

Squandering the Fountains of Life-giving Water: A Biblical Cry by Allen Johnson

Water is just too easy to take for granted. We turn on the faucet and presto, plenty of water. We swallow a cool drink, wash our hands, flush the toilet, clean our clothes, mop the floor, boil tea, wash the car, and water the garden. We experience water coming down from the sky as rain and snow. We enjoy water for recreation such as swimming, fishing, snorkeling, or just being around its mysterious beauty. We also know that water is important for some people in their work such as in food growing, water transport, and manufacturing. Either too much or not enough water at the wrong time and place can be disastrous. Polluted water is unhealthy. Yes, water is integral to our lives.

I open a Bible as an all-day soft rain soaks our ground, refreshes the air, and gentles my mind. The Bible developed over many centuries by authors who had one trait in common—they lived where water was scarce. The hill country where much of biblical Israel's history occurred was bereft of rain most of the year and frequented by droughts. On the north, the Jordan River began as a rivulet seeping from snow-capped mountains into the sizable Lake of Galilee, then out again through a hot, fertile valley into the appropriately-named Dead Sea. Israel often faced hostile nations who had an edge in their water-based economies. To the west lay the Mediterranean Sea and its seafaring traders. Egypt to the southwest with its Nile River, and Babylon to the east with its Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, built strong agriculture economies and then aggrandized that power through foreign conquest.

Water is central in Christian narrative and doctrine. The Spirit of God moves over water at the beginning of the creation story. God liberates enslaved Hebrew people from Egypt as they cross the parted Red Sea, and who then years later cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Christian water baptism is liberation from the enslavement of sin and entrance into God's future. At the consummation of history, the River of Life flows from the throne of God and The Lamb [Jesus]. All who are thirsty are invited to drink the free gift of the Water of Life.

I snap out of my biblical musings and try to face into the reality that the world today is dangerously running out of clean, sufficient water. Deadly wars have been fought over water. More conflicts are sure to come if humanity does not quickly practice water conservation, protection, and just allocation.

I ponder grim statistics that point out 80% of sewage in developing countries is discharged untreated, thus polluting rivers, lakes and coastal areas. 6000 children die every day from disease associated with lack of access to safe drinking water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene. Millions of women and children spend several hours a day collecting water from distant, often polluted sources. Investment in drinking-water and sanitation would result in 272 million more school

attendance days a year. The value of deaths averted, based on discounted future earnings, would amount to US\$ 3.6 billion a year. However, investment in safe drinking water and sanitation contributes to economic growth. For each \$1 invested, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates returns of \$3 to \$34, depending on the region and technology. (<http://www.ensaa.eu>)

Climate change is already altering weather patterns enough to spew extremes of flood and drought disaster on some agricultural regions. The current trajectory portends more drastic fates especially to many of the world's most vulnerable Poor. Ocean acidification due to increased CO2 load is killing coral and altering ocean biomass.

Industrial agriculture is especially water hungry, wasteful, and polluting. Irrigation-intensive agriculture is depleting aquifers and rivers at rates far exceeding recharge. Farm run-off can carry fertilizers such as nitrates and phosphates along with pesticides that contaminate drinking water, harm aquatic life, and often result in bodies of water with massive-sized dead zones bereft of life.

Thermoelectric power is the biggest hog of water in the nation! This will surprise most Americans, but electricity generation uses 49% of the nation's water. Yes, essentially half. Try practicing every time you use water thinking that an equivalent amount is going for electric power generation. And as an aside, about 40% of the heat energy used to make steam is wasted.

The United States puts out detailed reports on the nation's water use. Following is some data from what apparently is their current report, 2005 data:

Steam-driven electric power draws vast amounts of water to spin the turbine-generators, while large bodies of water are required for cooling. 72% of water consumed is fresh water, the rest is saline.

Irrigation is next with 31% of all national water withdrawal. The categories then get a bit muddled. Public Supply is 11% which encompasses a lot of industrial, commercial, and domestic purposes, of which just over half is for drinking water, yard watering, toilet flushing, and household needs. Livestock and Aquaculture is 3%. Self-supplied water for the Industrial manufacturing, refining, and processing of commodities is 4%. Mining is 1%, although this 2005 figure does not reflect the horizontal hydrofracturing (fracking) boom that has since exploded.

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<http://www.ensaa.eu/index.php/water-and-food/110-water-water-everywhere-and-not-a-drop-to-drink.html>

I've been to the famed Jordan River several times. The Jordan is progressively polluted and drawn off

for human use during its 60 mile southward flow from Lake Galilee to the Dead Sea. Only 2% of its historic flow reaches the Dead Sea, whose water level has dropped over 65 feet since the 1970's. The Jordan River today is spiritually dissonant, a parable of how far humanity has twisted a symbol of liberation, promise, and sin-deliverance to the very opposite. For how humanity treats its most essential gifts for life is how we ourselves will end up. If humanity cherishes, conserves, and cleans up life-giving air, water, soil, and biodiversity of life, then blessings inherent within God's creation order will accrue to humanity. But if humanity scorns, pollutes, and squanders these God-given, life-essential gifts, we ourselves will become what we did to these gifts.

"Water, water, everywhere
And all the boards did shrink
Water, water everywhere
Nor any drop to drink."
(*Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

