

Stanley P Saunders,
Associate Professor of New Testament
Columbia Theological Seminary

Living Water: A Response to Martha Moore-Keish's "Common Waters"

The mosaic image in the apse of the Basilica of St. Giovanni in Laterano, in Rome, the traditional home parish of the Pope, blends together images of the baptism of Jesus, earthly paradise, and the resurrection.¹ The face of Jesus, surrounded by seraphim, gazes down on the viewer. Beneath him, a dove spews forth a stream of water that pours downward over a cross. The cross sits upon a mount from which four rivers stream, carefully labeled after the four rivers of Eden in Genesis 2:11-14. The rivers flow around a meadow that contains the heavenly Jerusalem and finally, at the bottom of the image, into the Jordan River, in which swans and cherubs swim. One cherub rides on the back of a swan. Another seems to be wind-surfing. The whole mosaic is detailed with symbols of the extravagant abundance of creation's gifts, as well as the promise of new life. Here baptism, resurrection, and the restoration of creation itself is tied to the Lordship of Christ through water.

For the 4th Century Christians who crafted this image, as well as for the writers of the New Testament, salvation did not entail escape from this earth as disembodied souls, but rather the earth's redemption and renewal along with that of humankind. In this view of redemption, often forgotten in the modern church, heaven and earth are once again joined together as God first intended and humans finally assume their God-given vocation as servants of the earth and

¹ For a brief description, see Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love for this World for Crucifixion and Empire*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), xii-xiv. For an image, see <http://www.pilgrimstorome.org.uk/gallery/picture.php?/1433/category/7>.

the bearers of God's image and dominion.² Water is at the heart of all this paradisaal imagery. Just as water is part of the original soup from which God separates and forms the various elements of creation in Genesis 1, so, too, it is part of the final vision of creation restored in Revelation 22, the means by which God supplies beauty, food, and healing for the nations in the heavenly city. Water is one of the earth's—and the cosmos's—primal elements.

Humans are designated “earthlings” (*adam* from *adamah*, earth) in Genesis, but as Larry Rasmussen reminds us in his most recent book, we are really microcosms of the ocean waters. Our bodies contain about the same percentage of water as the earth's surface (ca. 75%), and the salinity of our blood and tears matches that of the ocean.³ Humans breathe out carbon dioxide, which the oceans breathe in. The oxygen the seas exhale, we inhale. Every expression of climate change is somehow related to water. We come from water at our birth and we depend on water for every aspect of our living being. All of human health and well-being, as well as the health of all living things around us, derives from and depends upon the health of our waters.⁴ No wonder water—like bread and cup, a most commonplace symbol—is the crucial element in our first sacrament.

Martha Moore-Keish's wonderful article invites us to reclaim the sacramental character of water. She reminds us that water is not ours, but God's gift for the whole creation, and the marker of our movement into the new creation. She also names clearly the disconnection between our sacramental claims and the realities of the water regimes in which we now participate. Can we really pass through water to new life while participating in the rapacious

² J. Richard Middleton provides a careful, provocative explication of this vision in *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

³ Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 274.

⁴ *Ibid*, 280.

consumption and despoiling of the very waters that make life on this earth possible? Too often it seems that Christians are sprinkled in the waters of Christian baptism, but immersed and drowning in the more powerful and culturally pervasive baptism of consumption. Are we really moving from death to life, or from life to death?

The water crises Martha cites—the water wars over the Chattahoochee the Flint, and the Nile, the drought now shaking California and the western United States, and the conflicts, lack of clean water, and refugee crisis gripping central Africa—have differing root causes, but common threads of scarcity and overconsumption. Put simply, there are too many people now living on earth, especially given our thirsty appetites and industries. The UN estimates that Lake Chad, once the largest lake in Africa, lost 95% of its volume between 1963 and 1996, largely due to overgrazing, deforestation, increased human demands, and the altered weather patterns associated with climate change. Here in the US, while the west is on fire, our overconsumption of water is also drying up the Ogallala Aquifer, which serves the Midwestern grain belt. In the not too distant future, the relatively water-rich eastern states, including Georgia, may need to become the primary source of agricultural production in the United States. What then might become of the humble Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers?

Our overconsumption should be well known but is often well-hidden. It requires 80,000 gallons of water to produce only the steel for one new car. Over 700 gallons of water are used in the production of one t-shirt; over 2500 gallons for a pair of jeans. It takes twice as much water to produce a plastic water bottle as the bottle itself contains. The production of one pound of beef requires 2000-6000 gallons of water, depending on where the cow is raised. Virtually every aspect of the modern, western lifestyle requires the intensive use of water, nearly all of it hidden from our eyes. One of the functions of sacrament is to help us to see, to recognize the world

around us for what it is, including both its sin-soaked realities and God's redeeming presence. True sight requires constant reminders of how to look at things rightly, how to perceive their true meanings. But, as Rasmussen notes, "When water is a market commodity in a plastic bottle piled on supermarket shelves, it is no longer sacramental."⁵ We no longer see it for what it really is.

We can learn some important lessons about the sacramental perception and use of water from our forebears. In her thought-provoking account of the "cognitive archaeology" of ancient Galilee, Marianne Sawicki carefully unpacks the ways the people of Judea and Galilee in Jesus' day made sense of their world through attention to "grounding structures, circulating fluid, and redirective spin."⁶ Instead of construing holiness, for example, in terms of static conceptions of space and separation, in Israel "a place is holy when things moves rightly within it and, moreover, when it can rectify the trajectory of what crosses it. Thus, what profanes is whatever moves in the wrong way."⁷ Whereas modern Western people focus the pursuit of justice on relatively static principles of individual property, rights, and obligations, ancient Jews perceived justice as the *right movement* of people and things—including water—in relation to grounding structures of land, temple, and God.

During the transitional period from Hasmonean to Roman imperial rule in the first centuries BCE and CE, an architectural innovation related to water shows up for the first time in Judean and Galilean homes: the household *miqveh*, a ritual immersion pool, and the *otzar*, its supply tank. Jewish law required ritual cleansing for many purposes, not least in preparation for temple sacrifices and for women's participation in procreation. Not just any water was suitable for purification, only "living water," that is, wild, running water whose movement from the

⁵ Ibid, 282.

⁶ Marianne Sawicki, *Crossing Galilee: Architectures of Contact in the Occupied Land of Jesus*. (London: Trinity Press International, 2000), 35.

⁷ Ibid, 34.

heavens had not been interrupted by human hands or devices. Many Galilean settlements were built on limestone karst, which provided natural cisterns that collected and stored water during the rainy season for use during the dry season. But the water captured in cisterns had to be lifted by hand, thereby shifting its valence from living water to drawn water and rendering it unsuitable for ritual purification. Such water could be revived, however, by adding living water from the heavens to it. The *otzar* captured the rainwater that fell directly from heaven so that it might be mixed in the *miqveh* with the water from human sources such as cisterns and even the Roman aqueducts, transforming it once again into the living water required for ritual cleansing.⁸

There was, of course, little or no chemical difference between the water that came from the sky and that which collected in cisterns or came from aqueducts. The distinction lay in what these different waters meant and which direction they pointed: one relied on human work and ingenuity whereas the other was a gift from God. From our modern, scientific, utilitarian perspectives, we might be tempted to view such constructions and orchestrations as silly, meaningless expressions of a magical worldview. Nothing could be further from reality. The household *miqveh* asserted a sacramental worldview in the face of repeated, relentless incursions of Roman rule, culture, and worldviews into Jewish society. Roman will and skill to move water made it possible to supply ever larger cities with their most important resource, water, thereby permitting larger concentrations of population and new levels of commerce, disrupting the traditional patterns of village life, the bonds of kinship, and the relational patterns of the household, and shifting the focus of agricultural activity from subsistence and exchange to the production of commodities for export. The aqueducts that diverted water from its natural courses to the growing, Romanized cities of Galilee were not merely pipes on the ground; they were

⁸ Ibid, 23.

visible expressions of Roman sovereignty, an assertion that water came from Rome's hands, rather than from God. Their stone arches seemed to leap visibly across the land and through neighborhoods.⁹ They ran without any regard for the seasons or festivals that marked Jewish notions of time. In short, the aqueducts implicitly denied the hand of God in the "provision of one of the most profound and poetically powerful symbols" of God's identity as creator, sustainer, and redeemer.¹⁰

Roman technological control of water was the foundation of its empire, not unlike the ways American control of oil and water is the basis of our empire. The preservation of Jewish identity and practice required constant reminders that the story told by Roman rule and commerce—and not least by the aqueducts—was not true. The *miqveh* was an act of resistance built into the very walls of houses and the stones of the land, the means to return the water to its natural state as a free gift of God and, in turn, to redirect the lives of those who used it once again toward God. The presence and use of the household *miqveh* provided a constant physical reminder that water is a gift of God—not a commodity—essential not only for human physical need but for the life together, witness, and vocation of God's people.

Jesus and his followers go one huge step further: they move outside the walls of the house into the wilderness places where heavenly light shines and vision is not hampered by human architecture, where living water runs free, and where, surprisingly, food is available in abundance. They adapt John's practice of baptism for repentance (turning around, redirecting life), emphasizing its function as a sign of death and rebirth, for both humans and the whole creation. The story of John's baptism of Jesus itself recalls elements of the first creation—water, wind, the voice of God, the identification of a beloved son and agent of divine authority—in

⁹ Ibid, 112.

¹⁰ Ibid, 171.

order to signal the inauguration of the new creation, where heaven and earth are once again united in the rule of God. The architecture of this new creation is necessarily cosmic. It cannot be bound to particular spaces, whether temple or house. It dwarfs human symbols of salvation, whether aqueduct or dam, that scar the earth and deny the hand of God. The new creation joins heaven and earth, land and sky, humankind and God, all living things and the whole of creation with living water, like the waters of Eden that brought forth trees both beautiful and fruitful (Genesis 2:4-15, cf. Ezekiel 47:1-12, Revelation 22:1-5). The Christian vocation is to fulfill Adam's calling, to be the caretakers for the earth, to use the dominion given to us to ensure the continuation of God's blessing for the whole creation, rather than to use that dominion to expand the curse of death.

Building on Martha's final three points about baptismal wisdom, what might a sacramental relationship with water mean and entail in practice? First, the baptismal sacrament does not change the substance of water itself, but its meaning and, most importantly, our relationship with it and with God. When we are washed in the waters of baptism, we discern our place within a circuit that runs from life to death to new life. We are also immersed in a hydrological cycle that runs from God to creation, to us, then back to creation and to God. Water is only truly living water within this cycle. When the cycle is interrupted or distorted, the outcome is death.

When water is treated as a commodity rather than a gift, it is no longer sacramental, no longer fully life-giving. Like the ancient Judeans and Galileans, part of our vocation as baptized Christians is to discern and name the true nature of water as gift. If we don't remind ourselves and those around us of this reality every day, both in word and practice, who will? How, then, might we engage with water so as to affirm its sacramental, "living," character? Part of the

answer may entail daily remembrance of our baptisms, our death to this world and our new life in God. Another part of the answer lies in continually affirming the fact that water belongs not to humans for their use alone, but to God for the whole creation. Conventional water management in the United States is geared toward “beneficial use,” nearly always interpreted as “beneficial (to humans) economic use.” This has led to the impoundment and diversion of water for the production of energy, for industry, and for human consumption and recreation, with little or no regard for the other parts of the ecosystem—the web of life—that also depend on the natural flow of water and a stable hydrological cycle. A more balanced ecological perspective, such as those enacted into water laws in South Africa, the European Union, and Australia,¹¹ corresponds with a sacramental perspective, because it aims to preserve the gift of water for the whole ecosystem, for which we are first of all servants rather than owners and consumers. At the human scale, this means making access to clean drinking water for all—but especially the most vulnerable (women, children, the world’s poor people)—the first priority. It also entails a commitment to ensuring sufficient flows of water to preserve, renew, and restore ecosystems and riparian habitats, as well as the ocean habitat—in short, a commitment to ensure the preservation and renewal of all living things, including water itself, prior to any other human use or interest. In these ways, we embrace our true place within both the hydrological and the sacramental cycles. We remember the creation in which our life is set and the new creation that is coming to us. We participate in the flow of living water for living people and a living creation, from God, with God, and back to God.

¹¹ David Groenfeldt, “The Next Nexus: Environmental Ethics, Water Management, and Climate Change,” p. 5, available at www.waterculture.org.