

The River of Life in Biblical Theology

by
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Psa. 46:4 – There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the habitation of the Most High is holy.

The River motif that flows through scripture has many branches. Sometimes it appears as a spring (ex. Isa 12:3) or sometimes as a whole water system (ex. Ezek 47:6-12). A River that once watered the garden of Eden (Gen 2:10) returns again to water the New Jerusalem (Ps 46:4; Rev 22:1-2). Thus, the Living Water motif is very significant in the eschatological program, running its course from the opening chapters of Genesis to the final chapter of Revelation. Beyond the river's function of watering the blessed lands (whether historical or eschatological), it has a unique development in the Gospels as spiritual water, which revives everyone who believes in Zion's king, granting them eternal life. Thus, the purpose of this article is to examine the biblical texts related to the development of Living Water and its importance in eschatological studies.

Part 1: The First River

'A River Flowed out of Eden'

In the Garden of Eden, there was a river that flowed through the land, which then divided into four rivers. These four rivers then became the source of Eden's blessings to the rest of the world. Concerning the four river courses, Genesis 2 states,

The name of the first was Pishon, it surrounds all the land of Havilah, where there is gold, and the gold of that land is good, there is also bdellium, and onyx stone. The name of the second river is the Gihon, it surrounds the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris, flowing east to Assyria. The fourth river is the Euphrates. (Gen 2:11-12)

Each river is connected with a region that they serve. Rivers, particularly in the ancient world, were extremely important for the economic prosperity of a city – Egypt’s dependence on the Nile River is a quintessential example. Rivers were important for both commerce and irrigation. Concerning the connection of the river with mineral wealth, the Pishon River is connected with a land of gold and other precious gems. Thus, the material wealth of the Havilah is connected to Eden by means of the Pishon River. This type of connection is likely true of the other three rivers of Eden as well, though only Pishon receives that development in the literature.¹

From a cosmological perspective, we may consider Eden as the navel (center) of the world.² From this perspective, it becomes likely that the reader should understand these rivers as flowing out in four separate directions from the world’s center. Given that water runs downhill, we should understand that Eden, and its river, were in an elevated location (i.e., a mountain), and

¹ A very different understanding and identification of the rivers is proposed by Laird Harris, who writes, “The naming of the rivers of Eden in the following verses locates the general area of the garden for us. Speiser neatly shows that the four rivers that parted from the river of Eden were not rivers flowing away from Eden but toward it. The expression ‘four heads’ by good parallels refers to the four sources of the rivers. These four rivers united to form the river which by inundation watered the garden. Two of the rivers have long been identified—the Euphrates and the Hiddekel. Hiddekel is the ancient form of the name ‘Tigris’ which has come to us in this form through the Persian and Greek. A third river, Gihon, ‘compasseth’ or ‘winds through’ {Speiser} the land of Cush. Since the AV was translated it has been found that the Hebrew word *hush* refers to two areas. It may mean Ethiopia south of Egypt or it may mean the country east of Mesopotamia where the Kassite people were. Clearly the Nile river of Ethiopia and Egypt is not in view in Gen. 2. The Cush intended is the Kassite territory and the Gihon is therefore one of the several rivers coming from the Zagros Mountains east of Mesopotamia. The fourth river, the Pison, winds through the land of Havilah. Havilah is rather clearly some portion of Arabia. It is associated with Ophir and Sheba in the Table of Nations (Gen. 10:7, 28, 29) and is located east of Egypt and between Egypt and Assyria in Gen. 25:18 and I Sam. 15:7. This land is now all desert, but the climatic conditions were doubtless somewhat different in Edenic times. The geography has changed through the centuries through the receding of the Persian Gulf and probably also through the effects of the flood and other major climatic and geological processes. None the less, there are valleys in North Arabia which may well have formerly channeled water into the lower Euphrates River. We can not, of course, set the limits of Eden, but its approximate location can be inferred. It was in the general region of southern Mesopotamia. It may even have been under the present Persian Gulf.” (Laird Harris, “The Mist, The Canopy, And the rivers of Eden,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 11 no 4 Fall 1968, p. 179).

² Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1972), 190-192.

that all four rivers flowed down the mountain to water the rest of the world.³ Thus, Eden was a mountain-paradise and the source of life for the rest of the world.

Part II: Zion's River

The River in the City of God

And just as humanity's original mountain-paradise had a blessed water supply, so also the eschatological mountain-paradise will have a water supply that blesses all the lands around it.

And he received me, and brought me back to the bank of the river. (7) And when I returned, behold, on the bank of the river, there were very many trees – on this side and that – (8) and he said to me, “These waters, going down to the eastern district, go down to Arabia, and when the waters that go down enter the sea, they become fresh. (9) And it shall be that every living creature, from those which swarm to all who enter its streams, will live. And there will be very many fish because these waters entered that place. All who enter her stream will be healed and live!⁴ . . . (12) And along the stream will come up, by its bank – both this side and that side – every tree for eating. Its leaf will not wither, and its fruit will not fail in its season, but will bear first fruits each month because of its waters which come down from the sanctuary. And its fruit will be for eating and its leaves for healing. (Ezek. 47:6a-12)

The language here (i.e., “many trees,” “fruit for eating,” “swarming creatures”) is likely intended to recall humanity's original setting in the Garden of Eden. But here, the vitality of the river does not flow from Eden, but from the sanctuary of Mount Zion's temple.⁵ Similarly, Psalm 46:4 states, “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.” The following verse (v. 5) clarifies that in this city, “God is in her midst, it will not be shaken.” The life-giving properties of

³ Similarly, Alexander says, “The river flowing from Eden (Gen. 2:10) is reminiscent of Ezekiel 47:1-12, which envisages a river flowing from a future Jerusalem temple and bringing life to the Dead Sea. The fact that Eden must be an elevated location, possibly a mountain, also supports the idea that it is a sanctuary, for God's presence is frequently associated with mountains.” (T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 23.)

⁴ Or “all *the places* which this stream enters will be healed and live.” The translation varies depending on the subject of the verb, יָבוֹא, “to come/enter” The subject may be “all” referring to any creature that enters the stream, or “the stream” may be going through every place on its journey the Arabian sea.

⁵ For the river motif in biblical literature see: Isa 12:2; Isa 41:18; Ps 46:4; Zech 14:8-9; Ezek 47:1-12; and Rev 22:1-5.

Eden's river will flow again from the city of God. It's important to note that the historical Jerusalem is likely not in view in Psalm 46, as there is no river that flows from Jerusalem.⁶

Isaiah brings attention to Zion's life-giving water supply in chapter 12. In Chapter 11, Isaiah envisions the coming of the Lord's Davidic king who reigns over the nations. While restoring the fallen throne of David, he also reclaims the original created order of Adam's dominion. Isaiah states,

- 6) The wolf will abide with the lamb,
 and the leopard will lie down with the young goat,
 The calf and the lion and the fatted calf together,
 And a little child will drive them.
- 7) The cow and the bear will graze,
 together their offspring will lie down.
 The Lion will eat straw like the ox,
- 8) and the nursing child will play
 by the hole of the cobra,
 and the weaned child will stretch out his hand
 by the den of the viper. (Isa 11:6-8)

The harmony of the animal kingdom pictured here recalls Adam's original heritage in Eden. He received dominion over the animals and called each by its name (Gen 2:19-20). Further, the Lord's people are collected from the nations (Isa. 11:12) and permitted to travel the Lord's highway, which brings them to Zion, the city of his salvation.

And there shall be a highway for the remnant of his people who remain from Assyria, just as there was for Israel, in the day when he brought them up from the land of Egypt. (Isa 11:16)

When the Lord's people are safe inside the city, they sing the song of their salvation (Isaiah 12:1-6). In that song, the Lord's people rejoice that they are permitted to drink from Zion's spring,

- 3) And you (pl.) will draw water with rejoicing, from springs of salvation.

⁶ The city was nourished by a few natural springs near the city. Most notable is the Gihon spring, which Hezekiah's underground aqueduct brought into the city during the Assyrian crisis.

- 4) And you (pl.) will say on that day, Praise the Lord, call on his name!
Make known his deeds among the nations. Let it be remembered, that his name is lifted high.
- 5) Make music to YHWH, because he does majestic things, that this may be known in all the earth.
- 6) Cry and shout, inhabitants of Zion, because great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel. (Isa 12:3-6)

The connection of Zion's life-giving waters and Eden's waters, which refresh the earth, should not be missed. Both are bringing blessings and prosperity to the lands they serve.

Similarly, the cosmic nature of both Mt. Zion and Eden's mountain serves as the source and center of the world's blessings. Levenson's comments are instructive here,

In sum, it is reasonable to assume that someone in Israel saw in Zion the cosmic mountain which is also the primal paradise called the Garden of Eden. The sacramental spring which is the source of Jerusalem's miraculous waterworks was conceived as the cosmic stream which issues from that mountain and sheds its fertilizing waters upon the face of the whole earth.⁷

What makes these water supplies unique, as Levenson points out, is their vivification properties. This theme of vivification is particularly prominent in prophetic passages of Mt. Zion. The waters that issue from Zion come from unlikely places and create gardens in uninhabitable deserts.

Isaiah 35:7

The dry places will come alive with a pool,
and the drylands with springs of water.
The jackals will pasture in her bed,
tall grass, with reeds and rushes.

Isaiah 41:18

I will open rivers on the bare heights,
springs in the middle of valleys,
I will set the desert as the reed-sea,
and dry lands as springs of water.

Isaiah 51:3

⁷ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 131.

For the Lord comforts Zion,
He comforts all her waste-lands,
He will make her wilderness like Eden,
and her desert like the garden of YHWH,
Joy and rejoicing will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the sound of song.

Zion's water supply, like Eden's river, does not stay in Zion. It moves outwards and revives the desolate places around it, making even the "wilderness like Eden" (Isa. 51:3). In Isaiah 51:3, the link of Zion's water supply with Eden becomes explicit, as the Lord will bring about the fertility once found in Eden once again for all who drink from Zion's river.⁸

Zechariah 14:8-9 completes the living-water motif in the Old Testament. He writes,

- 8) And it shall be, on that day,
that the water of life goes out from Jerusalem,
half to the eastern sea,
and half to the western sea,
it will happen in summer and winter.
9) and it will be that YHWH is king over all the earth. (Zech 14:8-9)

This passage envisions the Day of the Lord as the day when YHWH claims his right to rule the earth. Additionally, that day is marked as the day on which "the waters of life" go out from Jerusalem to the eastern and western seas. As in the Ezekiel text, the life-giving property of the river is going out from Jerusalem and reviving all the outer lands until it reaches the sea.

⁸ Roberts states, "In the Zion Tradition. . . there was a river whose streams made glad the city of God (Ps 1:6:5), but the living waters of that river had its source in and flowed out from the very abode of God (Ezek 47:1-2; Joel 4:18; Zech 14:8; cf. 13:1). The waters were there only because Yahweh was there. In Jeremiah's words (2:13; 7:13), Yahweh is the, "the fountain of living waters". . . The water motif is then expanded by reference to another motif of the Zion Tradition, the assault of the enemy kings on Zion. In the mythological antecedents of that motif these *lim . hp y[m]*, "men of the seashore" (KTU 1.3 ii 7) apparently came by ship to attack Baal's mountain. Psalm 48:8 speaks of Yahweh smashing the ships of Tarshish, and Isaiah elsewhere in a highly mythological context speaks of Yahweh's day against all the ships of Tarshish and dhows of Arabia (Isa 2:16). The motif is clearly mythological in origin and secondarily applied to Jerusalem, since Jerusalem is neither on the coast nor subject to waterborne assault. Nonetheless, Isaiah uses this motif metaphorically to underscore Zion's future security. Though Yahweh's abode will be the source and site of wide streams, those rivers will never again be the avenue for arrogant human assaults on God's city. No rowing ship or majestic vessel will be able to reach it with hostile intent." (*First Isaiah*, 429-430)

It may help to examine these life-giving water supplies from a cosmological perspective. In ancient cosmology, the world is pictured as a massive mountain. The summit of this mountain serves as the most sacred space (or “navel”), and is the meeting of heaven and earth. From this summit, the most high ruler exercises dominion over everything below. The whole mountain is surrounded by the cosmic waters through which one must pass to descend to the underworld below.⁹ When applying this cosmology to Jerusalem, Zion is serving as the center and navel of the world, and as the peak of the cosmic mountain. Zion’s river then runs from the center (and sacred place) in the midst of the world to the ends of the world, which flow down to refresh all land until it reaches the outermost seas which surround the cosmic mountain in a cosmological geography. In this picture, Zion’s water supply refreshes the entire cosmos, bringing Zion’s life-giving properties to the rest of the world, a picture closely associated with Eden’s rivers.

Part III: The Spiritual Water

There is Blood in the Water

When we come to the New Testament, we likely see the same life-giving water supply reviving and saving all who drink from it. Indeed, this life-giving water goes to the ends of the world and all who drink from this water, will not perish, but have everlasting life. But the river is bloody.

⁹ Morales, *The Tabernacle Pre-Figured*, 4. See also Clifford, which writes, “These heights can be the meeting place of the gods, the source of water and fertility, the battleground of conflicting natural forces, the meeting place of heaven and earth, the place where effective decrees are issued. In this sense, the mountains are cosmic, that is, involved in the government and stability of the cosmos.” (Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain of Canaan and the Old Testament*, 3).

In the New Testament, this living water becomes inextricably linked to a person: Zion's King. Revelation 7:17 identifies the guide to the living water,

17) Because the lamb in the center midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
And he will lead them to springs of living water,
And God will wipe every tear from their eyes. (Rev. 7:17)

As is often the case with the final apocalypse, there are multiple Old Testament allusions in view. The idea of the divine shepherd leading his people to water immediately recalls Psalm 23:1-2. But here, the divine shepherd psalm is paired with an allusion to Isaiah 25. In that text, at the great victory banquet, the Lord will wipe every tear from their faces. Significantly, the location of the great banquet takes place "on this Mountain" (Isa 25:6). John here has correctly identified that the divine shepherd will guide his people to the living water at Zion, where he will also remove tears, shame, and death (Isa. 25:8).

Earlier in Jesus' ministry, he encountered a woman at a well. Jesus asked her for a drink from the well, but the woman responded in disbelief that a Jew would accept water from a Samaritan,

10) Jesus answered and said to her, "if you knew the gift of God and who it was who said to you, 'give me a drink,' you would ask him and he would give you living water. . . 13) all who drink from this water will thirst again, 14) but whoever drinks from the water which I will give to him, will never thirst for eternity, but the water which I will give him will become in him a spring of water, welling up to eternal life. (John 4:10, 13-14)

The water offered by Jesus certainly offers the same spiritual refreshment that was promised to those who drink from Zion's river, reviving those who drink it with eternal life. Here, the living water is offered by Jesus, Zion's king, who gives 'eternal life.' Additionally, he offers the water freely to all who believe in him.¹⁰ Lastly, the water is available to the gentiles. The Samaritan woman identified herself as one who stood apart from the Jewish race (Jn 4:9). Nevertheless,

¹⁰ Recalling Isa. 55:1

Jesus said the water is offered to her as well, regardless of which holy mountain is considered sacred (Jn 4:21). The Old Testament prophets foretold of the day when the gentiles would be granted access and citizenship to Zion (ex., Isa. 2:2, 25:6, Psalms 87:1-7). Jesus has come to open Zion's gates to the nations and allow them to drink the living water.

The final chapter of John's apocalypse closes with the promise of living water.

1) And he showed me a river of living water, bright as crystal, coming down from the throne of God and the Lamb. 2) In the middle of her streets and on both sides of the river, the Tree of Life with its twelve fruits, yielding each of its fruit according to the month, and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3) and everything will no longer be cursed. And the throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. (Rev. 22:1-3)

We come once again to the garden imagery that opened the canon. But here, the water comes not from Eden, but from the throne of God. It is essential to note John's dependence on Ezekiel 47:6-12, where we learned that the living water flowed from the temple to the sea, reviving the earth as it went.¹¹ John closes his book with a beautiful depiction of Eden's greatest attributes – the garden, the Tree of Life, and the river of living water – returning for the betterment of the Lord's people. The lost dominion of Adam has been reclaimed by Zion's king. It may not be insignificant that when Mary first encounters the resurrected Jesus, "She thought that he was a gardener." The true Adam has returned to his true vocation: "to work and to keep the garden."¹²

¹¹ Beale writes, "22:1 also reaches farther back than even Ezekiel, Joel, and Zechariah, being modeled on the description of the primeval garden in Gen. 2:10: 'a river was going forth from Eden.' In association with the first Eden's river, the 'gold... the bdellium and the onyx stone' were features around one of the river's tributaries, like the precious stones (21:18-21) surrounding the river in Rev. 22:1. The point is that God "will make the end like the beginning" (so *Barnabas* 6:13), though the consummated garden will exist on an escalated scale in comparison to the first. In this respect, in striking resemblance to Rev. 21:1-22:5, *Test. Dan* 5:12 says that in the consummation of the ages 'the saints will rest in *Eden*' and places this in synonymous parallelism with 'and in the *New Jerusalem* the righteous will rejoice.'" (G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1103).

¹² Gen 2:15

In conclusion, the River Motif is a major theme of Biblical theology, which is introduced in the Bible's opening narrative and completed in the final discourse of Revelation. Thus, the River is a true eschatological theme. Like most eschatological themes, the River also finds its Yes and Amen in the Messianic king who allows all those who believe in him to enjoy his river of salvation freely. The vivification properties offered by Zion's river are offered by Jesus and given to everyone who believes in him. All who believe in him will never perish, but have everlasting life.

The Book of Revelation closes with an invitation to come and drink the water of the New Jerusalem,

17) and the Spirit and the Bride say, "Come!" And the one who hears says, "Come!" And let the one who thirsts come, and let the one who desires receive the water of life for free. (Rev. 22:17)

This invitation remains open, and all are encouraged to come and drink freely from the water of life through Jesus, our King. Through Jesus, we obtain the living water which we can freely enjoy now. All who believe in Jesus obtain the living water that regenerates and restores our souls. Let us never forget that a great and precious price was paid so that we could come and drink freely of the river of Life.