

Living Water-Let Us Not Take It For Granted

-Veronica Lawson RSM

How did Water Come to Earth?

There's a little article in the May 2015 edition of the Smithsonian Magazine that addresses the question, "How did Water Come to Earth?"¹ The author is Brian Greene whom many of you would know from his 2004 best seller, *The Fabric of the Cosmos*. Like every school child he learnt about the water cycle-evaporation from the water catchments and oceans, condensation in the clouds, rain and sleet and snow returning to Earth. We probably learnt that at school. Some of us may have learnt how water got into the oceans and rivers in the first place. Most of us did not ask. Water just was. We knew that if we did not drink enough, then we might get dehydrated, but we did not pay too much attention to the presence of water in the various parts of our bodies. Neither did we pay all that much *attention* to water as an essential component of every living organism.

So, where does water come from? In short, Greene explains, it may have come from comets or asteroids colliding with Earth, the latter explanation being favoured of late, although the jury is still out on that. Greene also reminds us that if we want the whole picture, we have to go back almost to the Big Bang, and to the production some 14 billion years ago of copious amounts of hydrogen (along with helium and trace amounts of lithium). Hydrogen is one ingredient in water. For the other, namely oxygen, we have to fast forward a billion years or so and thank the stars, those "nuclear furnaces that fuse the Big Bang's simple nuclei into more complex elements, including carbon, nitrogen and, yes, oxygen". Still later, "when stars go supernova, the explosions spew these elements into space". Oxygen and hydrogen finally combine to make water.

You can go to the web and read Greene for yourselves if you need more, or maybe this is no news to you. You might well be asking what has all of this to do with water in the Biblical tradition. Too often, it seems to me, we treat water in the biblical texts as a symbol and forget the underlying reality, the wonder and the significance of the physical material substance that underpins the symbol. Those of us who have been brought up with water on tap can fall into the trap of taking access to water for granted. Some 750 million people on this planet, one in nine members of the whole human community, lack access to clean drinking water and every minute of every day a child dies of a water-related disease.² These figures alone call us to consider water as more than a symbol.

The Intrinsic Goodness of Water: A Symbol Yet More than a Symbol

Taha Muhammad Ali reminds us that "[w]ater is the finest drink...and [that] art is worthless unless it plants a measure of splendor in people's hearts."³ In the biblical tradition, we find water engaged in word images that "plant a measure of splendor in people's hearts". Norman Habel reminds us that, in the beginning, the Earth itself issues forth from the watery womb of God: "Earth is like an embryo in the deep, submerged in the waters of the primal cosmos. On the third day God calls on the waters to burst and Earth appears like a baby emerging from its mother's womb".⁴ The second day had brought the separation of the waters above and the waters below, and the third day had brought the separation of land from sea.

¹ <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/how-did-water-come-to-earth-72037248/#ws9TOYJLdrXpMHq8.99>

² <http://water.org/water-crisis/water-facts/water/> Accessed 14/08/2015.

³ "Twigs" in *So What: New and Selected Poems, 1971-2005*, trans. Peter Cole, Yahya Hijazi & Gabriel Levin (Port Townsend, Wash.: Copper Canyon Press, 2006), 117.

⁴ *Discerning Wisdom in God's Creation: Following the Way of Ancient Scientists* (Northcote: Morning Star Publishing, 2015) 51. In Psalm 110:3, the king is told, "From the womb of the morning, like dew, your youth will come to you".

The goodness of the various separations is affirmed, as is the life that emerges on the dry land. There is no mention here of the water that waters the dry land and makes the vegetation grow. Do the “seas” include the inland lakes and waterholes? Does this poetic account of Earth’s beginnings include the rivers and the springs in “the waters under the dome” of verse 7? We shall return to the springs and the rivers in relation to Genesis 2.

In God’s response to Job from the whirlwind, the sea is said to “burst out from the womb” (38:8). Norman Habel comments, “The origin of Sea is depicted poetically as a birth from a cosmic womb with the baby being swaddled in dense clouds”.⁵ Just as salt water emerges from the womb of God, so too does the water that turns to ice or hoarfrost. “From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?” is the question God puts to Job in the following verse (v. 39). Water in the form of sea, ice and hoarfrost all emerge from God’s womb.

Water features powerfully in Genesis 2:4a-15. There is “no rain”, only a subterranean water source, an *ed*, and no ‘*adam* to care for (*abad*) and conserve (*shamar*) the earth (*ha-adamah*). The underground water source, the *ed*, plays a crucial role in the narrative that unfolds. The subterranean stream is depicted as having agency. It “would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground”. It is only on account of the living water of the stream that God can “make to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food”. Rivers are introduced in v. 10. The underground water does not suffice “to water the garden”. The river that divides into four is specifically said to have that function.

The naming of the four rivers serves to give them a connection with the reader, even if only two of the four can now be identified with any known river system. The two known rivers were once the life-blood of their respective environments. Their eco-systems are now critically endangered and their waters contested. Over forty percent of the flow of the Euphrates to downstream countries (Iraq and Syria) has been lost since the early 1970s because of over-exploitation.

The Euphrates River is of critical importance for water, food and energy security in Turkey, Syria and Iraq. Flowing south-east for 2,700 kilometres from eastern Turkey to the Persian Gulf, it supports over 60 million people and – along with the Tigris, with which it runs almost in parallel – has a rich history of sustaining civilization on the Mesopotamian plains. This vast water resource is in crisis. Degradation of the river from over-exploitation, population growth, pollution and other factors has been a serious problem for many years. Now war and violent upheaval in Syria and Iraq are worsening the situation: threatening key infrastructure and preventing policy cooperation. Without urgent attention, stresses on the river’s resources will add to the already catastrophic humanitarian crisis created by the conflict. In the longer term, a vision for cross-border coordination is essential if the river is to retain its vital role in the region.⁶

As we bring our ecological lenses to the Genesis text, we bring the world in front of the text as well as the world behind and the world of the text. The world in front of text includes all the endangered river systems of the planet. As we consider the future for our river systems, we might re-read Genesis 2:11-14, acknowledging God’s action in the formation of the river systems of our different regions.

As we read Genesis 2:15, we find God putting the human “in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it”. The verbs to till and to keep have been interpreted for so long as a licence for human

⁵ *Discerning Wisdom*, 51.

⁶ <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/euphrates-crisis-channels-cooperation-threatened-river?gclid=CNn8uYS9p8cCFcOXvQodfgMJlQ>. Accessed 15/08/2015.

exploitation and possession. Phyllis Tribble points out that the verb “to till” (*abad*) can also mean “to serve” in a cultic sense or “to reverence”, while “to keep” (*shamar*) denotes “care” rather than possession.⁷ There is no sense in this story that the human community has a license to dominate or to exploit God’s garden. Humans are Earth beings as are the other creatures in the garden.

Water as More than a Commodity

Pope Francis makes frequent reference to the anthropocentrism or human-centredness that contributes so much to the destruction of habitat and the disappearance of species. The question arises as to whether this Genesis text is intrinsically anthropocentric with its focus on “food” and on watering the “garden” since the only creatures inhabiting the earth to this point are humans.

The human is formed from the dust of the earth and from the breath of God (Genesis 2:7). To speak of “God breathing the breath of life” is to speak metaphorically. The metaphor evokes the human process of breathing out, a water-saturated process. It suggests that the water sustaining the life of the human body is the gift of God’s breath. Just as the human being formed from earth and breath is said to be a living being (*nephesh*), so is each of the animals and birds (v. 19). In retrospect, we can affirm that the living water of the stream and of the rivers brings life to every living being (*nephesh*). The trees are finally “pleasant to the sight” of the birds as well as to the sight of the humans. If read, again retrospectively, in the light of Genesis 1, the fruit of the trees and of the waters is intrinsically good, and not simply a commodity for human and animal consumption.

Michael Cathcart discusses the crisis affecting Australia’s Murray-Darling Basin where water has been treated simply as a commodity for so many decades. With salinity out of control, “wasteful irrigation has raised the water table, bringing ancient salts to the surface, poisoning productive country and leaching into the river”.⁸ Cathcart notes that for a century most irrigators thought of the river as “an open channel supplying them with water”.⁹ The “Murray-Darling Cap” introduced in 1995 did not fix the problem because too many people held entitlements to pump water from the river. Cathcart critiques water-trading that was later introduced as a solution to the problem. He notes that the policy abandoned the fundamental principle established by Alfred Deakin (Australia’s second Prime Minister) that “irrigators should not hold property rights in water. Under Deakin’s scheme, the water, in effect, belonged to the river-and the irrigators had an entitlement to use an allocated amount on their farms, for which they paid a small annual fee”.¹⁰

Cathcart affirms Deakin’s principle and offers a serious critique of water-trading as a solution. For Cathcart, it is not too late to reverse the damage. His reflection on Deakin’s principle echoes the sentiments of Psalm 24:1-2, “The earth is [God’s] and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for [God] has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers”. The Earth is actually established on the seas and on the rivers. Without the rivers and the seas, there is no life.

Water as an Agent of Destruction

In several First Testament texts, water is an agent of destruction or, at least, a potential agent of destruction. The two flood accounts of Genesis 7-8, for instance, are stories of both liberation and destruction. In both accounts, water is the agent whereby God destroys every living thing that God has made on the face of the earth.

In Genesis 7, water wipes out practically all that is:

⁷ See “A Love Story Gone Awry”, in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) 72-143.

⁸ *The Water Dreamers: The Remarkable History of Our Dry Continent* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2009) 253.

⁹ *Water Dreamers*, 253.

¹⁰ *Water Dreamers*, 254.

The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered; the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep. And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings; everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark. (Genesis 7:19-23)

What might have inspired the telling of such a story? Was it the movement of the tectonic plates and the consequent subduction at a time when no one knew about tectonic plates? In a society that attributed to God's action everything that happened, human transgression becomes a reasonable explanation for such cosmic events, although a crude correlation between human transgression and God's punishment for sin is all too simplistic.

So how do we read texts like this in an ecological age? Human transgression had to be confronted then as now. Indeed the whole purpose of our process is to reflect on what human exploitation has done to the river systems, albeit unintentionally, and to consider how we might mitigate or even reverse the damage. Such texts also remind us to respect the agency and power of water and of the other-than-human elements that formed part of the universe and of our planet long before the emergence of our species. They invite us to reflect on the extreme weather events that beset the planet as a result of climate change, and to support alternatives to fossil fuels for energy production. They invite us to look at the role of biodiversity over against the monoculture that has characterised much of the activity in river basins such as the Murray-Darling over the past fifty years or so. They invite us to locate our economy (the rules of the household of God) within the framework of ecology (the study of the entire household of God).

Engaging the Gospel Tradition

Mark and the Waters of the Jordan

When we turn to the first gospel, we find "the people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem" (Mark 1:5) drawn to the river Jordan for the baptism that John the Baptizer has to offer. Mark 1:9-11 recounts the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. As Jesus comes up "out of the water", he sees the "heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending." The three-tiered cosmogony that informs the Genesis stories of the beginnings also informs these accounts. Just as the Spirit descends from the heavenly realm above so too does the voice of God that authorises Jesus as "my Son, the beloved". God's words echo the words of Isaiah 42. Jesus is God's chosen who is to be a light to the nations.

Reference to the Jordan River in this context evokes the Israelites' passing over from slavery to freedom, initially through the Reed Sea (Exodus 14-15) and finally into the land of the Canaanites (Joshua 3). According to Joshua 3:14, the Jordan overflows "all its banks at the time of harvest". When the priests who carry the ark of the covenant dip their feet into the water, "the water flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap...[and] the people crossed over opposite Jericho" (Joshua 3:16). Just as the waters of the Nile had "formed a wall for them on their right and on their left" (Exodus 14:29) to pass over from the slavery of Egypt to the anticipated freedom of the desert, so now the waters of the Jordan rise up in a heap to allow them clear passage.

In the aftermath of the first crossing, water becomes an instrument of death for the Egyptian army. The crossing of the Jordan River is less problematic in that the flow of water is simply halted to

ensure the safe passage of the Israelites.¹¹ The Deuteronomic tradition depicts the land they are entering as “a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills” (Deuteronomy 8:7).

Some 2500 years ago, the Deuteronomist can create an image of a well-watered land and the author of Joshua 3 can write of the overflowing banks of the Jordan. Now the question is being asked, “Can the Jordan River be saved?”¹² Ironically, the traditional site of the baptism of Jesus has recently been closed on both sides of the river (Israel and Jordan) because of the toxicity of the water. The health of our rivers is a global issue. Increased international co-operation and the sharing of scientific expertise and wisdom are required for the sake of the river systems of our planet.

A Cup of Cold Water

Mark and Matthew both recount Jesus’ saying about a cup of cold water in his name. In Mark, the saying is addressed to the male disciples who are puzzled that someone other than their group is acting in Jesus’ name, “Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward” (Mark 9:40-41). Matthew’s account identifies the recipients of the water, “Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to *one of these little ones* in the name of a disciple--truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward” (Matthew 10:42). Restoring river systems in our times is about making cold water available to the human and other-than-human “little ones” of our planet.

A Claim on the Water

There are two stories in Luke about rightful claims on water. The first (in Luke 7:36-50) tells the story of a woman’s bodily fluids, her tears, having to substitute for the water that was denied to Jesus in the home of Simon the Pharisee. Jesus as guest could rightly make a claim on the water to wash his feet. The denial of water in this instance constituted a denial of hospitality. An unnamed woman understands and responds to Jesus’ unspoken claim on the water in a way that foregrounds the ignorance of a Pharisee, a respected teacher of the Law.

In the second story (in Luke 13:10-17) Jesus parallels the rightful claim of every donkey to water on the Sabbath with a daughter of Abraham’s claim to healing on the Sabbath, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” (Luke 13:15-16). Every member of the Earth community, human and other-than-human, has a claim on the water.

The Waters of Baptism

Four times in Luke’s second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, water is linked with baptism (Acts 1:5; 8:26-40; 10:44-8; 11:16). In Acts 1:5, John’s baptism “with water” is compared with the apostles’ immanent baptism “with the Holy Spirit” at Pentecost. The other three stories are about baptism into the Christian community.

Acts 8:26-40 tells the story of a high-ranking Ethiopian official, a eunuch of the court of Candace the queen of Ethiopia, who had been up to Jerusalem “to worship” and was on the first part of his journey home, on the “wilderness road” from Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip, one of the twelve, is instructed by the Spirit to go over to the carriage where the eunuch is reading aloud from the prophecy of Isaiah.

¹¹ Discussion of the issues around the taking of land that was already occupied is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹² See Peter Schwartz in the Middle East, National Geographic, February 22, 2014. http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/02/140222-jordan-river-syrian-refugees-water-environment/?rptregcta=reg_free_np&rptregcampaign=2015012_invitation_ro_all#. Accessed 15/08/2015.

Philip's inquiry of the eunuch is strange indeed. He asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch's reply, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" is followed by an invitation to Philip to get into the chariot, sit beside him and explain the meaning of the Isaian passage about the sheep led to the slaughter. Philip uses the opportunity to proclaim "the good news about Jesus". He does this so effectively that the Ethiopian responds with a request for baptism then and there. The story continues,

As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized? He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit ...snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea (Acts 8:36-40).

Readers are left to fill many gaps in this story. The good news about Jesus that Philip shared with the Ethiopian official clearly included the significance of water baptism for membership in the new community of Christian Jews. It is the Ethiopian and not Philip who sees the body of water by the roadside as an opportunity for him to be baptised. That both go down into the water and both come up out of the water suggests immersion in a substantial body of water. Later Christian tradition claimed the spring of living water of El-Haniyeh in the Rephaim Valley (see 2 Samuel 5:18; Isaiah 17:5) as the site of this event.¹³

While baptismal references occur quite frequently in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline literature, there is no mention of the symbolism of water except in Titus 3:5 which speaks of salvation "not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to [God's] mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit".

1 Peter, a letter addressed to displaced persons, resident aliens and visiting strangers (so John H. Elliott),¹⁴ is possibly a baptismal homily or at least incorporates a number of baptismal hymns (so M.-E. Boismard, O.P.).¹⁵ It depicts the building of Noah's ark as a prefiguring of baptism,

God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you--not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:20-21)

In this letter, the displaced are assured that within the community of the baptised, there is a home for the homeless. What might this mean in our times, as the displaced of the Earth community, including the bird and animal life of the river basins, seek a home?

Living Water

The final word in this paper belongs to the Johannine literature where the concept of living water finds its source and inspiration especially in the dialogue of John 4 between a Samaritan woman and Jesus. Christiana Z. Peppard summarises mainstream traditional interpretations of this story in a syllogism: "Jesus is to the Samaritan woman as purity is to adultery, and as spiritual, living water is to well water".¹⁶ She evaluates such interpretations as "insufficient". Turning rather to Sandra

¹³ Karl Baedeker, *Palestine and Syria: Handbook for Travellers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1876) 321.

¹⁴ *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (London: SCM Press, 1982) 59-100.

¹⁵ *Quatre Hymnes Baptismales dans la Première Épître de Pierre* (Paris: Cerf, 1961).

¹⁶ *Just Water: Theology, Ethics and the Global Water Crisis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014) 172.

Schneiders' focus on the role of the reader in interpreting texts, she proposes that readers bring a "hydrological hermeneutic" to this particular text.

Peppard draws attention to recent interpretations that emphasise the woman's prophetic role in proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah and that deconstruct the hierarchical dualisms of traditional readings of the story. In Stephen Moore's interpretation, for instance, the Samaritan woman's story is to be read in dialogue with the thirst of Jesus on the cross, a thirst that returns the reader to the well. In Peppard's summary of Moore's reading, "Well water and living water, matter and spirit, are all part of the same flow. Water for living and living water depend on one another, inextricably".¹⁷ Peppard wants to go further than Moore, however. She stresses the need "to historicize and contextualize water", to attend to the historical and material realities of water in multiple ancient and contemporary contexts.

The Samaritan woman is a water bearer. She belongs in a long, long line of women whose lot as women is to undertake the burdensome, often dangerous, daily toil of carrying water so that their families might simply survive. She knows the difference between the still water of the well and living water. As Kathleen Rushton explains:

A significant subtlety highlights two understandings of water. When the woman, whom I shall call Photina (as she is known in the Eastern Church), describes the well (*phrear*), the word means 'still water' (John 4:11-12). This had been separated from its source by being collected in a cistern or pool. 'Living water' was wild water from a river or spring. 'Spring' (*pēgē*) is used twice (v 6) to refer to Jacob's well, once when Jesus was sitting by the well, and again, when he spoke of 'living water' (v 14).¹⁸

Rushton brings her own hydrological hermeneutic to several dimensions of the text. She comments on Photina's response to Jesus' command that she give him a drink: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Underlying this response is the long-standing hostility between Jews and Samaritans. Rushton notes that the spring-fed well of their common ancestor [Jacob] was "to provide 'living water' for all [and yet] over centuries land made valuable because of this water was held in private ownership by succeeding generations".¹⁹

Photina's story deserves far greater attention than the restraints of this paper permit. As we struggle with issues relating to water, we might bring the implied words of Jesus at the well *I thirst*, his spoken words from the cross *I thirst* and the implied thirst of Photina into dialogue with the thirst of the 750 million on our planet who yearn for living water.

Conclusion

We have journeyed over fourteen billion years, from the formation of the elements that constitute water to the reflections on water in the traditions of Israel and in our originating Christian scriptures. We have attended to both the material and the symbolic dimensions of water in our sacred texts and brought all of this into dialogue with the issue at hand. As we work together for solutions to this issue, let us never forget that water is gift. As the Book of Revelation puts us, "Then [the one seated on the throne] said to me, 'It is done!...To the thirsty I will give water *as a gift* from the spring of the water of life'" (Revelation 21:6). In Revelation 22:6 we read, "Let anyone who wishes take *the water of life as a gift*". Water is God's gift to the whole Earth community. As gift, it is to be received graciously and respectfully. It is indeed the water *of life* since there is no life on Earth without water. Let us take the water of life, but let us not take more than our share, for that would be to forget that it is gift. Let us take it, but let us not take it for granted.

¹⁷ *Just Water*, 176.

¹⁸ "Living Water from an Overflowing Well," *Tui Motu* (March 2014) 27.

¹⁹ "Living Water", 27.