

⁴ This and the last paragraph are largely drawn from Fr John Behr's homily on Theophany found in *The Cross Stands While The World Turns*.