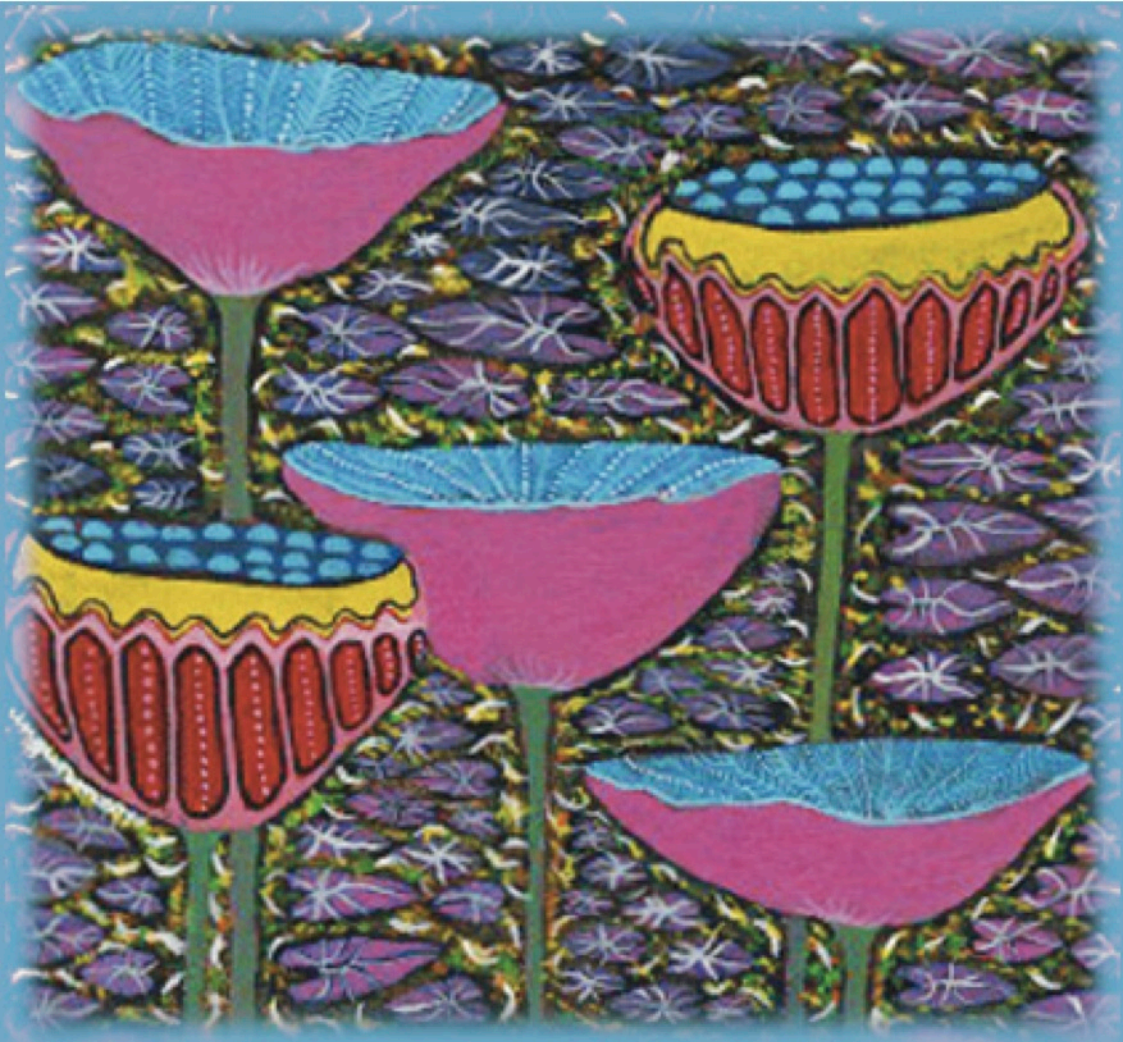

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A Matter of Life and Death

Edited by

Norman Habel and Peter Trudinger

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Table of Contents

Interface Vol 14 1/2011

Introduction
Water: A Matter of Life and Death

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Adelaide

Jacob's well

Many of us have sat with Jesus beside Jacob's well. We have been struck by that remarkable moment when Jesus asks for water from a Samaritan woman who came to draw water from the well. She is amazed that Jesus would ask for water from a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans did not share—especially water.

Jesus breaks the barrier. She is not unclean or alien in his eyes. She is accepted and invited not only to share water, but also to share the water of life which Jesus offers. She is no longer an outcaste. She is a sister who can live forever, because, as Jesus says: The water I give will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life (Jn 4:14).

And, as the article by Alan Cadwallader in this volume demonstrates, living water also implies fresh flowing water, not simply some spiritual source of life. The event at Jacob's well is also one of liberation for both woman and water from social, political and economic structures. Photina, the woman at the well also breaks down a barrier. For as Cadwallader says, 'The text that inscribes "living water" can only have spiritual power if it takes seriously the material reality on which it depends'. But the question remains, how does this flowing water offered by Jesus alleviate the water crisis we face in the world today—especially for Australians who are dependent on the Murray Darling Basin?

I recently drove through the plains of Southern New South Wales. Across these flat lands there are thousands of acres of rice watered by irrigation channels from the Murray River system. In a local newsletter at Moulamein, rice is described as 'the king of the desert'. The rice growers maintain their right to grow rice as do vine growers, cotton growers and more. The water crisis is as much a question of economics as it is of climate change. Water is generally viewed as a source of productivity rather than a sacrament in nature. Where are our moral values in this debate?

In 2011 the situation seems to have changed radically. Flash floods and surging rivers have flooded these same areas. Inland tsunamis have wrecked havoc in Queensland. Areas greater than the land mass of France or Germany have been inundated with water. But the debate persists: what are our moral values in relation to water?

A Dalit well

Some of us have also sat beside a well in the rural regions of India. In many remote villages there are two wells—one for the caste people of the village and one for the Dalits (Untouchables). The Dalits are not permitted to draw water from the caste well, usually situated in a relatively clean location. The Dalit well is often located where the rubbish accumulates and soon becomes polluted.

The Dalits are considered untouchable and their water even worse. At a tea stall, there are separate tumblers for the caste people and the Dalits. They do not share water, tumblers or life. We can imagine Jesus waiting among the filth beside a Dalit well and asking for a drink of polluted water from a Dalit woman. And we can imagine the utter disgust of the caste disciples who are watching. What might Jesus' words be to such a woman? But do Jesus' words change the plight of the millions of Dalits with polluted wells?

I know a Dalit woman called Chellammal from the remote mountain village of Poombari. She did not even attend primary school. Yet as a teenager she entered a Grihini program for poor Dalit women. Through the program she gained an understanding of the cause of the injustice in her world and the confidence to speak out publicly. After some years, she gained the inner strength to fight the system and campaign for a tap with clean water for her village. She led rallies and pressured political leaders. Eventually her village was given a tap with clean water. 'We celebrated', she said. 'We drank clean water'!

Is the water of life that Christ promises also the impulse that drives Dalits like Chellammal to get clean water? Does the water of life that Jesus promises also heal the waters of the world—whether they be in a remote well or in a massive waterway?

Wells of hope?

Throughout the Bible there are numerous sources of water we might call biblical wells of hope, as several of the articles in this volume suggest. The first creation story begins with the deep waters, the primal womb where Earth is waiting to be born. The waters burst and Earth appears. In the second creation story, a spring erupts from the primal landscape. From Eden, rivers of water flow in four directions to fertilise the planet. Life-giving water is present in creation as a message of hope from the beginning.

These same waters, however, become the agents of destruction in the flood narrative. The heavens open and the waters above flood the land. The waters below erupt and massacre millions of living creatures. Even Earth itself is said to be destroyed and needs to re-appear in New Years Day. Where is the hope in such a story?

The Exodus narrative may demonstrate that God is able to manipulate the waters of the Reed Sea to rescue the fleeing Israelites. The Egyptian soldiers are all drowned in the waters. Yet, when Moses sings his song of praise, it is YHWH the violent warrior who uses his nostrils to blast the waters and destroy the enemy with a flood. This image of this God appears much like the hurricane Katrina or one of her many friends. Where is the hope in that? In Psalm 74, the waters of the sea are demonised. YHWH is the warrior king who divides the sea with its many heads. The sea becomes the great dragon Leviathan whom God executes and distributes as food. Does such a text give us assurance as the ice caps melt in the Antartic? Psalm 65, however, speaks of the 'river of God' bringing life-giving water to all in need. Where is that river today?

Of course, prophets like Isaiah, dream of a day when the desert will be transformed by a 'new thing'! God will 'make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert' (Isa 43:20). But does this promised transformation of the wilderness ecosystem offer any real hope for those regions of the planet becoming increasing arid, barren or saline?

Some of the most promising texts about how we might relate to water are those where the patriarchs are associated with actual wells. It is en-

lightening to notice that when Abraham relates to Abimilech, it is the latter who urges covenant loyalty (*chesed)* between them and 'with the land' (Gen 21:23). This leads to a formal covenant that is specifically connected with a well that Abraham shares with the Philistines. Sharing water is essential to peace and a future in the land. A covenant between peoples on how to share water today and in the coming Greenhouse Age seems like an excellent plan . . . in spite of the legal complications Paul Babie raises in his article.

In the New Testament we also meet Jesus stilling the storm. Anne Elvey in her article sees Jesus in partnership with the stormwind. But do his words to the waters or the disciples promise similar support when a tsunami strikes? Is Jesus in partnership with the floods that persist today?

Do the biblical stories about God controlling the waters provide comfort in the current water crisis? Does the rainbow ending, when God says sorry and promises not to flood Earth again, really offer hope for the islands of the Pacific where the waters are rising due to global warming? The response of Jione Havea, a Tongan, makes us re-think how we interpret the rising sea levels.

Polluted wells

Many of the waterways of the planet are now polluted with waste, toxins, chemicals and more. Many have been exploited and abused by human greed. Irrigation and deforestation have transformed the landscape and the accompanying waterways. Western Christianity, it seems, has been one of the partners in this crime against creation, a reality we still need to face as global warming intensifies.

The story of the Murray Darling Basin, a waterway comparable to the Mississippi Missouri system, illustrates the extent of the disaster.

The Murray-Darling Basin extends over more than a million square kilometres; its longest continuous length of water runs for 3,750 kilometres. There is evidence that Indigenous occupation of parts of this Basin goes back 40,000 years.

If Western Christianity is indeed partly responsible for this water crisis, what were the flaws in our theology—especially our creation theology—that led to this sin being perpetuated for so long? We may indeed need an 'ecological conversion' to change our attitude to nature, but what are the controlling doctrines from which we must be liberated if we are to begin restoring our relationship to the waters of the world?

A deep well

The crisis facing the Murray Darling Basin is but one example of water now being a matter of life and death. The oceans, rivers and waterways across the planet are being transformed by the impact of the Greenhouse Age we are now entering. It is no longer a question of a quick fix or of tight water restrictions. Nor is it simply a question of improved practical responses. We now need to discover how to live with water in a new and vital way. If our planet is fragile and precious, our water resources are even more precious—they are sacred.

It may seem, after the massive floods of 2011 in many parts of Australia, that the water crisis facing the Murray Darling Basis is history. Far from it! The effects of greenhouse gases are still with us and demand serious consideration. Weather patterns have been disturbed and glaciers around the globe are still melting. We can still expect continued climate change in the future.

To what deep well shall we go to find the water of life, a resource that will reorient us to live in a Greenhouse Age where our relationship with water is as spiritual and vital as it is material? Perhaps we need to recognise all water as sacrament, not merely the water of baptism. Perhaps we need to discern God's presence in the water is a new and vibrant way.

Wells of thinking

These are some of the challenges facing the authors of this volume as we confront the issue of *Water: A Matter of Life and Death*. Their responses are but the beginning of a serious engagement with water as a spiritual well and also as a physical resource for all of life on this planet.

The study by David Paton focuses on the Murray-Darling crisis with special attention to the Mouth. Dredging the Mouth, he argues, is an engineering solution to a symptom but does not address the underlying cause of the problem—the lack of an environmental flow along the river to the Mouth. Environmental flows deposit nutrients and fine sediments on the mudflats that are vital for the life of the Mouth. The cessation of environmental flows over the Barrages has radically changed the ecology of the Southern Coorong. Rising salinity remains a problem; the decline of birds, fish and existing plant life is painful; current government interventions are inadequate; the local community is angry. The lesson is clear: 'thou shalt not covet the environment's water.'

Paul Babie and Mark Brindal tackle the complex question of water and the law—how can water be managed so that all benefit with equity? They argue Australian water law could become an exemplar for other nations. The efficacy of the current legal framework, however, is placed at risk by the inadequacies of the Australian Constitution and the federal structure it implements. A Constitutional change is needed so that 'all natural water that is not already appropriated under legal sanction shall be declared public water and made subject to a suitable system of law applicable to the whole continent' and that governments should 'secure the fullest possible use in the interests of the whole people.'

Jione Havea is a Tongan who takes us into another world, the world of a seawater people who believe 'they came from the sea and to the sea they will return'. They face a crisis of faith as rising waters begin to inundate Pacific islands, uncover their ancestral graves and force evacuation. So where then is home? Jione leads us to re-imagine the reality of home, land and diaspora in such a critical context. He even challenges us to re-read biblical traditions about God separating the waters and then allowing them to cover Earth in the flood. Wherever the waters take us, home is more than house; it is hospitality and sharing on land or on the sea.

The context of Clive Ayers' study is the water crisis in the state of Queensland, Australia; Ayers highlights that the signs of this water crisis are indeed a matter of life and death and that the environmental crisis is in fact a world life crisis. While, as Ayers points out, water is a symbol of life and renewal in the biblical tradition and Christian ritual, in the real life water crisis of Queensland, water is much more than a symbol. Both church and state need to find new ways to live with the ambiguity of a severe water shortage in a state where water has always been in abundance. Clive points us in the direction of these new ways.

The discussion by Barbara Deutschmann explores the crucial symbiotic relationship between place/well/people and water in the patriarchal narratives. Peace (*shalom*) is dependent on a mutual righteous relationship 'around the well'. Her discussion is illustrated by a contemporary case of water sharing and control among the Massai. The specific covenant of Abraham with Abimilech suggests a comparable action we might take, namely, to pledge our covenant loyalty (*chesed)* with this land to treat its waters, not as resources to be owned and commercialised, but as partners in a covenant community.

Employing the approach of ecological hermeneutics *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* edited by Norman Habel and Peter Trudinger, Ray