



Water in Biblical Reflection

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We live on what some call the “Water Planet.” About 70% of the surface of the earth is covered with water—a fact evident in photos from space that make clear the vastness of the world’s oceans. And some of us get our drinking water from aquifers, large caches of water underground. Of course water is everywhere in the air we breathe—apparent in the humidity we feel and the clouds we see. And, interestingly, over 70% of our bodies is composed of water as well. Water around us and water under us and water above us and water in us. Water is literally everywhere.

Water is everywhere in the Bible, too. Perhaps at first it may not seem so, but a more attentive look perceives the presence of water in many places, like a long thin river threading its way from Genesis to Revelation. Look (again) at this short sampling of biblical texts, and stop to reflect on the meaning and the mystery of this gracious gift from God.

THE WATERS OF CREATION

Water above and water below (Gen 1:9–13)

“And the waters that were gathered together [God] called Seas” (v. 10)

In the creation story in Gen 1, we are told that God separated the waters. In the beginning, there was light and there was darkness, and there were the as-yet-undivided waters. Then God made a dome to separate the waters under the dome from the waters above the dome. This dome God called sky. In other words,

These reflections on the place and meaning of water in the Bible provide a fitting lens and an appropriate prayerful attitude through which to consider this collection of articles on water. Water is life—physically, spiritually, and theologically.

God created livable spaces—habitats for marine and avian creatures. And God fashioned an inhabitable in-between region in which he created land and vegetation and land creatures—including us—the human earth creatures. And so we live, thanks to God’s providential plan, with waters above and waters below.

Indeed, we all live within a thin envelope between the rain-filled clouds above and the water-soaked ground below. This slender envelope, about the thickness of a peel if the earth were an apple, is called the biosphere. But despite its skin-like thinness, what life teems in its lakes and rivers, forests and mountains and skies! The all-providing and ever-sustaining Creator makes habitats for the plethora of creatures that come to be in the space between and among the waters. For such a gift, it is hard not to say thanks—by what we say and by what we do.

Waters of life (Gen 1:20–23)

“Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures” (v. 20)

The water was crystal clear and the color of turquoise. We couldn’t wait to see what creatures swam below the surface. And we were not disappointed. The second largest coral reef in the world, just offshore of Belize in Central America, was full of more marine life than I had ever seen before. The shapes and colors and sizes of the fish were mind-boggling. Their numbers were uncountable.

This text in the biblical book of beginnings hints at the abundance of life in the world’s oceans and seas and rivers and streams. God creates swarms of living creatures of more kinds than we humans can imagine. Indeed, we are still discovering new forms of marine life deep in our home planet’s oceans. Included in this mix, Genesis notes, are sea monsters—creatures feared by humans and not at all useful to us, and yet known by God their Maker.

The text affirms that God blesses the water creatures down below and the winged birds up high. Not only humans but fish and birds are blessed by God and called to be fruitful and multiply. God’s blanket of blessing extends to all God carefully creates. So we, as God’s earth-keepers, ought to mimic our Maker and care for the waters of life and all the creatures that call it home.

STREAMS OF LIVING WATER

A good land (Deut 8:1–10)

“A land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up” (v. 7)

Some years ago, I took a group of college students hiking in the Grand Canyon—an arid and often desolate land; water is very scarce. Ironically, in a place formed by flowing water, there is now precious little water to drink. Each day, we had to carry water with us between campsites. At a pound to a pint, that added up to quite a bit of extra weight. After a week in the canyon, we gained a deeper appreciation for the easy availability of fresh drinking water.

It is no accident that the promised land is described not only as a place flowing with milk and honey, but also a place flowing with water. It is “a land with flow-

ing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills.” To people traveling for forty years in a hot and dry desert, this must have been exceedingly good news. Imagine not having to plan your every step according to where the next well was located. Imagine not worrying whether the spring would be dried up. Imagine having water in abundance.

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Streams and trees (Ps 1)

“They are like trees planted by streams of water” (v. 3)

I was watering my newly planted trees the other day. A couple weeks ago, I planted six new arborvitae in the backyard, and without any recent rain I was trying to make sure they got their needed nourishment. A few years ago, I planted a couple of juniper trees, and then my family and I were away from home for two weeks. Without any rain the trees almost died. Parched roots and brown leaves greeted me when I returned.

In this important psalm—the opening psalm to the entire Psalter—we find an illuminating metaphor. Two paths are described: the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. One path leads to life and the other to death. Those who delight in the way of the Lord, who meditate unceasingly on the Torah, are on the path of life. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield fruit in due season and whose leaves do not wither. Like well-watered trees, these people prosper in all they do.

The metaphor is quite clear. We must meditate on God’s teaching about shalom. We should delight in God’s instruction for living well: with justice and righteousness and delight. This teaching is found, of course, preeminently in the Bible. Such study for us is like water to a tree—absolutely necessary for our survival.

WATERS OF SHALOM

The sacred river (Ezek 47:1–12)

“Water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east” (v. 1)

It rained and thundered and lightninged for almost ten hours. The wind was so strong it snapped off a large tree a few feet from our tent. Another tree fell on our canoe, buckling the hull from bow to stern. After the storm subsided, my daughter and I did emergency first aid on our canoe and made our escape. The portage trails were knee-deep, fast-flowing streams. Even in the Boundary Waters

Canoe Area Wilderness of northeastern Minnesota, a land of endless lakes, it seemed that water was everywhere.

So, too, in this vision from Ezekiel it seems that water is everywhere. Water flows from the temple toward the east and toward the south and toward the north. While the river is shallow at first, it quickly rises until it cannot be crossed.

But this river is no ordinary river. It is the river of life. It nourishes every living creature. Where this river goes everything lives. And its waters nurture all kinds of trees growing along its banks: trees that bear fruit all year long so there is always enough to eat, and the leaves of these trees are for healing. This is a sacred river, a river of life, a sign of God's shalom.

The waterfall of justice (Amos 5:21–24)

*“But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (v. 24)*

Years ago, I paddled some whitewater rivers in the Southeast: the Nantahala, the Ocoee, the Chattooga. As part of ten-day wilderness backpacking trips for high schoolers, the day we spent on the water was a refreshing change of pace. The water was wild and unrelenting. There was no stopping it. It rushed forth following the pull of gravity over and around boulders in its steep descent to a flatter place.

This powerful text from the prophet Amos, made famous by Martin Luther King Jr. in his “I Have a Dream” speech, trades on the metaphor of falling water. We are to let justice roll down like water and righteousness rush like an ever-flowing stream. But let's face it: we like those festivals and solemn assemblies that Amos condemns. We think our offerings are just fine and that they will persuade God to love us. We believe our songs (classic or contemporary) and our use of musical instruments (organ or electric guitar) will appease God. Justice and righteousness? That's for liberal revolutionaries and social reformers.

But God will have none of it. It is justice and righteousness that are important to God. God desires that justice roll down like a thundering waterfall because too many people have their rights flouted and needs unmet. God desires that righteousness rush on like a boiling whitewater river because shalom is God's grand design. So if we say we love God, we too should seek justice and righteousness.

THE WATERS OF BAPTISM

The baptism of Jesus (Matt 3:13–17)

“And when Jesus had been baptized...” (v. 16)

Baptism. We do it in different ways. Some of us dunk; others sprinkle. Some do it to infants, while others insist it must be done only to adults. However we understand it, we all agree that baptism must involve water.

Crazy John the Baptizer was hanging out by the Jordan River, a scrawny excuse for a river that nonetheless supplied people with much-needed water in an arid place. John the Baptizer, wandering the desert of Judea preaching that people

must turn to God, was wearing camel's hair clothing and eating locusts and honey. And yet many Jews sought him out to be baptized in the muddy Jordan.

So it was that Jesus, too, sought out John and asked to be baptized. John at first refused. Then, after a word from Jesus, John relented and did as Jesus requested. We know the result. The thin veil between earth and heaven was torn open and Jesus (and John?) saw the Holy Spirit descend on him like a dove, and Jesus (and John?) heard a voice from heaven announce that Jesus was God's Son, the Beloved.

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In today's baptisms, too, water signifies that we are part of God's grand family. The veil is thrown open and for a moment we see things as they really are. As the apostle Paul tells us, we see all things cohering in Christ, the Beloved Son. All things, as John the Seer reveals to us, singing praise to God and the Lion who is the Lamb.

Water and blood (1 John 5:6–8)

"This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ" (v. 6)

The one who came by water: baptism. The one who came by blood: crucifixion. Jesus, John reminds us, came not only with the water of baptism but also with the blood of the cross. Water and blood. John also tells us (John 19:34) that during the crucifixion one of the Roman soldiers pierced the side of Jesus with his spear and at once blood and water came out—evidence that Jesus was really dead.

We are sometimes tempted to ignore baptism. The act itself is not the problem as much as what it implies: I am now a member of this motley group of people whose lives are often muddled and confused. But there it is—this water ritual called baptism—enacted at fonts, in tubs, on beaches. And here we are—the church—the untidy body of people who are marked as God's own forever. When tempted or in times of doubt, Martin Luther took comfort in reminding himself that he was baptized.

We are sometimes tempted to forget the cross, too. It is messy, after all, and not very pretty. An excruciating instrument of human execution, the cross is not what one would normally choose as a central symbol of one's faith. But there it is—this ancient equivalent of an electric chair—in our churches, in our art, on our jewelry. And here we are—the church—those united with Christ in death so that we might rise with Christ to new life. We, too, come by water and by blood. Both by the grace of God.

THE WATER OF LIFE

Living water (John 4:1–42)

“Where do you get that living water?” (v. 11)

It was a most unlikely sight: Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, talking with a Samaritan woman. At high noon, at a well outside Sychar, a Samaritan city. Just the two of them. The woman realizes the inappropriateness of the situation. Jesus, in response to her question, speaks of “living water,” but the woman misses his point. She assumes he refers to water from the ancient well and wonders how he, without a bucket for a well so deep, will acquire this “living water.” She also asks Jesus whether he thinks he is greater than their revered ancestor Jacob, who first dug this well and drank from it.

Jesus contrasts the water from the well, which—for all its ability to quench thirst—will nevertheless leave one still thirsty, with the water he gives, which will quench one’s thirst forever. Indeed, Jesus claims his water will become in those who believe a spring of water gushing forth life eternal. In other words, Jesus is greater than Jacob, for Jesus is the source of life, the Word who has become flesh and pitched his tent among humans (John 1:14). The woman’s response indicates she is starting to catch on: “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water” (v. 15). As the rest of the story shows, this Samaritan woman becomes a means for others to know that Jesus “is truly the Savior of the world” (v. 42).

Water for the thirsty (John 7: 37–44)

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me” (v. 37)

It was the time of the Jewish Festival of Booths. For seven days, water was carried in golden pitchers from the pool of Siloam to the temple. This was a reminder of the water that gushed forth from the rock in the desert when Moses struck it with his staff (Num 20:2–13). This ritual was also a symbol of hope for the coming messiah (Isa 12:3). Water as icon of past and of future. Water as symbol of remembrance and of hope.

On the very last day of this popular festival, Jesus appeared. He had a habit of showing up at such events and turning everything inside out. Jesus cries out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.” While water already played an important role in this religious festival, Jesus increases its significance by making an astonishing claim: in effect, “I am the water of life.” As he does directly in the seven great “I am’s” of John’s Gospel (the bread of life; the light of the world; the gate; the good shepherd; the resurrection and the life; the way, the truth, and the life; the true vine), Jesus here indirectly gives us another “I am.” As with water, so too with Jesus: without him we cannot live.

WATER AND IDENTITY

Water is thicker than blood (Acts 8:26–40)

“What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (v. 37)

The Ethiopian Minister of the Treasury was on his way home after a trip to a foreign capital, where he didn't go to talk finances but to worship. He had traveled to Jerusalem on pilgrimage to seek spiritual wisdom and on his return trip he was reading a scroll of the prophet Isaiah when a stranger ran alongside his slow-moving chariot. The young man, Philip by name, asks the Ethiopian if he understands what he is reading. He answers, “No,” and invites Philip to sit with him and help him comprehend the text. The passage, Isa 53:7–8, was a starting point for Philip to proclaim the good news of Jesus—how Jesus had been unjustly put to death, like a sheep led to slaughter.

Upon spotting a body of water, the finance minister asks Philip a question: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” In other words, does your community include people like me—a non-Jew, a eunuch, someone “unclean”? Philip's answer is evident in his behavior: he goes down into the water with the man and baptizes him, thereby initiating him into the community of those who follow Jesus. In doing so, Philip proclaims that water is thicker than blood. The water of Christian baptism trumps our ethnicity or race or sex or any other marker of human identity.

Oneness in Christ (Gal 3:23–29)

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (v. 27)

In this passage from his great letter on Christian freedom, the apostle Paul takes up the same theme that Luke emphasizes in Acts 8:26–40. And not surprisingly, water—the water of baptism—is once again prominent. Paul argues that “in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith” (v. 26). The law, once necessary from Moses to the messiah, is now no longer needed since Jesus the Messiah has come.

Those who have been baptized into Christ have thus clothed themselves with Christ. In Christ, we have a new identity. We are all part of the Messiah's family. Therefore, Paul concludes, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (v. 28). Regardless of our ethnicity or class or sex, we are all one in Christ through baptism. Paul is not saying that these aspects of human identity are irrelevant; we don't somehow cease to be American, Chinese, or German; we don't stop being male or female. But Paul is saying that these typical identity markers are not important for our standing before God or each other. As the old saying puts it, the ground is level at the foot of the cross. Racism, ethnocentrism, classism, sexism, and the like have no place in the church. Our most basic identity is found in Christ.

THE WATERS OF THE ESCHATON

Rivers and trees (Gen 2:4–14)

“A river flows out of Eden to water the garden” (v. 10)

The Bible begins and ends with rivers and trees (Gen 1–2; Rev 21–22). For now, we will focus on the rivers.

In the second chapter of the Bible (Gen 2) we read that from the waters under the ground, a subterranean ocean of sorts, a river arose out of Eden. This river divided into four branches, each flowing to a different corner of the then known world. Two of these rivers have the same name today—the Tigris and the Euphrates; they were and are crucial waterways in the crucible of human history. In an often parched part of the planet, Eden provided life-giving water to the world.

Then, in the final chapter of the Bible (Rev 22) we are told that in God’s good future there will be a river in the new Jerusalem, bright as crystal, running smack-dab down the middle of that jeweled city. This river of life, shimmering and dancing and clapping its hands, flows from the very throne of God the Creator-Redeemer and the Lamb, the Lamb that was slain and now reigns as Lord. In this heaven-on-earth city flows a mighty and magnificent river—water, the elixir of life. Therefore, all creatures are nourished. All things are the way they are supposed to be. All things in this earthly city are filled with shalom.

Heaven on earth (Rev 21:1–6)

“To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life” (v. 6)

It was the end of a long day of backpacking and we were hot and tired and thirsty. All of our water was gone. I knew where we were on the map, and the map showed a spring at this site, so the spring must be here somewhere. But where? What if the spring had dried up? What if we had to hike many more miles to find the water we desperately needed? What if...? Then one of my students stumbled upon a trickle of water flowing from the ground. A roar of relief went up—a prayer of thanks in disguise. Water, a gift, life-giving, from a spring. It was a taste of heaven on earth.

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mortals and wipes every tear from our eyes. Death,
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The vision in Revelation is mind-boggling. John the Seer is trying to describe God’s good future of shalom. There is a new heaven and new earth—renewed, not destroyed. The holy city Jerusalem descends and heaven and earth are one. The home of God is among humans. God dwells with us mortals and wipes every tear from our eyes. Death, mourning, crying, and pain are no more. And the one seated on the great throne declares that he is making all things new (*not* all new things). To the thirsty (that’s all of us) God will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

This is only a sampling of biblical passages that deal with water. We do, indeed, live on the water planet, and clearly water is not only an essential ingredient of life but also a powerful metaphor to teach us more about our faith. May God grant us the humility and the gratitude to receive the many gifts of water and the wisdom and the courage to use them for our neighbors in need. And may God grant us the faith, hope, and love we need to learn more about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. ☩

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