

# **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WATER IN THE BOOK OF NUMBERS**

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## **Introduction**

Water is one of the most important necessities of life. We use it for washing, and we use it for drinking. In the absence of water, nothing can survive. When used in the Bible, the same is equally true in its use, but, in the Bible, it is also used for spiritual purification, and symbolic purposes. This paper is written to highlight the significance of water, as used in the book of Numbers. There are three themes that I will develop when talking of the significance of water. They are:

1. Israel as the redeemed people;
2. God as the sanctifier; and
3. God as Israel's provider.

What place does water have in the book? These three themes are developed in an effort to answer the question of water's significance in the book of Numbers.

## **The Use of Water in the Bible**

There are many uses of water in the Bible. The following are basically how water is used.

1. It is used for drinking by animals and by humans (Gen 24:11-19; Judges 7:4-5).
2. It is used for washing and ordinary bathing (Gen 18:4).
3. It is used for ritual cleaning, i.e., washing necessary for priests and Levites (Ex 30:17-21). It is also used for cleaning a person who is ceremonially or morally defiled.

4. The fourth reason why water is used in the Bible is when used as a symbol:
  - (a) as a symbol of evil people (Gen 49:4; Is 57:20);
  - (b) as a symbol of cleansing from sin (Is 1:16; Ezek 36:25);
  - (c) as a symbol in baptism (Acts 8:36); and
  - (d) as the symbol of the Holy Spirit (Is 44:3; John 7:38).

When used in Numbers, it is for these two reasons:

1. **For Ritual Cleansing.** It is used for bringing a curse upon a wife who is suspected of unfaithfulness (Num 5:17-27). It is used in the dedication of the Levites for priestly service (Ezek 8:17-21). It is used for purification from sin (Num 19:17-21). Finally, for ritual cleansing, men returning from war, together with the valuables taken from enemies, were cleaned with “the water of cleansing” for purification (Num 31:19-24).
2. **For Drinking.** The second reason why water is mentioned in Numbers is that water is used for drinking, both by human beings and livestock. In the desert at Kadesh, the people complained to Moses regarding water to drink, and for the livestock. Moses was instructed to speak to the rock, but, instead, struck the rock and water flowed out (Num 20:1-19). In Num 21:5, the people complained again to Moses regarding water, and forcefully stated that it would be better to go back to Egypt. When mentioned in Num 16:17, it is referring to the Lord’s leading of the people to a place called Beer, where a well was, and the people were refreshed. In Num 21:22, the Israelites pleaded with the Amorites that they be allowed to travel through their land. In the process, they promised not to set their eyes upon any fields, vineyards, or water wells. Finally, the last place in Numbers, where water is mentioned is Num 33:9, 14. Here, it is said, that they camped where they had

12 springs (v. 9), but, in verse 14, there is no water at the place called Rephidim.

From analysing the use of water in Numbers, we can conclude that the use of water is twofold; i.e.,

- (a) for consumption by humans and livestock; and
- (b) for use as a requirement for purification, on the basis of the rules given by God.

### **Why is Water Important in Numbers?**

I will start by quoting Gordon Wenham's comments, when he says the following.

“It is impossible to discuss the theology of Numbers in isolation from the other books of the Pentateuch, particularly Exodus and Leviticus. All are concerned with the outworking of the promises of God to Abraham, and the moulding of Israel into the holy people of God.”<sup>1</sup>

The mention of water in Numbers must be seen in the context of the covenant made by God with Abraham in Gen 12. The history of Israel, up to now (Numbers) has been the working out of this promise into reality. The mention of water in Numbers is best understood in the context of God's covenant relationship with Israel.

#### **(a) God as the Redeemer of Israel**

When the Israelites were in Egypt, the people were under the rule of a foreign king. They were oppressed, and given a terrible time. It looked as though the promise God made to Abraham would never eventuate. At least, this was the understanding, from the worldly view, as suggested by Graeme Goldsworthy, when he says the following:

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[N.B.: The footnote numbers in the original printed edition were incorrectly numbered. They have now been numbered correctly. –Revising ed.]

<sup>1</sup> Gordon J. Wenham *Numbers: Introduction and Commentary* Leicester UK: IVP, 1985, p. 39.

“To all outward appearances, Israel’s God is powerless to keep faith with His chosen, and unable to prevent foreign gods from exercising rule over His people.”<sup>2</sup>

It is when the people of God (Israel) are in a state of despair, a time of total hopelessness, that God intervenes. It is a God, who initiated the covenant, by His grace, and it is He who intervenes, because not doing so would make Him untrue to His word. In other words, their slavery would be seen as a threat to the covenant. On the basis of the promise to Abraham, God demonstrates His faithfulness, by bringing Israel out of Egypt. Into this hopeless situation, the word of God, through Moses, sounds the good news of salvation:

“Don’t be afraid, stand firm, and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. . . . The Lord will fight for you” (Ex 14:13).

And that is just what happened. Throughout the Pentateuch, we see the promise made to Abraham, in Genesis, that Israel will be God’s own. God will come to Israel, whenever she is in need. Every event that is recorded in the Pentateuch is to be seen in the context of Israel being the redeemed people of God, on their way to the promised land, that is, Canaan. As the redeemed people of God, the use of water in Numbers has two significant implications. These are:

- (a) God is the Provider, and
- (b) God is the Sanctifier.

**(b) God as the Sanctifier**

As the redeemed people of God, there are standards, which will have to be complied with, if they are to be continuously blessed. Goldsworthy says that they must show that their redemption is not merely outward, but a thing of the heart.<sup>3</sup> If they obey God’s word, they shall be His special

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<sup>2</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1991, p. 169.

<sup>3</sup> Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, p. 181.

possession out of all the peoples under His sovereign rule. To be God's people continuously means responsibilities under God's rule.

(i) **God is Holy.** Holiness in the Bible is applied in the highest sense to God. In regard to the holiness of God, the *New Bible Dictionary* says that, firstly, it is His separateness from the creation, and duration above it.<sup>4</sup> God is far above anything else, in the sense that nothing is like Him. Secondly, holiness is understood to mean an ethical quality or standard. Kenneth Jones says this, regarding holiness:

“There is a sense, in which the people of Israel were the people of God, and this is given repeatedly as the reason they must keep themselves from the customs and religions of the people around them. They are holy, and must refrain from all defilement rituals using water, because of moral and ceremonial uncleanness.”<sup>5</sup>

(ii) **The Unclean must be Cleansed.** There are basically two kinds of uncleanness, and people are to be put out of the camp when something happens to make them unclean. They are: (1) for physical reasons: such as for diseases, which were contagious; and (2) spiritual reasons. The camp was a place where God was present, and, therefore, in honour of Him, nothing impure should remain. Beside these two reasons the book, *The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*, proposes a third reason, and that is:

“Further, there was a *typical* reason, for the camp was the emblem of the church, where nothing that is unclean should enter, in which nothing that is defiled should enter, and in which nothing that is unholy should be tolerated.”<sup>6</sup>

While it is true that purity in the church must be maintained, and offenders dealt with immediately. I don't think the writer of Numbers

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<sup>4</sup> J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd edn, Leicester UK: IVP, 1982, p. 530.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth E. Jones, *The Book of Numbers*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1972, p. 89.

<sup>6</sup> *The Treasury of Scripture*, London UK: Samuel Bagster, 1974, p. 94.

envisaged the establishment of the church, in New Testament times. A reading of this interpretation into the context of Numbers would be shallow.

iii) **God is the Basis of Purity.** Just as Israel was not able to do anything in her hopelessness during the enslavement in Egypt, so is she again unable to do anything when there is corporate or individual defilement. It is God, Himself, who provides the remedy to counteract this defilement, either morally or ceremonially. On this, Kenneth Jones says the following:

“It is only God who can make man acceptable to Him. Man cannot approach God on his own terms and conditions. If man is rendered unfit for approach to God, only God, Himself, is able to provide the cleansing he needs.”<sup>7</sup>

Because, without God, there is no cleansing, God again initiates the purification concept. The appointment of priests and Levites to minister in the tabernacle is an act of mercy, designed by God to prevent His wrath upon the nation (12:17; 14:13-20).

(iv) **The Place of Water in Cleaning.** The place of water in the whole purification process is that it is just a symbol of God accepting sinners, when the sinner shows that he is truly sorry for his actions. Apart from the cleaning of physical dirt, it does in no way clean the spiritual ailments of a person. The purification processes, described in the book, in themselves, are mere rituals. That is, they are representing a reality. A very notable scholar in the field of anthropology, Monica Wilson, says the following on rituals, when she analysed rituals in Africa:

“Rituals reveal values at their deepest level . . . men express, in ritual, what moves them most. It is the values of people that are revealed.”<sup>8</sup>

Ritual in Numbers represents the reality that God is forgiving the offender, and the offender is entering into relationship with God again. The

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<sup>7</sup> Jones, *Book of Numbers*, p. 58.

<sup>8</sup> Monica Wilson, “Nyakyusa Ritual and Symbolism”, in *American Anthropologist* 56-2 (April 1954), p. 241.

actual ritual, in itself, has no real physical or spiritual effect. Rituals are symbols, and depend, ultimately, on God for their efficacy.

Water is mentioned here in Numbers as an element in ritual, with the connotation that it is God who sanctifies His people when they are defiled. Besides taking water as drink, and for physical cleanness, the theology of water here is that it is God who cleanses His people, and accepts them. The rituals here are just symbols of that reality. Monica Wilson's comment, though secular, is true of ancient Near-Eastern societies, and is even true here in Melanesia. Rituals are expressions of the reality they represent.

### (c) **God as Provider**

The next implication of water in Numbers that I wish to develop is that of water, as showing God as the provider. The *New Bible Dictionary*, in the article on "Providence", says this:

"Providence is presented in scripture as a function of divine sovereignty, God is king over all, doing what He wills."<sup>9</sup>

I understand this to mean that everything in creation is His, and He does with it what He wants. God chooses who to give to, and what to give. From this I also understand that God is in control of all the events of the world. To understand better the use of water in Numbers, the providence of God is also seen in Israel as the redeemed. Three elements are involved.

(i) **The Physical Environment.** When one reads about the vegetation of the areas the Israelites travelled through, most of the places were dry and rocky in most parts. The rocks make it hard for the soil to store water, and thereby to provide the necessities for plant life. These conditions made it difficult, even for a handful of people to live, and to gather food and water without not having to go through difficulties. This is the kind of physical background to the book of Numbers. To be able to provide for nearly three million people, and their livestock, is

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas, *New Bible Dictionary*, p. 1051.

incomprehensible. As one writer says: “It is small wonder, then, that water became a powerful symbol of God’s blessings in biblical times.”<sup>10</sup>

Water, here, is used in the sense that it is an expression of God’s blessing to His people. Not only with water, but the same is true of food and shelter.

(ii) **Provides Security and Fights for Israel.** The definition of providence given in the *New Bible Dictionary* can also mean that, as well as providing food and shelter, it can further be understood as God fighting wars for His people. This is seen in the battles with Sihon and Og, in which Israel became the victors. God provides them with victory.

(iii) **Providence also Implies Responsibilities.** One of the significances of water (as with food, shelter, etc.) was that of faith. The Israelites were required, on their part, to have faith. They were to know that their deliverance from Egypt, and their pilgrimage through the wilderness, must be seen, by faith, as the work of God, as J. L. Mays presents.<sup>11</sup> The importance of water was that the people would see water as more than a mere drink. They were supposed to see water as the Lord’s provision for their need, and were supposed to be reviving their faith in the Lord. The sad thing, though, was that, in the experience of Israel, faith is often missing. There are two ways of seeing faith here in Numbers. They are:

1. God, as the answer to their physical needs, i.e., in food, drink, and protection from their enemies. This was not the case, as we see people in fear at the sight of the Amorites, thereby wishing to return to Egypt.
2. Faith in God means worshipping Yahweh alone, but the people would rather go back to Egypt under the rule of foreign gods. They are not happy with being God’s people under God’s rule. The ordeal of the unfaithful woman, in chapter five, gives a story of a moral and spiritual connotation. Moral, in that she is

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<sup>10</sup> John A. Thompson, *Handbook of Life in Bible Times*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1986.

<sup>11</sup> J. L. Mays, *Leviticus and Numbers*, London UK: SCM Press, 1963, p. 109.



unfaithful to her husband, spiritual, in that Israel is just like this to God.

The significance of water, as developed here, is that God provides, and He requires faith on the part of those for whom He provides. Even though, many times, Israel failed God, He is very faithful.

## **Conclusion**

The significance of water in Numbers, as noted in this paper, has been these:

(i) **The Context of God as the Redeemer.** The place of water in Numbers is seen in the context of the Israelites as being the redeemed people of God. Being redeemed means being holy, just as God, is, Himself, holy. Any act, contrary to these special demands, calls for purification, for no one is to come into the vicinity of God with defilement.

The use of water in the ritual is as a symbol of cleansing, both of moral and spiritual impurity.

(ii) **The Context of God as the Sanctifier.** God is the Sanctifier of His people. Man cannot do it on his own. God, Himself, is the basis of declaring who is cleansed and who is not. The use of water in this context is the symbol of God's acceptance, through the ritual of purification. It is not the ritual, but the reality this ritual represents, which cleanses.

(iii) **The Context of God as the Provider.** God, Himself, comes to live among His people. This implies that God will see them through their needs. God provides for needs of food and drink, and also provides protection from their enemies, and from the climate. The use of water here implies that God is the provider for Israel.

As part of this providence, is the demand by God for them to have faith in Him. And having faith means worshipping God alone, and trusting Him for all their needs. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case. But the concept of purification has been the basis where God accepts those

who break these stipulations. This makes God, Himself, to be the Redeemer, the Sanctifier, and also provides the remedy for the offences committed by Israelites. The significance of water, seen in these contexts, is important in Numbers.

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