

Towards a Biblical understanding of water.

"Water is the beginning of everything. It is the first nourishment. It is the blood of the earth."
Ryszard Kopuscinski

Introduction

I was fascinated to write a paper on the Biblical understanding of water since I have not embarked upon such an idea before. As human beings who have our primary basis of life in land and water, let us try to do our theological reflection of water. Water reminds us how much we depend on nature for our survival. Our history, without doubt, is a history of the relationship between the human beings and water, be it wells, lakes, rivers, sea or oceans.

Once when I went to my native village and asked the eldest surviving members, how long have we lived in this village and when did our ancestors actually start living in this land, I met with a sharp reply from one of them, "Only our wells know when they actually came here". The wells have nourished all of us since the day we started living here and while doing so has also our history with it. Human civilizations emerged on river beds (Indus, Nile, Tigris). River and sea navigations furthered our civilizations, often to cynicism of the Bible!

Water is a paradigm for life. It plays strong cultural symbolisms, defines one's religious beliefs, a key factor in economics, has founded and ended many political systems, a theme for numerous literary classics and generated many myths of unparalleled powers around the world. Hence, it is extremely difficult to handle with this theme, given its multi dimensional and over reaching nature to many directions. The ecological sensitivity which 'water' brings in the recent times has furthered the debates on water. The burning issue of linking of the national rivers in India has raised fresh complications for the appropriate interactions with water for the future. The global threat due to the competition of 'yellow gold' has now shifted to the competition of 'blue gold'. In such circumstances, it is quite true to say that we discuss about 'life' when we discuss about 'water'.

Water as paradigm of life

Bible describes Eden as a garden with a river with four tributaries flowing in it, Pishon, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates.¹ The Exilic visionary Ezekiel foresaw a community of overflowing life where a river was flowing from the temple. Four branches are flowing on four sides. People are fishing on both sides of the rivers. All the living creatures will live due to the water. There will be all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will bring healing to all the infirmities.² Revelation views a restored community where the 'river of the water of life' was flowing from the throne of God and of the lamb. On either side of the tree are the 'tree of life' offering twelve kinds of fruits for twelve months of the year. The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.³ These passages remind of a tradition where water serves as a symbolism of 'life'. Jesus was symbolically speaking of himself as the fountain of living water and any one who drinks of him does not thirst of water again.⁴ He clearly refers to human life in all its entirety here. Perhaps Jesus was drawing from the Jeremianic traditions of seeing God as the source of life in the metaphor of water. "They have forsaken me the fountain of living water and dug out cisterns for themselves cracked cisterns that can hold no water".⁵

Water in a cultural lingua

Water is a cultural metaphor and it brings the whole world of ideas into it when it is used in a variety of meanings. The saying, "unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence" refers to a kind of character in human beings.⁶ Water is used as a parable for something which reflects another thing. "As in water, face answers face, so the mind of the man reflects the man".⁷ When the people are unable to gather themselves, they say, they have become like water. "We are like the water split on the ground, which cannot be gathered again".⁸ "He who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind".⁹ The wise man who meditates the Torah is like a tree planted by the streams of water.¹⁰ Water marked the barrier between the non equals in a community. Jews did not have the habit of accepting the water from the Samaritans.¹¹ Pilate washed his hands to show that he was not responsible when Jesus was handed over to death.¹² This shows

how the idea of water penetrates deeply into the human psyche, both as individuals and as collective.

Water as polemic:

I intend to bring some aspects of faith with reference to the water here. The prophet Isaiah was once inspired to a comparison of "the waters of Shiloh and the waters of Euphrates".¹³ The gentle waters of Shiloh, which flows from a spring to a pool, appeared trust worthy whereas to trust the mighty waters of Euphrates could be disastrous. The gentle waters of Shiloh are compared to trusting in YHWH whereas to trust in the waters of Euphrates is like trusting in the Assyrians. God brings life and these oppressive kingdoms bring death. To turn away from the gentle waters is to bring the mighty waters against themselves. We do not have to strain ourselves in identifying who the mighty waters are today. However, it is wise to be warned of the powers of these mighty waters and the illusions of trusting them in the place of God. God alone can sustain human life.

The whole of the flood stories emerge from this background of seeing the Euphrates as an adversary of God. The raging and the unruly waters symbolised the powers which are opposed to God's sovereignty and therefore threatened to destroy the meaningfulness of history. The world has the possibility to return to the pre-creation chaos. These demonic powers of the mighty waters were mythified forms of their historical enemies who threatened the existence of Israel. However, they believed in God who was able to preserve the righteous through the floods. Hence these myths refer to the relationship between the humanity and water on one level and to the contradictions within the human society on an other level.

Water and human liberation

It is interesting to see how water is an active participant in human liberation according to the folk language of the Bible. When the people of Israel were liberated from Egypt, waters offer the passage for the liberated whereas it becomes the death snare for the pursuing oppressors. The waters of Nile became blood, and the dead animals stinking when the Pharaoh refused the liberation movement of the people to go free.¹⁴ When the

Israelites were threatened of death due to lack of water, God provided them water thus sustaining their life and liberation.¹⁵ Miriam's well is a well known legend among the people of Israel. It moved with them as they walked through the wilderness until the day when Miriam was dead. Hagar story also reminds how God sustains the thrown away people with water.¹⁶ God's justice to the landless fugitives was shown in the form of a good land, "a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills".¹⁷ God will provide rain and feed the plants, animals, birds and human beings.¹⁸

However, if their justice did not roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream,¹⁹ this rain from the heaven may be in jeopardy. God will become "like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail."²⁰ As in the case of Jonah, when they refuse to proclaim the justice concerns of God, water may turn against them.²¹ When the violence and injustice mounted up, they had to meet the vengeance of God in the form of floods.²²

The waters of Jordan healed when the army men were willing to be transformed into becoming like children.²³ The water was willing to become wine when the son of man wanted to celebrate with his people.²⁴ The waters cherished supporting the Messiah walking on their back while self glorying Peters and pigs could be thrown into the waters.²⁵ Water as sustaining life, sustaining liberation, its participation in maintaining justice and the creation of a new earth and heaven are very much part of our spirituality. We must join hands with all faiths and cultures of this world in seeking a new kind of relationship between the human and nature.

The interdependence of water and human

Water has always been friendly to human beings. However, we have not been so kind to water. All our food materials are produced with water. It takes 500 liters of water to raise a kilo of potatoes, 900 liters for a kilo of wheat, 2000 for a kilo of rice and soya, 3500 liters for a kilo of chicken, and a staggering 100,000 liters for a kilo of beef. But we are hardly thankful for the water. Even if we are not able to appreciate all for what the water is to us, at least shall we not be alarmed at the fact that life cannot be sustained without water. Due to our technology and the social structures, water is becoming a scarcity as

days advance. The level of the water table is going down. Rivers are getting dried up. The monsoons which use to bring the rain for six months a year are reduced to two months. Much of the agrarian lands are being reduced to dry lands due to our mindless deeds of greed and exploitation. The water resources are depleted in unprecedented ways. Water is being treated as a commodity. Water resources are privatized and sold. Tourism has led to the overuse of water by a few and the deprivation of water for many. Drought and famine are increasing. Interfering nature for artificial nature are further deteriorating the situation. This is a theological problem.

The quality of water is crucial to human life. Nearly half the people in the world, practically a majority of them in the developing countries, most of them poor, suffer from diseases related to insufficient and contaminated water. Two million people are at the risk of water borne and food borne diseases. These diseases are the main biological reason why nearly four million children die each year. Schistosomiasis infects some 200 million people through contact with infected water. Insect vectors which breed in stagnant water transmit malaria which infects 267 million people, filariasis infects 90 million people, onchocerciasis infects 18 million people, and dengue fever infects 30 to 60 millions every year.

In addition to biological agents, trace of chemicals in water can significantly affect human health. In countries where there is sufficient water supply, the threat comes from another corner. Pharmaceuticals excreted in urine have been detected in a number of water sources in Europe. Antibiotics excreted from the dairy farms have mixed with water and it is leading to a situation of antibiotic non resistance. The fishes in the back waters of Kerala die in massive numbers due to the pesticides washed down by the rivers which flowed from the tea plantations of Munar hills. Have we failed miserably to preserve the water which is basic to the survival of humanity in future? How did we turn water which nourished our life into a potential human killer?

Returning to myths

It is time we return to our old myths of living with harmony with water. Shall we resort to a collective human endeavor to return to ancient ways of preserving water. Water has life and it must be restored of its happiness. You visit the earth and water it. You greatly enrich it. The river of God is full of water.....You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers.....you crown the year with bounty.....the pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird them with joy, the meadows cloth themselves with flocks, the valley deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.²⁶

All celebrations must enter through the passage of water in the form of ritual cleaning. It is a reminder that our happiness depend on water. Whenever some one passed by Abraham's house, he would ask them, "let some water be taken and wash your feet". Hence Abraham became the epitome for hospitality. The Song of Songs compared the teeth of the lover to the flock of white eves coming up from the bath. Beautiful Bathsheba was presented to the eyes of David as coming from the waters while she was bathing on the roof top. How shall we repent that water will become our ally and not an enemy?

Conclusion

The central feature of the seventh day celebration of the Pesach is the singing of the song at the sea. Some Hasidic sects re enact the event by pouring the water on the ground and crossing it in a special dance. Some will go down to the sea and recite some special psalms. The crossing of the sea was the important event of the entire Egyptian episode. After all, it concludes the event. It is the climax, the most impressive of all the miracles, and only at the very end of the story are the Israelites safely away from Egypt. Moreover the crossing of the sea is deeply symbolical, reflecting a new creation. It is here that the slaves become a nation.

But in today's ritual, the first night of the Pesach eclipses the last. The importance lies in Egypt with the emphasis on the ten plagues. May be, this reflects a reality that they are still in Egypt, owing to their continued persecutions in history. Jewish people are still in Egypt, occasionally sharing the triumph of some temporary respite after a plague. But

they have not yet experienced the complete liberation experienced by the crossing of the sea. Like our Jewish brothers and sisters, our joy will be complete, only when we attain the final, complete liberation from all kinds of slavery including the death. In that comprehensive struggle for liberation, let water be the mark as set for the finality of things. We have a long way to travel to sing the song of the sea!

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¹ Genesis 2: 10-14.

² Ezekiel 47

³ Revelation 22:1-3.

⁴ John 4:14.

⁵ Jeremiah 2: 13.

⁶ Genesis 49:4

⁷ Proverbs 27:19.

⁸ II Samuel 14:14.

⁹ James 1:6.

¹⁰ Psalm 1:3, Jeremiah 17:7-8.

¹¹ John 4:9

¹² Mathew 27:24

¹³ Isaiah 8:5-8.

¹⁴ Exodus 7:17-18.

¹⁵ Exodus 17:6, Numbers 2-21.

¹⁶ Genesis 21.

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 8:7

¹⁸ Psalms 65:9-10.

¹⁹ Amos 5:24

²⁰ Jeremiah 15:18.

²¹ Jonah 1:12.

²² Genesis 6-8

²³ II Kings 5.

²⁴ John 2.

²⁵ Mark 6:48-51.

²⁶ Psalms 65:1-3.