

CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS ON WATER

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Water is inseparable from life. Covering over 70% of Earth’s surface, it was the original medium for the emergence of life itself. Without it, no organism survives. Yet despite its widespread presence, clean fresh water is rare, comprising less than 1% of the global total. For our survival, humanity needs an ethic that places a high value on water.

Water - Under Threat

The world’s supply of fresh water faces serious threats. As human population grows, water use increases, as does sewage-contaminated water, polluted agricultural runoff, and water that’s fouled from industrial, commercial and residential uses. Suburban sprawl is a global phenomenon, increasing polluted storm water runoff and lacing aquifers with chemical residues.

In addition, nearly 1 billion people lack access to clean drinking water. In a growing number of locations, lack of fresh water creates political instability.ⁱ This will only get worse. Weather pattern changes due to climate change, resulting in droughts in some parts of the world and floods in others, will create an estimated 250 million climate refugees by 2050.ⁱⁱ Always a source of life, water will also be a source of international insecurity.

Cornerstone of Society

Without an ample supply of water, human society would collapse. Try living even one day without it, and you’ll soon realize the meaning of dependency. The ancient Israelites and early Christians understood water’s value—there are at least ten words for “rain” in biblical Hebrew, eight for “cloud,” and numerous terms for springs, wells, cisterns and aqueducts.ⁱⁱⁱ The people of the ancient Near East developed and depended on these technologies for collecting as much water as possible: wells, cisterns^{iv} for rainwater, tunnels which allowed access to springs in wartime, aqueducts to bring water into the cities, and terrace farming to maximize the benefits of rainfall on hilly areas. No one survives long without water, and all cultures seek to protect an adequate supply.

Biblical Themes on Water

There are numerous references to water in the Bible – more than 700 in all. Across these passages, several themes emerge.

Life Emerges out of Water

Whether in Genesis 1, in which the entire created order emerges out of water and God makes the waters “swarm” with life (Gen. 1:20-21), or in the second Creation story in which God makes “a stream ... rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground” (Genesis 2:6), life emerges from water. Consistent with our understanding of science (no water, no life), the Bible reminds us of our utter dependence on water. It is our origin. It sustains and renews us. It makes everything possible.

Water Represents Christ's Life in Us

In baptism we descend into water and emerge a new person, our dying with Christ and being raised with him echoing Christ's own immersion and emergence (see Matthew 3, Mark 1, Luke 3). In his memorable encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus refers to himself as the source of "living water" (John 4:10); elsewhere in the New Testament, trusting in Jesus lets loose "rivers of living water" (John 7:38) within the human heart. In each of these cases – which embody initiation, conversion, and renewal – water is a mysterious, encompassing signal of Christ's overflowing presence in the depths of life.

Water, Intimacy and Compassion

Our relationship with water is, unavoidably, both fundamental and intimate. At its most basic, water satisfies two basic human/animal needs, quenching thirst and cleaning us. And like Christ, water is deep within us and vapor-like, pressing as close against us as the air itself.

After the Last Supper when he washes his disciples' feet, Jesus unites the basic and intimate in a simple, forceful expression of love. And, to prevent us from over-spiritualizing water's importance, Jesus reminds us that "if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones . . . , truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward." (Matthew 10:42)

Metaphor for Divine Purification and Restoration

Following the above-mentioned physical dimensions to water's role in our lives, the Bible also uses water as a metaphor to describe the divine in action. "Wash me through and through and I'll be clean," says Psalm 51, invoking water (without directly mentioning it) as a liquid tool in God's hands or, even, as God's very own self which purifies by its own inner dynamism. And in being led "beside the still waters" which restores our soul, (Ps. 23:2) we remember the cool, soft, bracing refreshment – of water and of God - that awakens and soothes us at the same time.

Water, Freedom and Danger

In both Jesus' baptism and the Israelites' successful escape from slavery, water is God's agent of liberation. It frees us from enslavement to oppression, outer and inner. It dissolves bonds that chokingly bind. It gives us a chance to step into the clear light of day.

While remembering water's power to free us, we're wise to remember that, biblically, water also represents a threat to those who oppose God's will – just ask Pharaoh's army, drowned in pursuit of Moses and the Israelites. This Biblical metaphor stands in contrast to the sad reality that many of the world's poorest and most vulnerable are threatened by rising waters or drought, through the effects of man-made climate change.

Conclusion and Discussion

Origin of life. Christ's life within us. Sign of compassion, purification and restoration. Agent of freedom. Various experiences of water, rooted in the ecology of the Holy Land and the life of the early church, created a rich vocabulary in which Christians expressed their relationship with water, and with Christ.

The challenge to us? Internalizing these rich teachings, interpreting them for today, and developing an ethic of water that meets the needs of the present age.

Questions for Discussion

1. **What water metaphors work today?** The essay describes several water-related images or metaphors that Jews have used to describe God – fountain of life, source of purification, origin and final promise, etc. Create a metaphor, or adapt one of these traditional metaphors, that you would use today to refer to the divine. Discuss the metaphors developed by members of your small group.
2. **What's your Water Ethic?** As you consider the value of water and the need to preserve it, what would be your own personal water ethic? Write a short paragraph, no more than 3 sentences, that captures your water ethic. Consider key words, Christian themes and potential action steps.
3. **Water and Security – how to engage beyond apparent abundance?** North Americans today enjoy a level of “water security” that would have been inconceivable to those in Jesus’ day. What can our faith communities do, concretely, to increase awareness that water is scarce, valuable and vital?
4. **Water and Purification.** Ancient purity laws and rituals, which usually involved water, appeared in a time when the threat of infection was extremely high, and cleanliness was a matter of life and death. In recent years, the growth of the bottled water industry has turned the deep human fear of contamination into a multi-billion dollar industry with negative environmental impacts. How can our natural desire for purity be interpreted today in a way that supports water conservation and protection?

ⁱWorldwatch Institute, *State of the World 2005: Redefining World Security*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005); Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit*, (Cambridge: South End Press, 2002).

ⁱⁱCARE report, “In Search of Shelter Mapping the Effects of Climate Change on Human Migration and Displacement,” from: <http://www.careclimatechange.org/publications/global-reports>.

ⁱⁱⁱGarry A. Rensburg, “From the Desert to the Sown: Israel’s Encounter with the Land of Canaan,” in: Leonard J. Greenspoon (ed.), *The Mountains Shall Drip Wine: Jews and the Environment*, (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2009), p. 112-113; Daniel Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible: An Environmental Exploration of the Hebrew Scriptures*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 317 n. 12; John Peter “Water Works” in: David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), Volume 6 p. 883-893.

^{iv}The effectiveness of cisterns to hold water for use can be seen in the following analysis: In an area with 4 inches of rain per year, the runoff from a 1 hectare field is 403 inches of water. If 20% of this water is caught and stored it is enough water for 1 gallon of water per day for 100 people or 700 sheep.