



Living Waters in the Psalms

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My deep interest in the importance of water in the Psalms comes from the intersection of two principal areas of my work in the last many years. Over thirty years ago I completed my dissertation on creation in the Psalms,¹ and that rather heady work eventually led me into my present activism with the eco-faith/care-of-creation work in two synods of the ELCA.² I also have written a Book of Faith Lenten journey entitled *Water Marks*³ and, more recently, have had the opportunity to speak with Winona LaDuke at the Johnson Symposium entitled *Water Is Life*.⁴ All of this stands behind these current reflections.

The Scriptures talk about water hundreds of times in all manner of ways—through story, prophecy, poetry, and more. From the very beginning water is described and experienced in two opposing ways: the raging waters of chaos (see Gen 1:1–3) and the nourishing seas/rivers of living waters (see Gen 1:10; 2:10–14). The tension between these two images exists throughout the Bible. Indeed,

¹ Diane Jacobson, “A Literary and Theological Exploration of Appeals to the Creator in Psalms 24, 27, and 33,” PhD diss (Union Theological Seminary, 1990).

² SPAS Care of Creation Workgroup and EcoFaith Leadership Team, Northeastern Minnesota Synod ELCA. See <https://www.ecofaithnetwork.org>.

³ Diane Jacobson, *Book of Faith Lenten Journey: Water Marks* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011).

⁴ Johnson Symposium on Faith and Society, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN, November 11–12, 2022.

For the Hebrew people living in the arid climate of the Holy Land, water was the essential element of life; its presence was a sign of God’s favor, as its absence was a sign of God’s displeasure. In the Psalms, “living water” is more than just a physical representation, but a symbol of the intensity of relations between Creator and created.

the paradox of the tension between waters of death and waters of life continues through to cross and resurrection.

If we pay attention, we see this dual reality of water all around us even today. We see that both oceans and rivers can fall on either side. Our oceans teem with life as well as threaten through flood and misdirection. Our rivers dry up, overflow, pollute, and poison as well as offer cultivation, transport, and life-giving refreshment. Particularly in our precarious times, we experience both floods and drought.

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One of the biblical invitations, as I see it, is to watch water in these two manifestations—death and life—and see what happens. In this article we will explore water in the Psalms, with a particular tilt toward where and how water is the source of life. Some reference to water, in its many manifestations, is made in over one-third of the Psalms (fifty-six of them), in at least 115 verses.⁵ Below are seven of the many ways that water is made manifest as life throughout the Psalms, seven being a very good biblical number.

1. WATER IS LIFE IN CREATION: PSALM 33:6–7 (SEE ALSO PSALM 24:2; 29:10; 74:12–17; 89:8–27)

We begin where Scripture begins, with water as life-giving in creation. Look at places in the Psalms like 33:6–7, which turns the prose of Genesis 1 into poetry.

⁶ By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.

⁷ He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;
he put the deeps in storehouses.⁶

We are transported into a world of metaphor and poetry, which adds immeasurably to the life given in the waters of creation. Poetry, like song, is never incidental to meaning.⁷ God gathers the waters of chaos as in a bottle or storehouses. God orders the chaotic waters of death in order that they might give life. In Psalm 24:2, water is foundational. In Psalms 74 and 89 the chaotic sea is again contained. Indeed in 29:10, God is enthroned over the flood; life rules over death.

⁵ See addendum.

⁶ All Bible translations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁷ See Diane Jacobson, “The Inseparability of Beauty and Truth in Biblical Poetry,” *Word & World* 39 no. 1 (2019): 3–10.

2. WATER IS LIFE THAT SUSTAINS AND REFRESHES: PSALMS 104:5–15; 36:7–10; 23:1–2 (SEE ALSO PSALMS 65:6–10; 68:7–9; 72:6–7)

How water gives life in creation becomes very specific in the wonderful hymn to God as creator, Psalm 104 (note, particularly, verses 5–6 and 10–13). The transformed waters gush forth as springs and then flow through the hills. And this moving, life-giving water becomes the divine gift of drink to every wild animal, including wild asses and birds. The water is refreshment first for the animals, and then even the earth itself is satisfied by God's heavenly abode (see also Ps 65:9–10). To begin with water refreshing the earth and its creatures puts human refreshment (v.15: "wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine and bread to strengthen the human heart") in a cosmic context. And it perhaps implies that we might see our own sustaining work in the same context.

In Psalm 36:7–10, we are reminded that part of God's steadfast love is giving drink to all people "from the river of your delights," which leads to the "fountain of life."

The connection between water as life that is sustaining and refreshing for animals as well for humans becomes part of one of the most influential metaphors in all of the Psalms: "The Lord is my shepherd" (23:1). Certainly, no psalm has been more central to the faith of American Protestants in the last two hundred years than the Twenty-Third Psalm.⁸ We know how it begins:

¹The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters.

Still waters are where sheep find refreshment, where we humans find refreshment. The metaphor washes over us. I learned this first from my beloved Union Theological Seminary professor, Samuel Terrien, as he spoke of his time living among the Bedouin, who would care for their sheep by "leading them to safe and quiet waters where the poor, not very intelligent creatures would not fall in and drown. And when the sheep were battered about, the Bedouin would bring them into their tents and anoint their heads with medicinal oil."⁹ We best know water as life that sustains and refreshes by imagining ourselves as God's sheep. The waters refresh and sustain us for our journeys and our lives in community, as God's flock.

3. WATER IS LIFE THAT ITSELF SINGS PRAISE: PSALM 98:4, 7–8 (SEE ALSO PSALMS 69:34; 148:4, 7)

Amazingly in the psalms, the waters are not only praised, they themselves are enjoined to sing praises. Hear the words of Psalm 98:

⁸ See William Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

⁹ Jacobson, *Book of Faith Lenten Journey*, 73.

- ⁴ Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises. . . .
- 7 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it,
the world and those who live in it.
- 8 Let the floods clap their hands.

The capacity to sing is itself an indication that the waters are living beings. So when we listen to the many sounds of water, we hear praise, not just random sounds. In my imagination the sung praise of the waters is accompanied by a Lakota drumbeat—*Mni Wiconi*, “Water is life.” In their singing, the waters invite us to join in their song of praise—yet another way that we ourselves are given life as well as hope.

4. WATER IS THE LIVING LAMENT OF OUR TEARS: PSALMS 6:6, 8–9; 137:1 (SEE ALSO PSALMS 39:12; 42:3; 119:136; 126:5); LACK OF WATER LEAVES US THIRSTING FOR LIFE: PSALM 22:14–15 (SEE ALSO PSALMS 21:21; 63:1; 143:8)

Whenever I make use of the biblical number seven, I am pulled into the notion that the fourth number, the middle number, is somehow set apart. And so it is here. What appear to be signs of death—tears, lament, and thirst—are themselves often signs of life.

Tears in the Psalms, as well as in our lives, are marks of personal chaos, salty as the chaotic seas. In psalms, these salt waters are brought to God by individuals, as in Psalm 6:6, 8–9:

- ⁶ I am weary with my moaning;
every night I flood my bed with tears;
I drench my couch with my weeping. . . .
- 8 Depart from me, all you workers of evil,
for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping.
- 9 The Lord has heard my supplication;
the Lord accepts my prayer.

Or the tears are brought by the community, as in Psalm 137 where they weep in their place of exile, remembering their beloved homeland. In both cases, the tears become laments to God. They bring the truth of their sorrowful situation before God. As we learn in the book of Job, honest lament is truer prayer than false praise.¹⁰ And thus, tears are living water of truth brought before God.

Even lack of water and thirst become a prayer of lament. In Psalm 22, we hear the psalmist cry:

¹⁰ Diane Jacobson, “Job as a Theologian of the Cross,” *Word & World* 31, no. 4 (2011): 378. We learn a similar, though more judgmental, lesson when Jesus weeps over the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41).

¹⁴ I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
¹⁵ my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

This all-important lament is a plea that becomes a proclamation. And for Christians, Psalm 22 becomes the underlying script of the passion narrative in John 19 in which Jesus proclaims his own thirst, “in order to fulfill the scripture” (v. 28). In his thirsting, as in his dying, we experience Jesus most assuredly as human. It is a thirst for life that only comes through death. It is God entering into our lament, owning and transforming it. Singing the truth through lament is one of the remarkable gifts of the Psalms. Israel learns that God is found in absence as well as in presence, in sorrow as well as in joy. Insight and faith were born out of the loss, sorrow, and even death.

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5. WATER IS LIFE IN BEING WASHED IN FORGIVENESS: PSALM 51:1–2, 7–10

Another remarkable characteristic of water is that it has the power to wash and to cleanse. All cultures know this, and we certainly all have personal experiences with cleansing waters. We wash our hair, our bodies, our clothes, our children. When we are dirty, we yearn for cleansing water. And being cleansed by someone else, be it a parent or caretaker, can be scary and/or exhilarating, humbling and/or uplifting. So it is in the Psalms, in a particular manifestation. We are given cleansing life by God in the washing away of sins through divine forgiveness.

Listen to Psalm 51:1–2, 7–10, which we sing on Ash Wednesday:

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin. . . .
7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Here is a washing we cannot do for ourselves. Because we sin before God, we have need of deep cleansing. And we pray to God, “Wash me.” Wash me thoroughly, we pray to God; wash my sins away.

Interestingly, the two main stories of washing in the New Testament are not about cleansing from sin, but they are deeply related. In the first story, in Luke 7, it is Jesus’s feet that are washed by a sinful woman. The instrument of washing is tears, transforming the chaotic water of her personal lament into the extravagant waters of hospitality.

In the second story, in John 13, it is Jesus himself who washes the feet of his disciples, setting an example that we might all become people who wash the feet of the other. We, like Jesus, become servants to one another. So the psalmic theme of water as life in the washing and cleansing from sin becomes transformed into the forgiven ones offering cleansing water to others.

6. WATER IS LIFE IN OUR THIRSTING AFTER THE LIVING GOD: PSALMS 63:1; 42:1–3, 7, 11

We have dealt with thirsting because of lack of water as a form of lament. But there is another manner of thirsting that is less lament and more yearning. Psalm 63 opens:

¹ O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

The lack of water is now a metaphor for how thoroughly we thirst after God as the source of life.

And just as knowing ourselves to be like sheep in Psalm 23 leads us to understand that water is life that sustains and refreshes, so in Psalm 42, knowing ourselves to be like a deer leads us to understand that water is life in our thirsting after the living God.

I have loved this psalm for as long as I can remember. I think I first fell in love with the hymn: “As Pants the Hart for Cooling Springs.” And, probably not unlike some who are reading this, I thought there was a misprint in the title. It should have been, “As Pants the Heart” (a missing “e”). The hymn spoke to my heart, panting after God. Whoever heard of a hart, which was a male deer? And so I learned a new word, and I saw this gorgeous image of a deer yearning for cooling springs. And it all made sense. Here is a double entendre that works most gloriously in English. As a deer, a hart, yearns for cooling springs, so our own hearts yearn for refreshment as well. We yearn for cooling springs.

Psalm 42 is rather like a poetic water narrative:

¹ As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
³ My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?” . . .
⁷ Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me. . . .
¹¹ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

We understand the longing of the deer. Here is a creature whose yearning for its goal of flowing streams is so deep that it will leap carelessly across the highway with little regard for the oncoming danger. The danger in the psalm is the ever-present deep and the thunder of cataracts. The living God is hidden and elusive. The hiddenness leads to tears. This careless, uncontrollable, naturally engrained yearning is precisely how Psalm 42 expresses our souls’ thirsting for the living God. And there is more! The word here translated “soul” is the Hebrew word *nephesh*. And the root meaning of *nephesh* is “throat.” That is, “the throat is the metaphorical place where our souls reside. Just as the deer thirsts for water, so also our throats—our very selves, our souls—thirst for God.”¹¹

The final aspect of this thirsting after the living God is that it begins and ends with questions: “When shall I come and behold the face of God? . . . Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?” Sometimes the very best descriptions of what gives life are found in the questions rather than in the answers. Our questioning, our searching, our thirsting is life itself.

7. WATER IS LIFE AS WE STUDY THE WORD TOGETHER: PSALM 1:1–3

Finally, and not at all incidentally, the Psalter begins with a psalm that guides our reading of all of the Psalter and indeed all of Scripture. And, of course, it involves water. Psalm 1:

¹ Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,

¹¹ Jacobson, *Book of Faith Lenten Journey*, 69.

or sit in the seat of scoffers;
² but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
³ They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

Blessed is the one whose life is immersed in God's *Torah*—in walking, in standing, in taking one's place. Three aspects of the first two verses are so important:

First, translating the twice-repeated "*Torah* is tricky. The usual translation, "law," is misleading. *Torah* can refer to the law, to the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), or, more broadly, to all of sacred Scripture. *Torah* refers to those sacred writings that form both our identity and our community. In Jewish thought, *Torah* is both *haggadah* and *hallakah*, the telling (story, narration) and the walking (path). Both the story and the path give us our identity as the people of God.

Second, Psalm 1 begins with the wisdom word *'ashre*, here translated "happy" but often translated "blessed." Those who "study" the word together are both happy and blessed.

Thirdly, Psalm 1 invites us to meditate on God's *Torah* day and night, taking delight in God's word. The Hebrew word for "meditate," *hagah*, is the same as the roaring of lions and the cooing of birds. Such meditation involves communal, more than individual, study. We are invited to study God's *Torah* as a community, all of us together experiencing the text speaking to us and through us to one another—inspiring us, challenging us, giving language to both demand and promise.

The promise of Psalm 1 comes to light most wonderfully in the central image in the psalm. The promise is this: when we take delight in God's *Torah*, when we participate in such cogitating, such cooing and roaring, such reading and listening and engaging together with the Bible, we become "like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither."

We have come to the life-giving water. One who is rooted in the soil of God's word is fed by the ever-flowing and refreshing divine stream. We students, we sheep and deer, are back to Psalms 23 and 42.

Like a tree, we students of the Bible are made alive and kept alive by being rooted beside God's ever-flowing and refreshing stream. But the image of the tree is more than roots. What is visible when we look at this tree is not its root but rather its fruit and its leaves. And the fruit and the leaves are not only for the tree itself. Fruit is always for the other—the fruit nourishes the other, reaching out to the other. The fruit-laden branches visibly mirror the life-giving roots. Fruit gives sustenance to all who eat, and in truth, the word sustains us as we share the fruits of the word with others. The leaves add yet more to this picture, providing both shade and shelter.

These ideas, as well as this image of Psalm 1, are drawn deeply from other passages of Scripture: Jeremiah 17:7–8 and the vision of the temple in Ezekiel 47:7 speak of such trees. And this image also points forward to the vision of Revelation 22:1.

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Also standing behind these images of the righteous path, of the ever-flowing stream, and particularly of the tree that gives forth fruit is the figure of Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 3:18:

She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;
those who hold her fast are called happy.

In the biblical tradition, this figure first becomes Torah and then Christ. But here in Psalm 1, something amazing happens. Rather than Wisdom or Torah being the tree, the true student of Torah becomes like Wisdom herself—a tree that gives forth fruit. Here the tree is the individual who studies, cogitates on Torah, and follows in her way.

Ending these thoughts about manifestations of water as life in the Psalms with “Water Is Life as We Study the Word Together” seems a very fitting way to mark what I am hoping to convey in this article: Studying is not merely an academic, heady activity. If biblical study is to lead to engagement with and in life, then we have need of happiness/blessedness. We have need of a broad depth of what is found in Scripture. We need community. We need a sense of calling and purpose to provide shade and nourishment for others. We need all manner of wisdom. And we need rootedness beside living waters. Water is life in so many ways. ⊕

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ADDENDUM

Water in the Psalms: 115 verses; approximately 136 references

WATER—47 TIMES

Psalms 1:3; 18:11, 16; 22:14; 23:2; 29:3; 32:6; 33:7; 46:3; 58:7; 63:1; 65:9, 10; 66:12; 69:1, 2, 14; 72:6; 74:13; 77:16, 17, 19; 78:13, 16, 20; 79:3; 81:7; 93:4; 104:3, 6, 13, 16; 105:29, 41; 106:11, 32; 107:23, 33, 35; 109:18; 114:8; 124:5; 126:4; 136:6; 144:7; 147:18; 148:4.

SEA(S)—38 TIMES

Psalms 8:8; 18:15; 24:2; 33:7; 46:2; 65:5, 7; 66:6; 68:22; 69:34; 72:8; 74:13; 77:19; 78:13, 27, 53; 80:11; 89:9, 25; 93:4; 95:5; 96:11; 98:7; 104:25; 106:7, 9, 22; 107:23, 24, 25, 29; 114:3, 5; 135:6, 13, 15; 139:9; 146:6; 148:7.

RIVER(S)—13 TIMES

Psalms 24:2; 36:8; 46:4; 65:9; 66:6; 72:8; 78:16, 44; 80:11; 89:25; 105:41; 107:33; 137:1.

STREAM(S)—9 TIMES

Psalms 1:3; 42:1; 46:4; 74:15; 78:16, 44; 104:12; 110:7; 119:136.

FLOOD—8 TIMES

Psalms 6:6; 29:10; 69:2, 15; 88:17; 93:3; 98:8; 124:4.

TEARS—8 TIMES

Psalms 6:6; 39:12; 42:3; 80:5; 102:9; 116:8; 119:136; 126:5.

RAIN—7 TIMES

Psalms 68:8, 9; 72:6; 84:6; 105:32; 135:7; 147:8.

HAIL—5 TIMES

Psalms 78:47, 48; 105:32; 147:17; 148:8.

POOL—1 TIME

Psalms 114:8.