

SEEING WATER AS A CENTRAL ELEMENT IN GENESIS 1-9: ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR ECOLOGICAL DISCOURSE IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

An attentive study of the accounts of the origins in Genesis 1-9 discovers the centrality of the element water in the creation, preservation, destruction and further restoration of all things. The accounts present water as a great force in all its ramifications. The Creator realises this great potentiality of water and takes extra care in putting it under effective control and management so that it serves the creative purpose. Everything in creation is seen to thrive as long as water is put to effective use. Interestingly the same water is used to destroy creation and to preserve it. All these challenge greater consciousness and discussion on the role of water in the ecological discourse. All talk of environmental health goes back to the effective use of water. Unfortunately, water remains a scarce commodity in the African context not only because of drought and allied natural causes but due more to recklessness on the human agents who should have put it to greater control and management. Many parts of Nigeria are blessed with natural sources of water, yet, people suffer terribly for lack of water. The present essay, using a synchronic reading approach, examines the role of water in Genesis 1-9 and its abiding lessons for the present ecological discussions.

Key words: ecology, ecosystem, environment, creation, health, life, sanitation, water.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present essay addresses this issue of the centrality of water with particular focus on the biblical account of the origin of the species in Genesis 1-9. These texts are by no means unitary as they contain a complex combination of mythical and quasi-mythical stories from different epochs and ideological concerns. However, one element that stands out is the centrality of water in the different accounts of creation and destruction of the created order. The essay sees the text as a great inspiration to the contemporary discussions on ecological sustainability. The text provides a theological basis for putting water at the centre of the discussion. Water remains a major factor in development and environmental health, and for the African and the Nigerian context, it remains a topical matter. The place of water in organic life cannot be overemphasized. The fact is that it plays a basic role in every life and all efforts at environmental health depend ultimately on the provision and management of water. Water is thus central to the contemporary ecological discourse. This is even more the case in the camp of eco-theology. The discussion is carried out through a synchronic analysis of the biblical text, which is also subjected to a contextual application.

2. WATER AS A FACTOR IN CREATION

The creation account in Gen 1:1-4a presents water as a basic factor in the emergence of things. Though one can speak of creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), still water plays a causal role in the emergence of things within the created universe. This becomes clear as one takes a close look at the narrative. The major interest here is Gen 1:1-22, within which water

is mentioned as a defining element in the creative activity. The first mention of water is in Gen 1:2 where the created world is said to be covered with water. The text of 1:1-2 reads:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now, the earth was a formless void (*tohu wabohu*) and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters (*mayim*).

Significantly there is no clear mention of the creation of water in the text. The mention of the waters (*mayim*) is made in such a way that the critical reader may think that it was an uncreated mass. However, it may be taken for granted that water is included in the report in 1:1 that God created the heavens and the earth. Immediately, the author says that the created world is enclosed in chaos (*tohu wabohu*), rendered as formlessness and void. The cause of this chaos is identified in v. 2 by the three terms: darkness (*hoshek*), deep or abyss (*tehom*) and waters (*mayim*). Remarkably, nothing is said about the creation of these apparent forces of disorder. What can be deduced from the text is that the creation of the heavens and the earth is a product of one single act. This single act is qualified as *bārā'* ("he created") in 1:1. The heavens and the earth here represent the totality of everything, including the waters.¹

At this primordial stage, the state of things is not yet well defined as all is just a watery mass, which the text calls *t^hôm* (deep, abyss = primeval sea). The Hebrew noun *t^hôm* occurs 36 times in the Hebrew Bible, and only 4 of these are attested in Genesis (1:2; 7:11; 8:2; 49:25).² It is used to identify the great deep containing the great mass of water, and because of this it is often used synonymously with the water itself. In Gen 1:2, it refers to the whole mass of the universe covered with water. The situation in v. 2 is that this immense mass of water is enclosed in darkness. So the writer qualifies the whole state of affairs as a state of formlessness, emptiness (*tohu wabohu*).

However, the great collection of water called *t^hôm* (deep, abyss) is never presented in the Old Testament as evil. In Gen 7:11 and 8:2, the abyss simply denotes the subterranean sea or ocean from which the waters of the flood emerge. In the account of Jacob's blessing of his sons in Gen 49:1-27, the abyss (*t^hôm*) is regarded as a blessing for Joseph: "From the God of your father who will help you, God Almighty who will bless you with the blessings of heaven above, the blessings of the abyss (*t^hôm*) that lies below, the blessings of breasts and womb" (Gen 49: 25). The present text of Gen 1:2 simply expresses the watery universe as a state of formlessness. The subsequent creative acts will consist in governing the natural forces, that is, controlling or regulating the three causes of the disorder: the darkness, the abyss and the waters.³ The point is that nature needs to be governed and controlled for it to serve its creative purpose. The subsequent acts of creation have to do with the regulation of the waters.

2.1. The Control of the Waters (Gen 1:3-10)

The creation of light in v. 3 is meant to overcome the darkness covering the waters. The light is divided from the darkness, as the light is called day while the darkness is called night (vv. 4-5). The created light illumines the waters and makes them appear in their splendour. The next creative act has to do with the ordering of the waters. In v. 6, God creates the vault (*rāqîa'*) to separate the waters. The interesting thing here is that the vault, also called a dome

¹ For further light on these issues, see Luke E. Ijezie, "Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-2:4 as a Model of Political Governance," *African Journal of Contextual Theology* 2 (2010) 29-43.

² See C. Westermann, "*t^hôm*," *TLOT* 3, 1411.

³ See Ijezie, "Creation Account," 33.

or firmament, is presented as separating two levels of water, one under the vault and the other above the vault (vv. 7-8).⁴ This implies that the content of the heavens and the earth created in v. 1 is actually water. The vault becomes identified as the sky or heavens (*shamayim*) and functions as a separator of the waters. The separation continues as the waters are made to gather in a single mass thus enabling the emergence of the dry land (*yabashah*), which is now called earth (*aretz*), while the immense collection of water is identified as the seas or *yammim* (vv. 9-10).

2.2 Emergence of Living Things through the Management of the Waters (1:11-25)

The regulation of the waters brings about a favourable environment for the emergence of living things. Different forms of vegetation are made to emerge from the ground (vv. 11-13). Further, all the sea creatures, flying things and land creatures are made to emerge in there biodiversity (vv. 20-25). The noteworthy point here is that the emergence of life is strictly tied to the management of the waters by the Creator. The ecosystem is now in full form waiting for the emergence of the human species to take the role of leadership.

3. WATER AS ELEMENT IN THE PRESERVATION OF CREATION (Gen 2:4b-3:24)

In the second account of creation in Gen 2:4b-3:24, water is presented again as the central element in the emergence of things. This is clear in the opening text of 2:4b-5:

At the time when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, while as yet there was no field shrub on earth and no grass of the field had sprouted, for the LORD God had sent no rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil.

According to this text, the created world is suffering two forms of crisis: no water to moisture the land and bring about vegetation and no human being to cultivate the land. If in the first account of creation, everywhere is water, in this second account, water is in scarce supply. Ecologically, this is an unwholesome situation for the emergence of any form of life. The Lord God resolves this crisis by bringing about the irrigation of the land and by creating the human being (Adam). The irrigation is explained thus in v. 6: “but a stream was welling up out of the earth and was watering all the surface of the ground.” The water functions to make the land arable for cultivation. Water is a symbol of life, and a world without water is a lifeless world. With the provision of water, the land is empowered to produce and enhance life. But water is not enough to make the created land realize its divine purpose. There must be a human agency to manage affairs. The Creator demonstrates this by fashioning the human being, planting a beautiful garden in Eden (v. 8) and then placing the human being there to cultivate and guard it. The author of this text is very careful to underline the fact that the watering of the earth is not done by man but by the Creator himself. God brings the water, fashions the man, plants the garden himself and employs human labour for the garden. Here God functions as a great agriculturist.

The writer spends a little more comment on the source of water supply and its importance for the created world.

⁴ For discussion on the meaning of *rāqîa* ‘, see R. W. Younker and R. M. Davidson, “The Myth of the Solid Heavenly Dome. Another Look at the Hebrew רָקִיעַ (*rāqîa* ‘),” *AUSS* 49 (2011) 125-148.

A river rises in Eden to water the garden; beyond there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is the Pishon; it is the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. The gold of that land is excellent; bdellium and the onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is the Gihon; it is the one that winds all through the land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it is the one that flows east of Asshur. The fourth river is the Euphrates (2:11-14).

The point of these detailed descriptions is that the places are well known to the original audience of the text. The emphasis, thus, is on the causality of water for the fertility and wealth of these regions. The significant thing is that this water flows from Eden and multiplies to water the whole world. The luxuriant nature of the garden is caused by the abundance of water and the purposeful cultivation that emerges from the garden. This shows the significance of water as well as the managerial competence required to make the water effective.

4. WATER AS INSTRUMENT OF DESTRUCTION OF CREATION (Genesis 6-9)

The flood story in Genesis 6-9 recounts how the destructive power of the waters is unleashed on the created world as a punishment for evil. According to 6:11, “In the eyes of God the earth was corrupt and full of lawlessness.” This moral depravity has brought untold social chaos into the human society. As J. H. Walton puts it, “God uses the waters of chaos to eliminate social chaos.”⁵ The flood is actually God’s own reversal of what he did with the waters in Genesis 1. The separated waters were let loose to recede to the earth. It was a return to the original chaos of 1:2. This is graphically expressed in 7:11: “In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month: it was on that day that all the fountains of the great abyss burst forth, and the floodgates of the sky were opened.”

What happens here is that both the waters locked up in the designated portion of the earth (seas and oceans) and the waters above, which were separated by the vault, were all let loose. So water came from up and down, both from the sky (as rain) and from the land. This may sound strange to the modern scientific mind, but it reflects the worldview of the biblical writer. The flood narrative itself can hardly pass a scientific scrutiny, but it needs not be subjected to such scrutiny. Walton puts it well,

How should we assess the extent of the biblical flood? We first must understand that we have to deal with a text, specifically a text that is not only nonscientific but that also communicates within a prescientific worldview. Science is not in a position to make demands on the text, nor are interpreters in a position to import scientific concerns and perspectives into the text to satisfy their own worldviews. We must take the text on its own terms and be willing to accept it at face value.⁶

The fact is that the biblical worldview locates the position of water both above the sky and in the land. According to this belief, God holds the key to the movement of the waters in both locations, either through periodic rainfalls or through flooding. The flood story is an instance of God letting loose the imprisoned waters to destroy and purify the corrupted universe.

⁵ J. H. Walton, “Flood,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (eds. T. D. Alexander and D. W. Baker; Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2003) 323.

⁶ Walton, “flood,” 320.

Remarkably, at the end of the flood, God would make a covenant with Noah and his descendants (entire human race) never to unleash the flood waters again to wipe out creation (9:8-17).

5. CENTRALITY OF WATER IN ECOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

The text of Genesis 1-9 makes clear the centrality of water for the sustenance of creation. The human need for water cannot be overemphasized. The scandal is that in our African context and, particularly in our region, West Africa and Nigeria, the issue of water does not receive the required attention it should have had. It is embarrassing and pitiable that overwhelming millions of our people live their daily lives without ready access to decent water. It may be expedient to highlight some facts about the issue of water.

5.1 Water is central to the creation of a sustainable environment for healthy living. Just as in the creation story, the management of the sources of water is very critical for development. Lack of proper drainage systems creates a chaotic environment, detrimental to living. This is a perennial occurrence in the Nigerian cities. In most contemporary settings, flood and erosion menaces frustrate healthy living and development. One recalls the recent devastating experience of flood in Nigeria in 2012. From the reports of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), the flood was the worst in 40 years, and it affected 30 out of Nigeria's 36 states. The flood killed about 369 people and rendered 2.1 million people homeless. The monetary damage was put at N2.6 trillion.⁷ Flooding is a menace in all parts of Nigeria because of poor drainage systems and obstruction of waterways.⁸

5.2 Lack of access to potable water is responsible for inadequate sanitation and many problems of sustainable development. Most Nigerian homes have no ready source of water, and this applies to even some lower and higher institutions of learning. In many of these places, toilets are not flushed and kitchen utensils are not properly washed for lack of water. The health consequences are horrendous. It is an internationally attested fact that more than 2 million people die every year due to diseases connected with lack of water. Unfortunately, majority of these victims are Africans, and they continue to die daily. It is reported that about 80% of illnesses in developing countries are linked to inadequate water and poor sanitation.⁹

5.3 In Nigeria and many parts of West Africa, water exists in abundance as a natural resource but this is not made accessible to the majority of the inhabitants. This gives credence to the saying, Water everywhere but no water to drink. Ironically, many private boreholes are sunk with reckless abandon, yet the state cannot provide water for the majority of the populace. Lack of water means dirty homes and dirty environments.

5.4 The shortage of water frustrates development and causes incessant conflicts in many parts of Africa. For instance, in 1990 there was a violent clash between Nigeria and Cameroon caused by the use of the Lake Chad water which was drying up. This problem of the drying up of Lake Chad continues unabated, and it is the only source of water within that Sahel zone. Many lakes and rivers in Nigeria have the same problem of drying up or even total disappearance. Also, Egypt and Ethiopia have had their quarrels over the River Nile which is the major source of water for Egypt. Over 94% of Egypt's water supply comes from the Nile.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Nigeria_floods. Retrieved 29/03/2016

⁸ See Dokun Oyeshola, *Sustainable Development. Issue and Challenges for Nigeria* (Ibadan: Daily Graphics Nig. Ltd., 2008) 24.

⁹ The Water Project, Inc. [US] <https://thewaterproject.org/health>. Retrieved 29/03/2016

The attempt by Ethiopia to construct a dam in the Nile was seen by Egypt as a threat to its people who depend on the Nile for sustenance. The Nile Basin is said to be a source of water supply to about 300 million people in such African countries as Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Congo, Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia.¹⁰ In a similar vein, Ghana and Burkina Faso share a large percentage of the Upper Volta Basin, and analysts have seen this as a potential source of conflict, especially if the water is not properly managed. Burkina Faso is part of the Sahel region.

5.5 The question of water management must be taken seriously. Water must be managed to ensure its availability and accessibility to all, no matter the place of habitation. Much preference needs to be given to the poor in rural and urban centres in this regard. Regretably, most of our urban centres are indescribable slums largely because of the lack of potable water. In the question of water management, the issues of water supply, distribution, consumption and conservation must be seriously and responsibly addressed.

5.6 The water problem is such an all-encompassing phenomenon that it has multiple effects in physical, ethical, social and religious dimensions of life. In all religions and, particularly in the biblical religions, water is a symbol of life and purification. It is used for purification by Christians, Moslems and Traditional worshippers.

5.7 On the pan-cosmic level, water is necessary for the safeguard of the integrity of creation, for the conservation of the ecosystem with its myriads of flora and fauna. All these are inevitable for a healthy environment and harmonious cosmic life.

6. CONCLUSION

This discussion has exposed how the biblical text places the element water at the very centre of God's creative activity in Genesis 1-9. The creation accounts in 1-3 and the recreation account in 6-9 all stress the centrality of water as necessary for life in the created world. The present day ecological discourse cannot but take a cue from this biblical message and pay greater attention to the issues of the provision of water for better life, especially in Africa. Religious bodies in Africa have the duty to sensitize the society on the topical issue of water and ecological health. The biblical text and such documents, such as the papal encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, remain valuable reference points in this eco-apostolate.

¹⁰ *Africa Review*, [www.africareview.com/Special Reports/Understanding-the-water-wars-in-Africa](http://www.africareview.com/Special%20Reports/Understanding-the-water-wars-in-Africa). Retrieved 29/03/2016