

A River Runs Through: Water in God's Purpose for Creation

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Water is everywhere around us and in us, tangible as sweat, visible as the high seas, invisible as the envelope of earth's life-protecting atmosphere, and essential as blood. Water provides the matrix of our conception and our embryonic pre-natal environment. Breaking waters bring us to birth and water is the final elemental comfort we may ask for in dying. In the environment water has become a non-renewable resource because of its present rate of consumption, pollution and exploitation. Should it surprise us then that water has a central place in the story of God's purposes for creation?

At the beginning, one river flows out of Eden, to become the watershed that cradles civilization (Gen 2:10–14). At the very end, a cosmic echo declares the invitation of the One who is called the Alpha and Omega, " 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life (Rev.22:17 cf. 21:6)."¹ From start to finish in Bible history fresh water bubbles, gushes, gurgles, flows, floods, rainbows the sky, or suddenly dries up. Then it pours out of God's upper chambers all over again, to nurture, sustain, wash, cleanse, baptize, heal, or tempest-toss the heroes and heroines of God's story, towards his good ending.

This discussion assumes that God's purpose for history, since his cherubim barred the gates to Eden, is to restore humanity, together with every other creature, to communion with himself, in a new creation. Three ways of listening to God in Scripture have led me to this assumption about his ultimate purpose for creation.² Firstly, hearing the Bible as a whole – whole books or letters, and whole Testaments, from beginning to end, taking note of the historical context of the whole.³ Secondly, hearing the Bible as a story. Taking seriously that it is intentionally arranged in story form, with many bits that are not stories, to create one epic narrative.⁴ Thirdly, we need to listen to the Scriptures meditatively and contemplatively. In meditation Scripture is voiced and heard in the rhythms of listening prayer, giving ample time for the Holy Spirit to evoke a deep emotional or even inexpressible response within.⁵ These ways of hearing God speak convince me of one missional theme in the Bible – the living God reveals himself and his reign to particular people at particular times so that through these chosen ones he can open the secret of his goal for creation – to reconcile every people in every age, and every living creature, into communion with himself (Acts

¹ Quotations are cited from the New International Version.

² I share Klaus Bochmuehl's view: "When people listen God speaks." This view takes seriously the divine inspiration of Scripture and the aural reception and oral transmission of Scripture down the centuries. So, Klaus Bochmuehl, *Listening to the God who Speaks*, Helmers & Howard, 1990, p 8ff

³ This canonical approach to hearing and reading Scripture is one I have experienced in a liturgical tradition since childhood, but I was introduced to it more systematically in a Biblical Interpretation course with Bruce Waltke and Gordon Fee at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C in 1998.

⁴ The genesis and sustenance of theology in narrative, from the earliest apostolic sermon to the most up to the minute internet release, is an idea as old as theology itself, but is regarded by some as a new field. See Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative?, Readings in Narrative Theology*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997.

⁵ Also known as spiritual reading or *lectio divina*, a good introduction to contemplative Bible reading is found in Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, IVP, 1998, p.158–171.

3:19–21).⁶ As we shall see, clean drinking water is closely linked to this mystery of the Bible's theme of mission.

This discussion will invite you to hear, to see and to taste the river of life-bringing water that runs through the Bible story. We will see that specific references to water point us like icons into the very heart of God's purpose for creation. First, we will survey the theme of water in the Bible quite broadly with a focus on truly hearing the meaning of water imagery in some of Jeremiah's prophecies. Then we will explore what John understands by seeing the waters that flowed on Golgotha. Lastly, we will interpret the invitation made in the Revelation to John, to drink water in the wetlands of the New Creation.

LANDSCAPE AND SOULSCAPE IN SCRIPTURE

The landscape that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses hoped for, and which Joshua, Caleb, Samuel, Saul and David slew giants, scaled walls and fought miracle-decided battles for, had very specific boundaries. It stretched from the Red Sea, to the Mediterranean, going from South to North, and from the Negev Desert to the River Euphrates, from West to East.⁷ But this land of the Promise which flowed with milk and honey could also be a dry and waterless place. Wadis, that is dry river beds, which alternately flash-flooded or lay bone-dry, and a single small river – the Jordan, were the only drainage lines in rugged landscapes that are as parched as South Africa's arid western regions. This scarcity of water in the Bible lands explains why small springs, wells, and rivers great or small, play a key role in the unfolding story of God's purpose for creation.

Jacob's love at first sight meeting with Rachel happens at a well (Gen.29). Centuries later, the same well is the setting of Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman which turns out to be an invitation to drink "living water" from "a spring...welling up to eternal life" (John 4:10–14). After one of the ancient world's greatest droughts, Pharaoh plans the genocide of a whole generation of Israelites (Ex. 1). The nation seems all but done for and Yahweh's promise broken, but just then, the River Nile carries one child promise-bearer right down into Pharaoh's own bathroom (Ex. 2). The rest of this irony is the epic story of Israel's divine rescue from spiritual and socio-economic bondage. At Meribah in the Sinai Desert's unforgiving heat, thirsty Israelites complain to Moses (Num. 20:1–13). Then a rock bears water to save them from hallucinations and certain death. This same rock is Moses' stumbling stone, forfeiting him his right to enter the land he had lived for, and finally only saw from far off. The stories of Samuel, David, Elijah, Elisha, and nearly every Old Testament prophet, tell of water because fresh water often literally carries forward the plot of salvation history. So it is not difficult to understand why salvation itself is compared by Isaiah to drawing fresh water from a well (Is.12:3).

In the prayer book of Israel, the Psalms, rivers and streams mostly describe Yahweh's presence, his nurture, and even his own life-giving self:

*There is a river whose streams make
glad the city of God,
The holy place where the Most High dwells. (Psalm 46:4–5)*

*As the deer pants for streams of water
So my soul pants for you, O God. (Psalm 42:1)*

⁶ Richard Bauckham's *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*, Paternoster Press, 2003, Lesslie Newbigin's, *The Open Secret*, SPCK, 1978, and the publications of Vinoth Ramachandra have shaped my understanding of God's broad missional purpose for history in this paper.

⁷ This sequencing of boundaries is exactly how Yahweh described them to Moses in the thick darkness on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 23:31).

What we discover about geography when we read the Bible is that landscapes are inseparably connected to soulscapes.⁸ In Yahweh's covenants with Abraham and Moses the promise of a beautiful land with wells that the Israelites did not have to dig, and vineyards and olive groves they did not have to plant was always identical with the promise that Yahweh himself would be intimately present with his people (Deut 6:4–19). Thus Yahweh's covenant has no separate compartments between human needs for food, shelter and security, and the deepest spiritual need of all creatures, to truly know the Creator, and to experience belonging to Him in intimate communion.⁹ In other words, in Scripture there is no utopian state of being or place outside of creaturely existence to which the people of God are called. Rather, our spiritual journey is made in the ordinary places and datable times of human history, as the Living God enters space and time to bring us and all his creatures back into communion with himself. The way God achieves this purpose for creation is always through many self-sacrificing accommodations, and ultimately, by the sacrificial and atoning gift of his very self (Col. 1:17–19).

HEARING WATERS, FROM A DISTANCE

Jeremiah of Jerusalem leaves us the longest record of what it means to prophesy about God's purpose for creation.¹⁰ Yahweh called on Jeremiah repeatedly during the reigns of four Judean Kings and one Babylonian governor, to warn Israel about her increasingly commercialised worship, her flagrant disregard for the poor, and her uncritical buy-in to the global Baal cult of the day. The central thrust of Jeremiah's prophecy has to do with knowing or not knowing God, the need for true repentance, and holiness in worship. Often, the picture of a spring of living water is the metaphor Yahweh gives Jeremiah to illustrate this theme:

*My people have committed two sins:
They have forsaken me,
The spring of living water,
And have dug their own cisterns,
Broken cisterns that cannot hold water. (Jeremiah 2:12–13)*

There are many places in southern Africa where young women or San Bushmen still walk long distances every day to search out hidden springs or wells, for fresh water. This daily search in arid landscapes helps us interpret Jeremiah's message to the leaders of Judah during the failed reforms of Josiah. Yahweh's people had exchanged the search for spring water for sedentary dependence on tanked rainwater. They had exchanged true faith in Yahweh, the unseen God who calls for costly sacrifice, for the insurance policies and profit margins that appeared to be the benefits of the Baal cult. The result was that the most intimate dimensions of life became packaged and sold for profit, and most gravely, this included the commercialization of worship (6:13–15, 14:14). Jeremiah has the daunting task of telling Israel's priests that they have turned Yahweh's holy of holies into "a den of robbers" (Jer 7:11).

⁸ The title of Maxine Hancock's graduate course at Regent College in 2001, *Landscape and Soulscape*, encouraged me to inquire more systematically into this idea of a spiritual geography. Chris Wright's Old Testament theology and Russ Parker's *Healing Wounded History, reconciling peoples and healing places*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002, have rewarded my inquiry.

⁹ Psalm 104 celebrates the truth that all living creatures, including humankind, have the capacity for knowing God in loving dependence and communion. James Houston calls this responsiveness of nature to the Creator the "open system" of the natural world. So, James Houston, *I believe in the Creator*, Eerdmans, 1980, p. 98–104.

¹⁰ Charles L. Feinberg, *Jeremiah, A Commentary*, Zondervan, 1982, p.1ff, and R.K Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations, An Introductory Commentary*, IVP, 1973, p. 34–43.

Yahweh's response to Israel's shift of allegiance from true spirituality to secular profit motives illustrates the close link between Israel's landscape and what is happening in the soul of the nation. Yahweh withdraws the nation's water by sending drought:

*Who gives autumn and spring rains in season,
Who assures us of the regular weeks of harvest.
Your wrongdoings have kept these away;
Your sins have deprived you of good.
Among my people are wicked men
Who lie in wait like men who snare birds,
Their houses are full of deceit;
They have become rich and powerful
And have grown fat and sleek.
Their evil deeds have no limit;
They do not plead the case of the fatherless to win it,
They do not defend the rights of the poor." (Jeremiah 5:20–28)*

Often we assume that prophecy concerns the imminent or distant future. But Old and New Testament prophecy alike generally focuses on God's thoughts about life in the present.¹¹ The end of time, or imminent future events may well be declared through prophets, but the goal of prophecy is most often to evoke a corporate response of God's people to his word for the now. The water images God gave Jeremiah in his 7th Century B.C. present tense are no less poignant for the world in 2006. If the Church preaches an individualistic gospel that focuses exclusively on me and my relationships, and me and my eternal destiny, without also declaring God's purpose for the whole of creation, his indignation about political corruption, violence, especially against women and children, thoughtless consumerism, and environmental degradation, we miss the prophetic message of Scripture for our times. To put it another way, if the gift of prophecy said to be exercised in affluent churches today is limited to the individual's personal, private and therapeutic needs, without directing us, corporately, to engage our complicity in the socio-economic evils of our world, especially in regard to our negative ecological impacts on the creation, and the way this affects the poor and marginalised, then we need to ask if this is indeed biblical prophecy.¹²

While Yahweh's prophetic message directs Jeremiah mostly to grease his elbows in the challenges of his affluent and oppressive present situation, Yahweh also gives Jeremiah wonderful water images that point to realised justice and true peace in Yahweh's ultimate future promise of hope:

*See, I will bring them from the land of the north
And gather them from the ends of the earth.
Among them will be the blind and the lame,
Expectant mothers and women in labour;
A great throng will return.
They will come with weeping;
They will pray as I lead them back.
I will lead them beside streams of water
On a level path where they will not stumble,
Because I am Israel's father,*

¹¹ My discussion about prophecy here is indebted in part to George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, Eerdmans, 1972, p. 20 – 24.

¹² Many affluent Christians confessed complicity in Apartheid during South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Now, the delay to realising restitution is challenging the integrity of Christian witness in South Africa. If Jeremiah's prophecy were taken to heart in postmodernity, should an environmental truth and reconciliation confession not also be made by affluent Christians today, worldwide? And what of environmental restitution?

And Ephraim is my firstborn son. (Jeremiah 31:7-9)

Prophecies like Jeremiah's need to be understood again today if contemporary Christians are to hear the promising sound of God's life giving water above the noise of loudly globalizing, packaged, commodified and consumer-friendly Christianity. Jeremiah's humanity, his deep connection with nature and compassion for the poor, his un-minced words towards corrupt temple priests and national leaders, and his public persecution, make it easy to understand why some people confused Jesus for Jeremiah, thinking that the weeping prophet had come back to life. (Matthew 16:14) The water of life that Jeremiah had challenged Israel to hear from a distance could now be seen firsthand in the person of Jesus Christ.

SEEING THE WATER OF LIFE

John's Gospel associates water with Jesus in symbolic and allegorical ways, from his baptism at the beginning, until the Galilean fish braai at the end. If Jesus isn't turning water into wine, or drawing well water for a Samaritan woman, he is substituting the healing waters of Bethsaida for his own miracle, or washing his disciples' feet. Also significantly, John is the only Gospel writer who draws attention to the piercing of Jesus' side and the mixture of blood and water which flowed at Golgotha (19:34-35). John's aim in this detail is to provide eye-witness evidence to refute first century claims that Jesus had not really died.¹³ But more than verifying Jesus' death, John links the flowing waters of Golgotha to the prophecy of Zechariah (19:37ff.).

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son...

"On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity." (Zechariah 12:10, 13:1)

Like the massacre of children and animals in the destruction of Jerusalem by heartless Babylonians during Zechariah's times, one callous thrust of a Roman spear opens a fountain of separating plasma and clotting blood from Jesus' side. The trauma of this horrifying moment, seared on the memory of the disciple whom Jesus loved, had clearly been healed by his experience and treasured memories of Jesus' resurrection (John 20:19, 21, 25), but also by meditating on the collective memory of Jewish prophecy.¹⁴ John intentionally includes Zechariah at this traumatic moment of the Golgotha narrative so that our eyes are opened to a paschal secret. Zechariah's "pierced one", for those who have eyes to see, is God in this Galilean who died – the ultimate Passover Lamb who takes away the sins of the world.¹⁵ In this grave yet glorious moment we also anticipate John's later vision of the blood bath of the Lamb, in which the children of God are washed, forgiven and welcomed into the life of God's eternal reign (Rev.4:7-10).

Do contemporary churches, particularly in affluent places, dare to look on and truly see the One whom we have pierced? Contemporary worship rarely invites us into the stark and silent anguish of Golgotha to witness with those who did not run away from suffering, living

¹³ Stephen S. Smalley, *John, Evangelist and Interpreter*, IVP, 1998, p. 254.

¹⁴ Significantly, John relates Jesus' piercing and issue of bloody water to what Zechariah relayed in prophecy as Yahweh's wounds and Yahweh's fountain. I am thankful to J lio Reis, a colleague and friend who helped me to see the Trinitarian nuances in these passages.

¹⁵ See Richard Bauckham & Trevor Hart, *At the Cross, Meditations on People Who Were There*, IVP, 1999, p.117-128.

waters, promising cleansing and eternal life, but issuing in blood through humiliation, asphyxiation and death.

John the Seer was gifted with seeing in Jesus what most of the other disciples could not see.¹⁶ So, we turn to ponder the revelation of God's true purpose for all creation, given to John – the invitation to move on from hearing and seeing, to tasting the living waters of the New Creation.

DRINKING, IN THE WETLANDS OF ETERNITY

The Revelation of Jesus given to John has been called the climax of prophecy, because the message John receives directs him to his pastoral calling to seven churches known to him in his present, but also to congregations unknown to him in an open ended future.¹⁷ Although successions of future events are unveiled to John, even up to the age when solar and lunar time will be no more, the thrust of the prophecy is to bring hope and practical instruction to every subsequent generation, to live with integrity in the present, even in the face of suffering. So Revelation is a pastoral manual about true worship as we live towards God's planned destiny for creation.

The Revelation ends with the destruction of one city and the eternal damnation of its denizens, and the revelation of another city, and the invitation to eternal fulfilment of its citizens.¹⁸ Between destruction and damnation of one and the heralding and arrival of the other, the heavens and the earth are completely renewed.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God...."

I did not see a temple in the city because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp....

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." (Rev. 21:1-4, 22; 22:1-2)

The new Jerusalem is a city that is also a bride, and a garden, and a wetland all at the same time. The city is its white robed residents who collectively are the bride of Christ. It is also a wetland biosphere, like the river Ezekiel was shown, which flowed out of Jerusalem to revitalize the Dead Sea until it was teeming with life (Ez. 47). This transforming terminal moment of the whole of history fulfills Yahweh's covenant made with Noah and every creature on earth (Genesis 9). If we relate the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Zechariah to John's vision of earth's true destiny here, we see refracted in this final vision a composite picture of a garden-city teeming with life. Earth, sky, children, fruits, grains, and mountains,

¹⁶ For an introduction to John's unique "Gospel of Signs" and how it compliments the vision of other three synoptic writers, see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, IVP, 1985, p.237ff.

¹⁷ So, Richard Bauchkam, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation*, T & T Clark, 1993.

¹⁸ The synthesis offered in this section is partly indebted to Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, in Derek Tiball (ed.), *The Message of Mission, The Glory of Christ in all time and space, The Bible Speaks Today Series*, IVP, 2003.

together with every creature, are finally beyond their groaning, free of the ancient curse, transformed and made new, and entering into the eternal promise of belonging and communion with the Creator. The city is a place of eternal relatedness in communion, between every creature under heaven and the Triune God of grace.

IN CONCLUSION

Revelation ends poignantly with a stark, practical warning to John about falling down in false worship, and then a final invitation to taste and drink the free gift of God's life-giving water (Rev. 22:9ff.). In the sense that God provides water for fullness of life throughout the Bible story, this river at the end is the delta of the river at the beginning. The waters that flow through the whole story of salvation point us to God's hopeful purpose for every creature, and indeed for the creation itself. Listening for the sound of a well or river, with the prophets of the Old Testament, seeing the water of life in Jesus' life and death and risen life, and taking up the Father's invitation to drink from the wetlands of eternity, even in the present, are each necessary to enter the mystery of God's secret purpose for all of creation. An eternal reconciliation with creation and its creatures, through deepening communion with Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the open secret of the Bible story. This destination of universal blessedness and peace, reached only through God's chosen river course of salvation, was anticipated even long ago when the Psalmist pictured every creature together with creation itself, transfigured by love:

*Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens,
Your faithfulness to the skies
Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
Your justice like the great deep.
O LORD, you preserve both man and beast.
How priceless is your unfailing love.
Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house;
You give them drink from your river of delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
In your light we see light. (Psalm 36:7b-9)*