

Water in the Bible

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Abstract

Water is an indispensable physical commodity for all human civilizations, but it has also had a profound spiritual significance for thousands of years. Water features prominently in the Bible, perhaps the single most important book that has shaped Western Civilization. In the Bible, water represents life itself and is the physical carrier of the divine spirit. It was antecedent and prerequisite for the very creation of the cosmos. Water has been the means of spiritual cleansing, and through the sacrament of baptism, the means by which spiritual rebirth was facilitated. Water in the Bible can also be the instrument of mass death, but when water brings death, it is death to evil. Water has been held sacred in all human cultures, religions, and civilizations. It is the modality for purification, rebirth, and restoration, and the source of all potentiality. Recognition of its universal value unites us in a common humanity that transcends time and space.

Keywords: Bible, Ablution, Baptism, Flood, Diluvianism, Groundwater.

INTRODUCTION

The Spiritual Significance of Water

Water is the most abundant substance on Earth. About 71 percent of the Earth's surface is covered with water. It sustains all life. Water is an essential commodity, and the growth of human civilizations has been facilitated by the availability of reliable water supplies. At the beginning of history, abundant supplies of water fostered the growth of the first great civilizations in river basins. Mesopotamia was situated between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Egyptian civilization was dependent upon the Nile River, and a great Bronze Age culture flourished in the Indus valley in India (Childe 1951, 114). Rome was founded on the banks of the Tiber River. The unfailing flow of the great rivers ensured a reliable food supply, supported the expansion of population, and allowed the division of labor and specialization that fostered the development of culture, science, and art. Many great cities flourish today because of harbors and access to shipping lanes. Examples include London, New York, Singapore, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Rotterdam, and Los Angeles. By facilitating trade, water has also quickened the exchange of ideas and intellectual innovation. Miletus, the Ionian city where science began in the 6th century BC, was a great trading center where people from different cultures and countries interacted and exchanged ideas (Deming 2010, 18).

Although water is an indispensable physical commodity, it has also played a large role in spirituality and religion. We study water as a science, yet it is worth noting that science "is a human and social activity conducted within civilizations constructed by religion" (Deming, 2010, 8). If we are to understand fully the historical role that water has played in the development of human civilizations, a full accounting requires an assessment of its spiritual significance (Bradley 2012). In a spiritual sense water "symbolizes the whole of potentiality; it is the source of all possible existence" (Eliade 1996, 188). Water is antecedent and prerequisite for the very creation of the cosmos. In the creation story recounted in the first book of *Genesis*, water is a receptacle for the divine creative spirit (Figure 1). "The spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (*Genesis* 1.2, KJV). God created the dry land of the Earth from water. "Water precedes all forms and upholds all creation" (Eliade 1996, 188).

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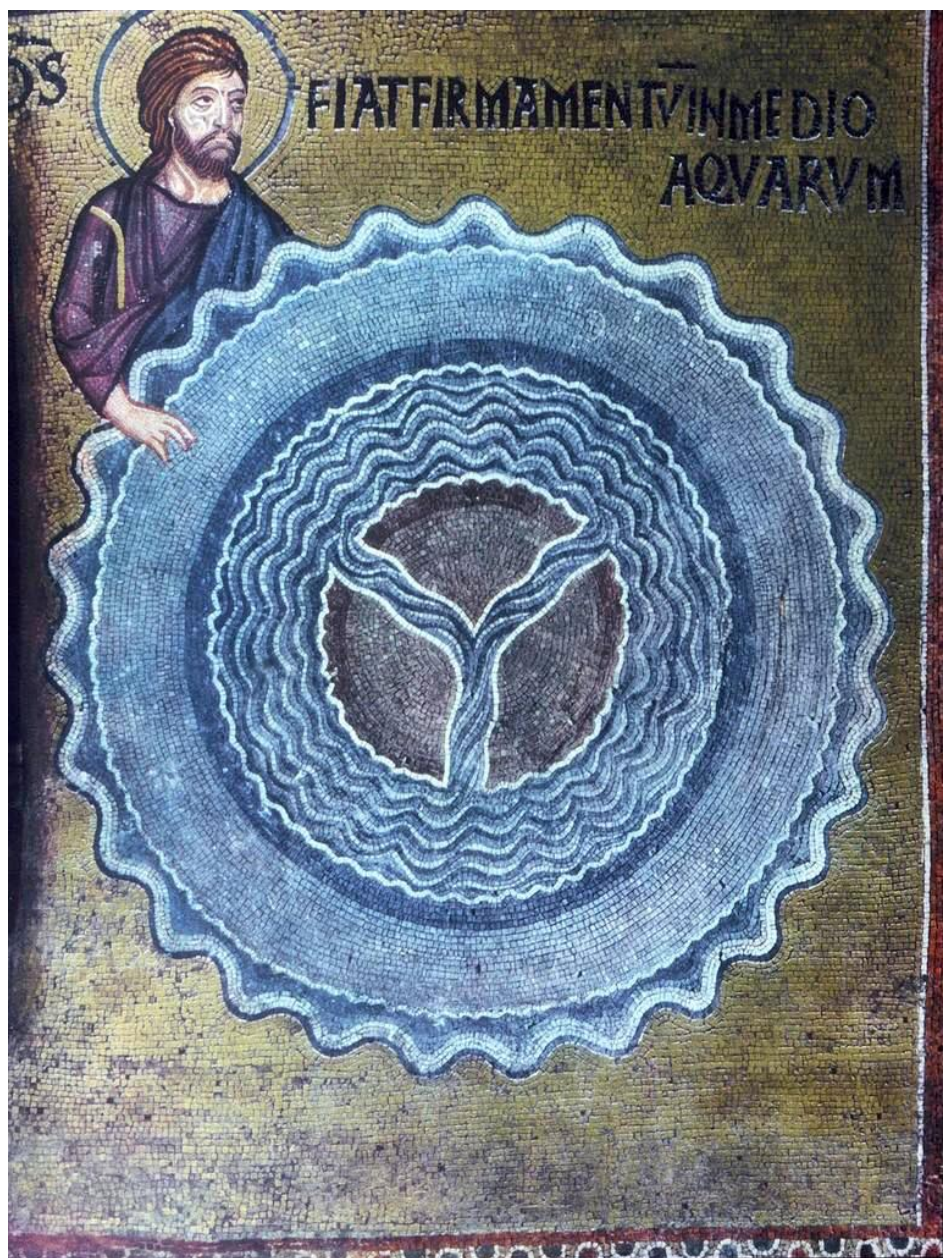


Figure 1. Separation of the water and the firmament by God. Mosaic from the Palatine Chapel in Palermo, 12th century AD, public domain. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.13716874>

Belief in the spiritual significance of water preceded the Christian Era. Amongst all ancient peoples, springs and wells were revered (Bradley 2012). "The one general principle which runs through all the varieties of the legends...is that the sacred waters are instinct with divine life and energy" (Smith 1894, 173). Temples were often constructed adjacent to natural springs because "the presence of living water in itself gave consecration to the place" (Smith 1894, 170). Groundwater was important to ancient peoples. Britain alone contains more than eight thousand wells with religious dedications (Bradley 2012, 73). The island of Sardinia is replete with monumental structures related to water cult activity near sacred wells and springs that date to the 18th century BC (Depalmas 2018). *Cenotes*, natural sinkholes, in central America were sacred sites to the ancient Mayans. The cenotes were considered to be portals to other worlds where sacrifices were made to the gods of rain and fertility (Lopez 2009).

The first natural philosopher, Thales (c. 624-547 BC), regarded water as the fundamental substance from which all other matter was composed. Water is "that of which all things that are consist, the first from which they come to be, the last into which they are resolved" (Aristotle 1941, 693-694). The water mythology of the ancient Greeks was vast. The god Poseidon ruled over the sea, each river was governed by a god, and every spring, brook, or stream was associated with a water nymph or naiad (Fox 1916). In Lebanon, spring rains wash red soil into the river Abraham, giving the water a red color. In Greek mythology, the discoloration of the river was said to represent the blood of Adonis (Figure 2), the mortal youth and ideal of male beauty who died in the arms of his lover, the goddess Aphrodite (Lucian 1711, 243). Blood was thought to hold the principle of life, and a stream was consecrated by the blood of a deity.



Figure 2. *Venus (Aphrodite) and Adonis*, painting by Simon Vouet (1590-1649). Public domain.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.13613570>

The Carthaginians also believed in water deities. After defeating Rome in the Battle of Cannae (216 BC), Hannibal of Carthage made a treaty with Phillip V of Macedon (238-179 BC). According to Polybius (c. 200-

118 BC), Hannibal swore an oath to uphold the terms of the treaty, not just by the gods of the "Sun, Moon, and Earth," but also by the gods of "rivers, harbors, [and] waters," revealing a common belief that all bodies of water were inhabited by spiritual entities (1889, 515).

Water features prominently in the Bible, "the most globally influential and widely read book ever written" (Favazza 2009, 31). "The single most powerful force in the emergence of Western Civilization" (Mattson 2011, xvii), the Bible "has been a major influence on the behavior, laws, customs, education, art, literature, and morality of Western Civilization (Favazza 2009, 31). The Bible is a fountainhead of human rights. The creation narrative in *Genesis* asserts that all human beings are made in the image of God and thus endowed with dignity and worth with the right to act as free moral agents (Tutu 1996). The Bible has also had a profound influence on Western law and legal theory (Burnside 2011).

The King James Version (KJV) of the Bible has guided the development and evolution of the English language (McGrath 2001). Correspondingly, the Bible has fostered the spread of literacy. Children were "taught to read so that they might become acquainted with the commandments of God and learn what was demanded of them" (Cubberley 1919, 13). In 1647, the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay Colony enacted a law that "every town having 50 householders should at once appoint a teacher of reading and writing" (Cubberley 1919, 18). This statute became known as the *Old Deluder Satan Law*, because it proclaimed as its purpose as the frustration of "that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from a knowledge of the Scriptures" (Cubberley 1919, 17).

Although the mythological narratives of the Bible are no longer widely accepted as empirical facts, "the traditions of mythology and religion describe the significance of what happened," and offer unparalleled insight into human psychology (Peterson 1999, 459). The stories of the Bible are a gateway to understanding human nature. Carl Jung (1875-1961) explained, "we must read the Bible or we shall not understand psychology. Our psychology, our whole lives, our language and imagery, are built upon the Bible" (Jung 1997, 442).

One of the great questions in the history of geology is the nature of the hydrologic cycle (Deming 2005, 2014, 2019, 2021). For nearly two thousand years, it was unknown if terrestrial streams and springs were solely supplied by precipitation, or if there were hidden channels within the Earth that allowed ocean water to flow back to the land. One of the first recognitions of the nature of the mystery is found in the Book of *Ecclesiastes*: "all the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again" (1.7, KJV). And *Job* 36.27-28 (KJV) describes the processes of evaporation and precipitation: "for he maketh small the drops of water: they pour down rain according to the vapor thereof, which the clouds do drop and distil upon man abundantly."

Groundwater especially was important to the ancient Israelites. Israel is characterized largely by a Mediterranean type climate with warm, dry summers. Abraham, father of the Jews, dug wells, but these were evidently destroyed by his enemies. Abraham's son, "Isaac digged again the wells of water, which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham" (*Genesis* 26.18, KJV). The precious nature of well water is illustrated by the existence of conflicts over access to these waters. After Isaac opened the wells of his father, "the herdmen of Gerar did strive with Isaac's herdmen, saying, the water is ours" (*Genesis* 26.20, KJV). And Moses drove away the shepherds who had tried to usurp the waters of the well of Midian from the daughters of Jethro (*Exodus* 2.17).

In the Bible, water represents life itself and is the physical carrier of the divine spirit. Water alone has the power to purify both the physical and the spiritual. Speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, God refers to Himself as "the fountain of living waters" (*Jeremiah* 2.13, KJV). When the Israelites were in danger of perishing from thirst, Moses provided water in the desert by striking a rock. "Thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink" (*Exodus* 17.6, KJV). The author of *Revelation* (22.1, KJV) had a vision of "a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God." In the *Gospel of John* (4.14, KJV), Jesus proclaimed "whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (Figure 3). Water has the power to heal and restore, it is the carrier of the spiritual life force. Chapter 9 of *John* describes how Jesus performed a miracle by giving sight to a man born blind (Figure 4). But water is requisite for the culmination

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of the miraculous healing, because vision is not bestowed until the man washes his eyes with water from the Pool of Siloam.



Figure 3. *Christ and the Samaritan Woman at the Well* (1795), oil painting by Angelika Kauffman (1741-1807). Public domain.



Figure 4. *Healing of the Man Born Blind* (1567), oil painting by El Greco (1541-1614). Public domain.

Ablution and Lustration

Ablution is ritual washing for the purpose of purification; the cleansing is both physical and symbolical, preparing the body for a greater degree of holiness. Ablution is a form of *lustration*, a term that encompasses any sort of ceremonial or religious purification. The purpose of lustration is to remove a *miasma*, a "religious pollution" (von Ehrenheim et al. 2019, 4). A person contaminated with a *miasma* need not have committed any sin, evil act, or immoral deed. Nevertheless, a person may not approach or interact with the divine without removing the *miasma* through a lustration or abluion.

The ceremonial purifications of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, often involved water. Hesiod (c. 700 BC) warned "never pour a libation of sparkling wine to Zeus after dawn with unwashed hands" (1920, 57). Thus in Homer's *Iliad* (c. 8th century BC), Hector states "I should fear to pour dark wine to Jupiter with hands unwashed" (Homer 1898, 163). Achilles performed the same prayer to Jupiter, also taking care to wash his hand, and rinse, with clear water, the golden goblet from which he poured wine (Homer 1898, 104). In the *Odyssey*, Penelope, wife of Odysseus, is advised by her nurse, Eurycleia, to "bathe thyself and take clean raiment" before praying to Athena (Homer 1927, 161).

In ancient Egypt, the sun-god, Ra, "was supposed to wash or be washed every morning before he appeared above the eastern horizon...as a result of his daily matutinal ablutions...the sun-god was thought to be reborn" (Blackman 1918, 117). Because the Pharaoh "was regarded as the embodiment of the sun-god on earth...he had on various occasions to undergo lustration like his divine prototype" (Blackman 1918, 117). The river Nile was believed to contain the life force of the god Osiris (Delia 1992, 183). Water from the upper headwaters of the Nile was regarded as "especially pure and potent" (Blackman 1918, 118). When a king died, "lustration in Nile water purified the dead king's body and ritually consecrated it. By absorbing the vital fluid of Osiris, the deceased might partake of the god's immortality" (Delia 1992, 183).

In Judaism, abluion may consist of the simple washing of the hands, the washing of the hands and feet, or the complete immersion of the body in a bath (Drachman and Kohler 1901, 68). Jews have practiced washing with water to remove ritual impurities for more than two thousand years (Adler, 2018; Lawrence, 2006). In *Exodus* 30, God instructed Moses that Aaron and his sons must wash their hands and feet before entering the Tabernacle to avoid death.

Ritual washing was required for purification after several types of defilement. *Numbers* 19 declares that anyone who touches a corpse is unclean. *Leviticus* 17 specifies that anyone who has eaten an animal that died a natural death (as opposed to being slaughtered for food) is also defiled. These impurities can only be corrected by purification with water. *Numbers* 19 proscribes that the ashes from a burnt sacrificial animal are to be mixed with water and sprinkled on unclean persons with a hyssop branch. It is not sufficient to do this only once, it must be done repeatedly over seven days. The purification process is culminated by bathing and the washing of clothes.

Leviticus 15 categorizes any man who has experienced a seminal emission as unclean. Similarly, a woman is ceremonially unclean for the seven days of her menstrual period. And any person that touches a menstruous woman is also unclean (*Leviticus* 15.19). There is no explicit provision in the text of *Leviticus* that requires a menstruous woman to purify herself by washing. This is implied in the text of 2 *Samuel* 11.2 and 11.4 and *Numbers* 31.23" (Drachman and Kohler 1901, 69). 2 *Samuel* 11.1 and 11.4 (KJV) refer to King David observing a woman washing herself and afterward she was "purified from her uncleanness." And *Numbers* 31.23 (KJV) states that anything that cannot be purified by fire "ye shall make go through the water."

A man and a woman who have had sexual intercourse must also purify themselves with water. The proscriptions in *Exodus*, *Numbers*, and *Leviticus* mention only washing, complete immersion of the body is not explicitly required. By the first century AD, purification by total immersion of the body had become the accepted practice (Adler 2018, 5). This immersion could be in any natural body of water such as a stream, pool, or spring, or in a *mikveh*, a bath dedicated to purification. The earliest stepped pools date to the first century BC, while the remains of hundreds of *mikvehs* dating to the late Second Temple-period in Judea have been uncovered (Adler 2018, 7).

As is the case with all religious rites and practices, observance of the ritualistic cleansing procedures described in the Bible was probably not universal.

"Following the custom of the priests, the pious Israelite bathed, or at least washed his hands, every morning before prayer" (Drachman and Kohler 1901, 70). In the time of Jesus, it was also the common practice for some Jews to wash their hands before eating. "For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash their hands oft, eat not" (*Mark* 7.3, KJV). However the practice of hand washing before prayer or dining may not have been universal. *Luke* (11.38, KJV) notes that a Pharisee "marveled that he [Jesus] had not first washed before dinner." The practice of washing before prayer was adopted by the early Christian Church. The *Apostolic Constitutions*, dating to the late fourth century AD, instructs that the faithful should pray after arising in the morning, but only "when they have washed themselves" (Roberts and Donaldson 1913, 495).

In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides (AD 1138-1204) characterized the process of spiritual purification through ablution as a religious mystery beyond human comprehension. The "laws about uncleanness and cleanness are decrees laid down by Scripture and not matters about which human understanding is capable of forming a judgment" (Maimonides 1954, 535). Purification requires both physical contact with water and "intention of the heart." (Maimonides 1954, 535). The mere physical act of bathing without repentance is ineffective (Maimonides 1954, 535). Maimonides also conceded that there is "some indication" that intention alone without the presence of water may be sufficient for cleansing if a person sincerely desires to purge their mind of "wrongful thoughts and false convictions...and brings his soul into the waters of pure reason" (Maimonides 1954, 535).

Since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, most of the laws of ritual impurity proscribed in the Old Testament no longer apply. The primary use of the *mikveh* today is by women, prior to marriage, following menstruation, and after childbirth (Baskin et al. 2007, 225). Although not otherwise obligatory, ritual immersion and purification in a *mikveh* may be employed "as an aid to spirituality...in all branches of Jewish practice" today (Baskin et al. 2007, 225).

Holy Water

In the realm of spirituality, not all water is equal (Figure 5). "Living" water, or water undergoing a natural flow, as from a spring, or through a river, is generally considered superior to water from any stagnant body. In Christianity, holy water is defined to be any water blessed by a priest (Sullivan 1917, 156-157). Water was universally believed to be capable of holding the holy spirit in suspension (Encyclopedia Britannica 1910a, 623). This interpretation flowed directly from the creation narrative in the first chapter of Genesis when "the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (*Genesis* 1, KJV).



Figure 5. *Holy Water*, painting by Constantin Daniel Stahi (1882). Public domain.

The concept of holy water predates Christianity. The gateway to a Greek temple or sanctuary commonly contained a *perirrhanterion*, a basin of water, from which a worshipper sprinkled themselves before entering holy ground (Mikalson 2010, 9). Perirrhanteria "were used for ritual purification at the entrances to temples and sanctuaries as early as the 7th century BC" (Fullerton 1986, 207). The Hippocratic treatise *On the Sacred Disease* (c. 400 BC), notes that "we mark out the boundaries of the temples and the groves of the gods, so that no one may pass them unless he be pure, and when we enter them we are sprinkled with holy water" (Hippocrates 1886, 338). The Book of *Numbers* (5.17, KJV) in the Old Testament, the text of which was finalized in the fifth century BC, states "the priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel."

In the first centuries of the Christian Church, water "was not expressly consecrated for baptisms and other lustrations" (Encyclopedia Britannica 1910a, 623). Perhaps because running or living water was not always readily available, the practice of creating holy water through prayer began in the third or fourth century AD. The *Apostolic Constitutions* (c. 375-380 AD) provides a recipe for holy water. "Let the bishop bless the water," and thereby endow it with "a power to restore health, to drive away diseases, [and] to banish demons" (Roberts and Donaldson 1913, 494). Serapion of Thmuis, a Christian monk and bishop in Egypt (died c. AD 360), recorded a prayer for the sanctification of baptismal waters. God is asked to "see now from heaven and look upon these waters and fill them with the Holy Spirit...and make them holy and spiritual" (1899, 68-69).

Holy water has a multitude of uses in Christianity. The faithful may purify themselves with it upon entering church, or retain some in a vessel, and take it home and use it to water "their fields, vineyards, and gardens" (Catholic Encyclopedia 1910, 433), or "for the blessing of persons and things" (Sullivan 1917, 159). *Asperges*, the rite of sprinkling a congregation with holy water at the beginning of mass, is believed to date from the ninth century AD (Sullivan 1917, 158). The rite originated in *Psalms* 51 (KJV), wherein God is asked to "wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." Hincmar, Bishop of Reims (806-882 AD) directed that a priest should bless water every Sunday and sprinkle the members of his congregation with it (Catholic Encyclopedia 1910, 433). *Asperges* "renews every Sunday the memory of baptism, by which we have been sanctified and purified from sin" (Sullivan 1917, 161).

Endowed with the spirit of God, holy water is believed to have the power to drive away evil, and to be "effective in driving out devils and curing diseases" (Sullivan 1917, 160). Teresa of Avila (AD 1515-1582) advised, "keep some holy water near you; nothing drives the devil away more quickly" (1921, 243). Holy water is used liberally and frequently, to cure all ills and drive away all evils (Sullivan 1917, 161).

Baptism

Baptism is a Christian sacrament involving the use of water for spiritual purification or regeneration. "It is the outward mark of Christian discipleship, the rite of initiation into the covenant of grace...the sacrament of repentance, of remission of sins, and of regeneration by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Schaff 1910, 466). The word *baptism* originates in the ancient Greek βαπτίζω, meaning "to dip in liquid. The Christian sacrament originated in Judaism during the late Second Temple Period (c. 516 BC - AD 70) as an offspring of ritual bathing and ablution employing water. Jesus Christ himself was baptized by John the Baptist (Figure 6, *Matthew* 3).

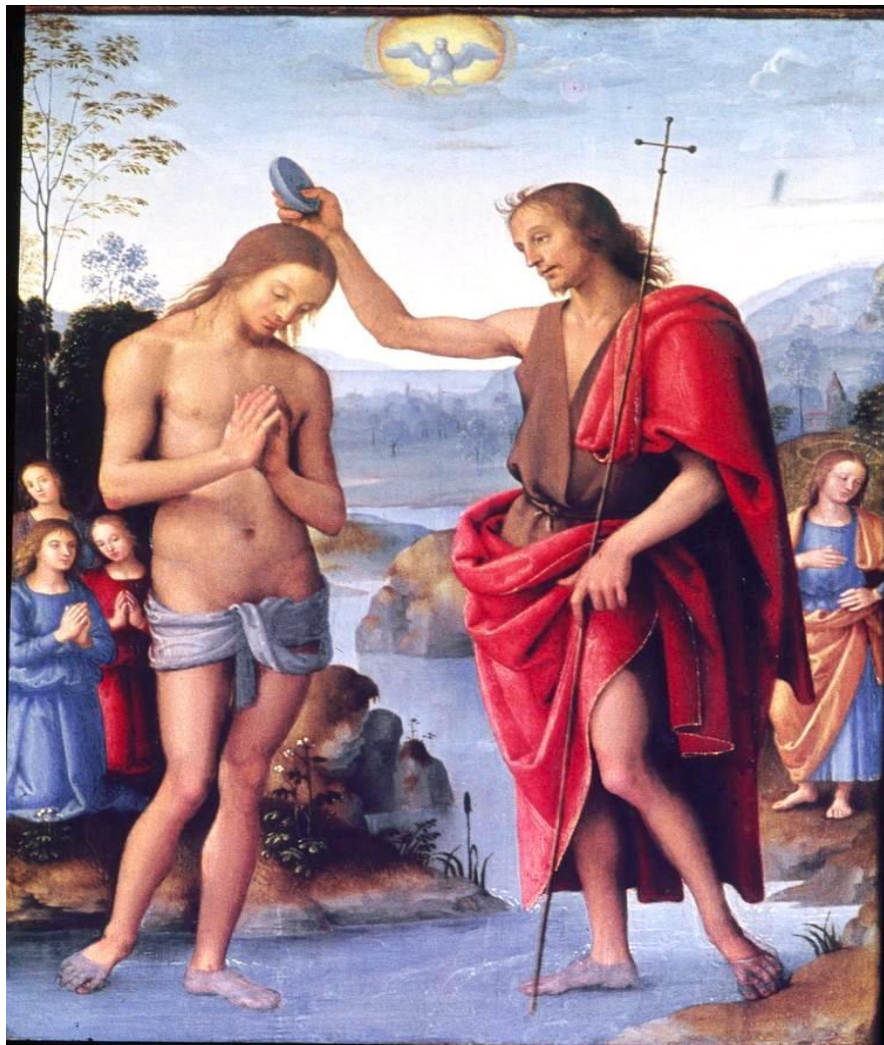


Figure 6. *Baptism of Christ*, oil painting by Pietro Perugino, c. AD 1450-1523. Public domain. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.13608531>

In Christianity, baptism is widely considered to be indispensable for salvation. Jesus commanded his disciples to "teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (*Matthew* 28.19, KJV), and stated explicitly that "he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (*Mark* 16.16, KJV). And Jesus may have been referring to baptism when he stated "except a man be born of water and of the spirit, he

cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (*John* 3:5, KJV). In *Romans* 3, Saint Paul described baptism as a reenactment of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Man dies symbolically with immersion, and is reborn, purified, renewed; just as Christ rose from the tomb" (Eliade 1996, 196). Yet orthodox Christian doctrine has maintained "that the mere want of the sacrament does not condemn, but only the contempt. Otherwise all unbaptized infants that die in infancy would be lost" (Schaff 1910, 467).

Like other religious rituals involving water, baptism in Christianity was preceded by similar pagan practices (Encyclopedia Britannica 1910b, 364). Tertullian (c. AD 155-220) noted that initiation into the sacred rites of Isis and Mithras involved washing, and "at the Apollinarian and Eleusinian games they are baptized; and they presume that the effect of their doing that is their regeneration" (1869, 236). Christian baptism is a spiritual rebirth, and "the idea of re-birth was...the very keynote of all the solemn initiations and mysteries--Mythraic, Orphic, Eleusinian--through which repentant pagans secured pardon and eternal bliss" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1910b, 369).

After the Gospels, the earliest descriptions of baptism in Christianity are found in the anonymous *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (c. first century AD), and the *First Apology* of Justin Martyr (c. AD 100-165). The *Didache* instructs "baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water" (Anonymous 1913, 379). Presumably, the reference to "living water" refers to water in natural motion, as issuing from a spring, or flowing through a stream. The person to undergo baptism is instructed to "fast one or two days before" (Anonymous 1913, 379). If "living water" is not available, other water can be used. If immersion is not possible, it is permissible to baptize by pouring water directly upon the head, three times, once for each member of the divine Trinity. Justin Martyr advised preparation for baptism through fasting and prayer. After baptism, the initiated "become the children of choice and knowledge...and this washing is called illumination" (1903, 183).

Tertullian (c. AD 155-220), one of the most prolific and important authors in the early Christian Church, explained that water alone suffices for baptism, because it is "always a perfect, gladsome, simple material substance, pure in itself" (1869, 233-234). Water was chosen by God to receive His Spirit in the first act of Creation, it was more pleasing to Him "than all the other then existing elements" (Tertullian 1869, 233). Water "supplied a worthy vehicle to God...water was the first to produce that which had life...how great is its power or its grace; how many ingenious devices, how many functions, how useful an instrumentality, it affords the world" (Tertullian 1869, 234).

Tertullian believed baptism washed away sins, set a man free, and admitted him "into eternal life" (1869, 231). Any water was suitable for baptism. "It makes no difference whether a man be washed in a sea or a pool, a stream or a fount, a lake or a trough...all waters, in virtue of the pristine privilege of their origin...attain the sacramental power of sanctification" (Tertullian 1869, 235). "It is not in keeping with the genius of the gospel to limit the operation of the Holy Spirit by the quantity or quality of the water or the mode of its application" (Schaff 1910, 469).

The *Shepherd of Hermas* is one of the books of the *Apocryphal New Testament* that dates to the last first half of the second century. It is found in the *Codex Sinaiticus*. In the *9th Similitude* of the third book of *Hermas*, baptism is described as the "seal" that frees man from death and opens the door to eternal life (Shepherd of Hermas 1820, 254). The life provided by the sacrament of baptism mimics the creation account in Genesis where water is the gateway for the entry of the divine creative spirit into the material world.

John Chrysostom (c. AD 347-407), archbishop of Constantinople, explained "when the spirit is present with the water...all those things so strange and transcending reason, easily take place" (1848, 209). The miracle of the spiritual transformation that could be accomplished in baptism with common water was not to be wondered at, for nature abounded with instances of transformations. Chrysostom noted that "earth receives water and makes it wine, the flesh receives wine and changes it into water" (1848, 209).

Water, a physical substance, is necessary for the purely spiritual rite of baptism because man is both material and spiritual. According to John of Damascus (c. AD 675-749), "since man's nature is twofold, consisting of soul and body, He bestowed on us a two-fold purification, of water and of the spirit...the water by the grace of

the spirit cleansing the body from sin and delivering it from corruption" (1908, 78). "Water is the most beautiful element and rich in usefulness, and purifies from all filth, and not only from the filth of the body but from that of the soul" (John of Damascus 1908, 27).

The Deluge and the Parting of the Red Sea

One of the most dramatic narratives in the Bible is the story of how God destroyed almost all life on Earth by means of a universal Flood or Deluge (Figure 7). "And the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights... the mountains were covered...and every living substance was destroyed" (*Genesis 7*, KJV). For centuries in Europe, through the first decades of the nineteenth century, the Biblical Deluge was widely believed to be an accurate historical account of the greatest geological event in Earth's history (Hallam 1989; Gillispie 1969.)

Writing near the end of the eighteenth century, Richard Kirwan (1733-1812), President of the Royal Irish Academy from 1799 to 1812, cited "unequivocal geologic proofs of a general deluge" (1797, 272). These included shells found on a mountaintop in Peru at an elevation of 14,220 feet [4334 meters], and the "bones of elephants and rhinoceri...found in the lower parts of Siberia" (Kirwan 1797, 270-271). The presence of fossilized creatures acclimated to tropical latitudes in the freezing steppes of Siberia seemed clear evidence that the animals had been swept north by a catastrophic flood of unprecedented magnitude.



Figure 7. *The Deluge*, by Gustave Doré (1832–1883). Public domain.

Another famous Diluvialist was William Buckland (1784-1856). Oxford professor and President of the Geological Society of London, Buckland was among the most distinguished and eminent of the nineteenth-century British geologists (Figure 8). In *Vindiciae Geologicae* (1820), Buckland argued "the grand fact of an universal deluge at no very remote period is proved on grounds....decisive and incontrovertible" (1820, 23). Even if there had been no Biblical account, Buckland believed that the science of geology itself would point to such an event. Geologic observations "are unintelligible without recourse to a deluge exerting its ravages at a period not more ancient than that announced in the Book of Genesis" (Buckland 1820, 24).



Figure 8. William Buckland. Lithograph by T. H. Maguire, 1849, after A. Claudet. Public domain.

As the nineteenth century progressed, both Diluvianism and Catastrophism withered under the criticisms of the uniformitarians. And many of the phenomena Buckland interpreted as diluvial were later shown to be glacial in origin. The historical interpretations and reasoning of the Diluvialists stand as a fascinating example of how brilliant and respected men possessed of absolute certainty can be completely wrong.

It may seem strange that water, which represents life in Biblical accounts, was also upon occasion the instrument of mass death. This is because when water brings death, it is death to evil. The Flood occurred because "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth" (*Genesis* 6.5, KJV). Water's role is that of a purifier. John

of Damascus (c. AD 675-749) referred to the Flood as "the first baptism...for the eradication of sin...water has the power of purification. In the time of Noah God washed away the sin of the world by water" (1908, 78).

Water again was used by God to bring about mass death in *Exodus* 14, where the waters of the Red Sea close in upon Egyptians who are chasing fleeing Israelites. In one of the most dramatic miracles recounted in the Bible, Moses held out his staff, and the waters of the Red Sea parted so that the Israelites could pass. "The Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided" (*Exodus* 14.21, KJV). Then "the waters returned, and covered the chariots, and the horsemen, and all the host of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them; there remained not so much as one of them" (*Exodus* 14.28, KJV). It has been suggested that there is an entirely naturalistic explanation for the parting of the Red Sea. A strong wind that blows for several hours "along the surface of a body of water exerts a stress on the water which forces it back" (Humphreys 2005, 94). This phenomenon is known as "wind setdown," and can result in water elevation changes of several meters (Humphreys 2005, 94).

CONCLUSION

Water the Transcendental Unifier

Water is the most essential of all human commodities, yet "man doth not live by bread only" (*Deuteronomy* 8.3, KJV). Science and technology supply our material needs, yet human beings hunger for meaning and purpose. Water has had a spiritual significance in all human cultures, religions, and civilizations. It is the modality for purification, rebirth, and restoration, and the source of all potentiality. Recognition of its universal value unites us in a common humanity that transcends time and space.

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