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'Everything Will Live Where the River Goes'

by [Ched Myers](#) [2] | [April 2012](#) [1]

A Bible study on water, God, and redemption.



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In the Christian tradition we speak of baptismal waters as the symbolic source of renewed life. That metaphor, however, is predicated upon a broader biblical vector concerning “living waters.” The prophetic literature contains a recurring eschatological promise of social and environmental restoration through the “rehydration” of the world, a rich tradition worth exploring for ecological theology.



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In our historical moment we cannot talk about “waters of renewal” without first acknowledging the systematic “dehydration” of the earth by industrial civilization. Of the many specters of our deepening ecological crisis—climate change, species extinction, peak oil, declining natural fertility—one of the most pressing is “peak water.” The Pacific Institute’s Peter Gleick describes this as “the critical point, already reached in many areas of the

world, where we overtax the planet's ability to absorb the consequences of our water use." We see its symptoms in global desertification, widespread water insecurity, and declining water quality.

Our ancient ritual of baptism reflects a modern ecological fact: Without water there can be no life. Peak water, like the other grim trends, represents an endgame unless we "turn around." This should compel Christians not only to seek earth-literacy urgently, but also to re-read our Bibles from the perspective of the "groaning creation," as did Paul in Romans 8:21-22. Water is a good place to start. Though we in the First World take it for granted, it is a central justice and environmental issue that deserves both social analysis and theological reflection.

"WATERS SHALL BURST forth in the desert, streams in the wilderness; torrid earth shall become a pool; parched land, fountains of water" (Isaiah 35:6). This beloved trope is only one of many instances in the Hebrew Bible where divine salvation is articulated in terms of the renewal—not the destruction—of the earth. With so much wrongheaded Christian theology (and politics) anticipating the latter, it is imperative that we recover the former vision.

The "streams in the desert" tradition suggests that Israel's prophets understood that the arid climate of their Palestinian homeland was not natural. Rather, their deep memory understood the desert to be the result of historic processes of desertification, the result of centuries of relentless imperial economic exploitation of the land of the Middle East.

In particular, the prophets lamented the clear-cutting of the hardwood forests of highlands in Lebanon (e.g. 1 King 5:6ff; Zechariah 11:1ff; Isaiah 14:3-8, 37:22-24). But judgment would come: "The cedars of Lebanon exult over you," Isaiah inveighed against the king of Babylon, "saying, 'Since you were laid low, no one comes to cut us down'" (Isaiah 14:8). Yahweh's liberating plan is thus often portrayed in terms of reforestation, typified by Isaiah's promise that arid lands will once again host those cedars, "the glory of Lebanon" (35:1ff).

What makes this "greening" of the desert possible is that water will flow again. These renewed streams will also quench the thirst of the "poor and needy"—those marginalized by violence and oppression (Isaiah 41:17ff). Just as Pharaoh's army "got drowned" in the old Exodus story (Exodus 14), so in Isaiah do the travails of empire similarly disappear under water. These are extraordinary visions of social and ecological redemption as rehydration.

IN AN EMERGING focus on "watershed discipleship" here in California, we are exploring this notion of "hydrology as theology." Our biblical investigation led us naturally to analogous poetic traditions in the New Testament, especially John of Patmos' vision of the "River of Life" (Revelation 22:1ff).

Israel during the biblical period was a dry place indeed, with few perennial streams, inconsistent springs (e.g. James 3:12; 2 Peter 2:17), and just a handful of actual rivers, most of which were relatively far from populated areas such as Jerusalem. Those living in this arid climate were primarily familiar only with the stagnant, torpid water found in small ponds, seasonal wells, catchment tanks, ritual baths, or clay pots. Domestic water quality was often poor (hence the advice of 1 Timothy 5:23 to stop drinking only water, and use a little wine to offset stomach illnesses). In Palestine, water was—and is today—an issue of environmental sustainability and social justice.

John's River of Life stands in stark contrast to the realities of his readers at the time. It "shines like crystal" (Revelation 22:1). This is not a supernatural claim, but a poetic observation: Pure water indeed appears

crystalline when it is flowing freely from its earth source. Who has not been mesmerized by the dancing silver strands of a mountain stream? The seer's phrase "river of the water of life" (Greek *potamon hudatos zoēs*) connotes exactly that: the running, bubbling, lively water of a spring or brook. Experiences of such "living water," as the gospel of John puts it (*hudōr zōn*, John 4:10, 7:38) were rare indeed for this desert people. This river signals a dramatic restoration that brings life to the land and those dwelling on it.

John the Revelator acknowledges the ecology of grace: Water is a divine "gift" (Revelation 21:6). "Let the one who thirsts come forward, and ... receive the gift of living water" (22:17). Here he appropriates another subversive promise of Isaiah, which envisioned an end to the commodification and privatization of water by the powerful: "All who are thirsty, come for water, even if you have no money" (Isaiah 55:1).

The Revelator's River of Life runs "through the middle of the great street of the city" (Revelation 22:2; *plateia* connotes the main thoroughfare of a Hellenistic metropolis). Poignantly, earlier in the Apocalypse this *plateia* was the space of political violence, where the bodies of two prophets murdered by the imperial Beast lay in public view for three and a half days as a spectacle of state terror (Revelation 11:8-9). But here at the end of the vision this street has become "transparent as glass" (Revelation 21:21). Earlier John identified this same image with water: God's throne is perched upon "a sea of glass like crystal" (4:6; this vocabulary appears only in Revelation, and may connote "ice"). It is as if New Jerusalem's Main Street dissolves into a purifying river that washes away the blood of empire.

These living waters "proceed from the throne of God and of the Lamb" (Revelation 22:1). Elsewhere in Revelation they are depicted as a spring (Greek *pēgē*). The martyrs "will not thirst anymore" because they are led to God's throne, from which flow "springs of living water" (*zoēs pēgas hudatōn*, Revelation 7:16ff). This echoes Isaiah's vision of liberation from empire in which prisoners are led to water (Isaiah 49:9-10).

The notion of Yahweh as a cosmic fount is found in several places in the Hebrew Bible. "With you is the spring of life," sings the psalmist (Psalm 36:9; Hebrew *chay maqowr*). Jeremiah laments that his people have abandoned "the fountain of living water" (Hebrew *mayim chay maqowr*) for their own stagnant and leaky cisterns (Jeremiah 2:13; see 17:13). This image is also linked to fertility: *maqowr* can connote "descendants" (e.g. Psalm 68:27; Proverbs 5:18; Isaiah 48:1; and Song of Songs 4:15).

Such biblical metaphors identify water tightly with God. There are at least four ways in which water teaches about the character of the Creator.

1. There can be no life without water. It is the primary building block of creation, covering 71 percent of the Earth's surface, and constituting on average 60 percent of the human body. It cannot be destroyed—though if it is degraded, it loses its healing character.

2. Water exists in many forms that manifest in a great circle of life. The hydrological cycle moves from the heavens (condensation, precipitation) to earth and beneath (infiltration), to the sea and other large bodies of water (surface runoff, groundwater discharge), and finally back to the heavens (evaporation).

3. Water can be patient and accommodating, flowing around obstacles. Yet it also has the power to wear down the greatest physical structures (or burst them apart through expanding ice); it thus makes hard things smooth over time. Water has the capacity to carry, but also to drown. For humans, immersion can lead to either life or death, and the Bible is full of examples of both.

4. Water is a symbol of justice. Most substantial when fluid, it flows downward, seeking the level, a poignant metaphor of divine concern for the “lowest.” Thus Amos appeals for “justice to flow down like a perennial stream” (Amos 5:24).

It is hardly surprising then that the biblical story begins (Genesis 1:2) and ends (Revelation 22:1-17) in a “waterworld.” John envisioned a renewed earth that is, literally, saturated: When God transfigures the world, the waters will flow abundantly again.

JOHN’S APOCALYPSE rehabilitated a recurring image in the proto-apocalyptic oracles of several later Israelite prophets. Joel prophesied that “all the watercourses of Judah shall flow with water, and a spring shall issue from the House of the Lord and shall water the wadi of the Acacias” (Joel 4:18). So too Zechariah: “In that day, fresh water shall flow from Jerusalem, part of it to the Eastern Sea and part to the Western Sea, throughout the summer and winter” (Zechariah 14:8).

But the most elaborate articulation of “redemption as rehydration” is found in Ezekiel’s vision, toward the end of his concluding description of eschatological Israel, its land, and temple-city (Ezekiel 40-48). The first part of the oracle narrates a “rising tide” of waters flowing out from the temple from all four directions (47:1-2). Then begins a refrain in which, for each “one thousand cubits” going east, the water gets deeper: first to the ankles, then the knees, waist, and finally “a river that I could not cross” (47:3-5).

Implied here is the eschatological restoration of the Gihon spring, which (inconsistently) supplied water to Jerusalem (Gihon is one of the four rivers of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:13). Theodore Hiebert, in *The Yahwist’s Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel*, also notes that the biblical literature often seems to identify Eden with the Jordan Valley in primeval times—before desertification.

Sure enough, in the second half of Ezekiel’s oracle, all of Palestine is “re-created” by the waters flowing from the temple (Ezekiel 47:6ff). They reach all the way to the Dead Sea, which becomes fresh again: “Every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be many fish, once these waters reach there ... everything will live where the river goes” (47:9).

Unlike the flood of Genesis 7, Ezekiel’s surging river is life-giving, heralding an explosion of fecundity. Interestingly, an “ecological preserve” of brackish swamps is also included (47:11). Ezekiel’s vision culminates with “all kinds of trees” that bear year-round, both for consumption and medicine (47:12; a nod to the Eden story, since aside from olive groves orchards were not particularly characteristic of agrarian Israel).

In Revelation, John the Seer is clearly alluding to Ezekiel’s vision of ecological restoration. But he also invokes the Eden story (Genesis 2:9), turning Ezekiel’s orchard into a singular Tree of Life that seems to straddle the River of Life, yielding spectacular fruits each month (Revelation 22:2). Its 12 crops correspond to the central symbolic number of the Apocalypse (*dōdeka* appears 20 other times in the book). This numeric figure also represents the restored nation of Israel, hearkening back to the primal days of the tribal confederacy (a theme also explicitly addressed in Ezekiel’s vision, see Ezekiel 47:13 - 48:35). But this is an inclusive political vision: The leaves of John’s Tree are for medicine for the healing of the nations (Revelation 21:24).

John has cosmically “transplanted” the Tree of Life from the primeval Garden into the heart of the eschatological City. But the former has transfigured the latter; the New Jerusalem is no longer recognizable as an urban space (at least as defined by our civilization, which builds over and against nature). And all this is possible because the world has been rehydrated.

THESE PROPHETIC VISIONS represent profound articulations of social and environmental restorative justice for an ancient desert people for whom dehydration was a daily reality. They speak equally sharply to our own time, hostage as we are to widespread degradation and commodification of this primary gift of life, to the stark realities of “peak water,” and to the depressing prospect of unending resource wars.

Our lands are parched not by nature, but by imperial hubris. In such a world, these biblical visions of redemption as rehydration, of quenching every thirst, are compelling. May we persuade our faith communities to reclaim them for our theology, our liturgy, and our political practices—watershed by watershed.

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