



RIVERS, SPRINGS AND RAIN: AN ECO-THEOLOGICAL READING OF THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes an eco-theological reading of water symbolism within the Judeo-Christian tradition, examining whether the scriptural treatment of rivers, springs, seas, and rain lends support to a view of nature as intrinsically valuable. Beginning from the premise, drawn from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, that water may be regarded as a form of God, the paper asks whether Judeo-Christian thought correspondingly regards nature — of which water is a constitutive element — as inherently divine. It contrasts Spinoza's metaphysical monism, in which God and Nature are identical (*Deus sive Natura*), with the metaphysical dualism of classical Judeo-Christian theology, which maintains an unbridgeable ontological distinction between Creator and creation. Surveying biblical episodes in which water functions as a moral index, a revealer of divine power, a vehicle of grace, an agent of ritual purification, and a marker of civilizational abundance, the paper argues that although Judeo-Christianity resists a strict identification of nature with God, its scriptures nonetheless supply the resources for an ecological holism — one that the Deep Ecology movement, particularly through Arne Naess's notion of the ecological Self, echoes without requiring Spinozistic monism as its foundation.

KEYWORDS :

INTRODUCTION

Water occupies a foundational place in the cosmogony of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The biblical account of creation opens not with land or light but with formless waters over which the Spirit of God moves, and it is only by God's ordering of these waters that the earth, the seas, and the conditions for life itself come into being (Genesis 1:1–12). This primordial association between water and origination raises a deeper philosophical question: if water can be regarded, as the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna suggests, as a form of God, does this imply that nature more broadly — of which water is an integral part — is portrayed by religion as intrinsically divine and therefore intrinsically valuable?

This is not a question that admits of an immediate affirmative answer, even within traditions that revere water. The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna itself qualifies its own claim, noting that not all water is equally sacred: some is fit for worship, some merely for washing, and some only for the most mundane and unclean purposes. The sanctity of water, in other words, appears to be graded rather than uniform, which complicates any simple inference from "water is divine" to "nature is divine." The present paper takes up this complication as its organizing problem. It asks whether the concept of nature as intrinsically divine — and hence intrinsically valuable — is built into Judaic-Christian religious thought, and it approaches this question through the lens of two competing metaphysical frameworks: Spinoza's metaphysical holism, in which Nature and God are identical, and the metaphysical dualism characteristic of orthodox Judeo-Christian theology, which insists on an ontological gulf between the transcendent Creator and the created order. Having laid out this tension, the paper turns to the biblical record itself to examine the several distinct roles water plays — as moral index, as revealer of divine power, as vehicle of grace, as agent of ritual purification, and as marker of the flourishing of human civilization — before asking whether these roles, taken together, are compatible with a Judeo-Christian environmental ethic grounded in ecological holism.

Water, Divinity, and Nature in Judeo-Christian Thought Metaphysical Holism versus Metaphysical Dualism

One influential model for thinking about the relation between nature and God is furnished by Baruch Spinoza, a philosopher of Jewish descent writing in the early modern period, who held nature to be identical with God (*Deus, sive Natura*). On this view, every finite thing is a modification within

God, and God is immanent in everything; nothing is external to the divine substance.

"Each and every existing thing expresses God's nature or essence in a certain determinate way... that is,... each and every thing expresses God's power" (Ethics, Part I, Proof of Proposition 36)

Spinoza's metaphysical monism thus holds that nature is not ontologically distinct from ultimate reality; all things exist in God and follow necessarily from the laws of God's infinite nature (*Ethics*, Part I, Proposition XV).

Whether Judeo-Christian scripture endorses this Spinozistic identification of God with nature is a separate question. Certain passages do seem to gesture toward a non-separability of the divine from nature, particularly from living water: *Jeremiah* 2:13 describes God as "the fountain of living water," abandoned by a people who dig for themselves broken cisterns, while *John* 3:5 makes rebirth "of water, and the spirit" a condition of entering the Kingdom of God. Yet the dominant strand of classical Judeo-Christian theology resists a full holistic identification. God, in Judaism and Christianity, is conceived as a transcendent creator, and this conception requires an insuperable ontological boundary between the Creator and the created universe. The eschatology that follows from this dualism differs fundamentally from that of Hinduism or Buddhism: it is not framed as a body-transcending dissolution into the absolute, but remains rooted in a sensory, embodied experience of Heaven. However perfectly a human life is lived, the tradition holds, humanity is never assimilated into the divine unity of the Creator.

Toward a Judeo-Christian Environmental Ethic: Ecological Holism

If a strict metaphysical identification of nature with God is not straightforwardly available within Judeo-Christian orthodoxy, an alternative framework — ecological holism — may nonetheless offer a way of understanding the tradition's persistent, water-saturated concern for nature. Ecological holism proposes that human and non-human members of the ecosphere together constitute a symbiotic whole, and that an attitude of reverence toward nature, together with the recognition that the whole possesses greater moral value than the sum of its individual parts, follows naturally from this recognition of interconnectedness.

The history of Judaism is, in this sense, scripted in water. Its

parables, myths, ritual laws, and cultural practices revolve persistently around rivers and rain, seas and streams. Water served historically as the very boundary between the land of enslavement and the Land of Promise, a boundary that the Egyptian pharaohs who held the Jewish people in servitude could not surmount; the narrative of Exodus is, at its core, a narrative of water moving in obedience to divine command.

The Several Roles of Water in the Biblical Record

Scripture assigns water a range of distinct symbolic and theological functions, each of which bears on the question of nature's status.

Water is used as a moral index. The same Red Sea that parted to grant the Jewish people safe and dry passage became, in the same episode, an instrument of destruction for the Egyptians who had oppressed them — water thus discriminates morally between the righteous and the sinful. This moral valence recurs in the account of the Great Deluge, where Yahweh warns Noah that the earth, filled with violence, will be destroyed (*Genesis* 6:13); the unrelenting rain of the Flood stands as a paradigmatic instance of God baptizing, and judging, a sinning world.

Water is a revealer of divine power and generosity. When the Israelites, having reached the arid desert of Zin, protested the scarcity of water for themselves and their livestock, Yahweh's grace was made manifest through Moses, who struck a rock and caused a stream to gush forth (*Numbers* 20:13). Yet the same episode — the waters of Meribah — also records divine displeasure at Israel's momentary distrust of God's providence (*Numbers* 20:12), suggesting that water in this instance functions less as evidence of intrinsic divinity than as a life-giving force to be received with trust rather than treated merely as a resource.

Water serves as a vehicle of divine grace. The outpouring of divine love for humanity is figured, in Isaiah, as rain falling from the heavens together with righteousness and salvation springing from the earth (*Isaiah* 45:8) — water here operates as the medium through which grace descends.

Water serves as an agent of ritual purification. Rabbinic Judaism prescribes three forms of ritual immersion, or *mikveh* — full-body immersion, immersion of the hands and feet, and immersion of the hands alone — each carefully distinguished from ordinary bodily cleansing. Mikveh requires immersion in *mayim hayyim*, "living water," drawn from a spring, river, or sea, and is performed especially on the eve of the Sabbath and the Day of Atonement. *Numbers* 19:2–22 further specifies that ceremonial cleanliness, once compromised by contact with the dead, is restored only through water sprinkled according to divine ordinance — a purification that is ritual rather than merely physical. Christianity carries this symbolism forward in baptism, its central sacrament, understood as an immersion in living water that enacts, in Mircea Eliade's (Eliade 1958) terms, a death at the human level, followed by spiritual regeneration "for the glory of God by the Grace of the Spirit of Christ" (Oestgaard 2005). Baptismal water thus functions as an intermediary bridging the human and divine realms, a reading corroborated by *Hebrews* 10:22, the *Book of Common Prayer*, and *1 Peter* 3:21, each of which frames baptism as a spiritual rather than a physical cleansing.

Water and the genesis of civilization. In *Genesis* 2:4–14, the river of paradise divides into four distributaries — Pison, Gihon, Hiddekel, and Euphrates — which in turn catalyze the flourishing of human civilization, linking water directly to the material conditions of human flourishing.

Water as an index of abundance and well-being. The

Promised Land is described as a land that "soaks up its waters from the rains of heaven" (*Deuteronomy* 11:10–13), and divine assurances of well-being are repeatedly figured in terms of rain and rivers: "I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground" (*Isaiah* 44:3); "The Lord shall open unto thee his good treasure, the heaven to give the rain unto thy land" (*Deuteronomy* 28:11–12).

Deep Ecology and the Judeo-Christian Water Trope

The deep ecology movement, particularly as articulated by Arne Naess, draws extensively on Spinoza's metaphysical monism to ground its core commitments: ecological holism and self-realization. Naess's rejection of the "man-in-environment" image in favor of a relational-field image of the human person expresses the conviction that every being, living and non-living, exists within a network of interconnectedness, all beings forming part of a single, all-inclusive milieu. The first principle of the Deep Ecology platform — that the well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life have value in themselves — carries this ecological holism through explicitly, with Naess extending "non-human life" to include rivers, landscapes, and ecosystems. Self-realization, the movement's other central principle, is illustrated by Naess's account of an indigenous Lapp of Arctic Norway who, following the intrusion of a hydroelectric project into the river his community depended upon, declared that the river was "part of himself" (Naess 1995).

It should be noted, however, that a deep divide separates Spinozist holism from deep ecology as Naess develops it. For Spinoza, Nature is *causa sui* and infinite, following from his conception of substance as that which requires nothing outside itself for its own conception; Nature, on this view, does not represent merely the totality of finite beings, as deep ecology's relational-field image might suggest. An ecological holistic interpretation of Judeo-Christian theology can therefore be developed without recourse to Spinoza. On such a reading, water functions as a religious trope that facilitates human understanding of nature as God's domain, within which an ecological egalitarianism is to be enacted by humans standing in perpetual symbiotic relation with the rest of creation. As Eliade observes, "the symbolism of water is the product of an intuition of the cosmos as a unity, and of man as a specific mode of being in the cosmos" (Eliade 1958) — an intuition that deep ecologists, in their own idiom, likewise strive to cultivate, acquiring what Naess calls "a deep-seated respect, or even veneration, for ways and forms of life."

CONCLUSION

The foregoing survey suggests that Judeo-Christianity does not, in the manner of Spinoza's metaphysical monism, straightforwardly identify nature with God; it preserves, across its central texts, an ontological dichotomy between Creator and creation. Yet this dichotomy does not preclude a symbiotic, ecologically holistic outlook on nature. The multiple roles water plays across scripture — as moral index, as revealer of divine power, as vehicle of grace, as agent of purification, and as marker of civilizational and material well-being — together disclose a vision of nature as bound up with the divine purpose, even if not identical to it. Without a reverence for nature and a felt sense of oneness with it, the paper argues, the path charted by divinity for humanity, and the presence of God's Holy Spirit pervading the world, cannot be fully intelligible. Water, standing for nature as a whole, thus remains humanity's natural companion on its religious journey — a companionship affirmed in the promise that whoever holds God's creation in reverence will find within themselves "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14).

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