

The Theological Significance of Water in the Book of Ezekiel: A Brief Assessment

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Abstract

This study focuses on the significance of water in the Book of Ezekiel, and raises the wider question of the significance of water in the Bible as a whole. Very little direct research has been done on the matter and so the study aims at laying a foundation for further study, rather than attempting to answer all the questions it raises itself. The analysis falls into five sections; Ezekiel, 13&38, 17&19, 26-28, 31 and 47. The study highlights the diversity of Ezekiel with reference to water, but also in terms of the traditions he is drawing from. Clearly, water in the ancient world, and in ancient texts is worthy of further attention.

Water often seems to have a dual persona in antiquity: its vitality is renowned and praised for its life-giving qualities, but its destructive nature is lamented even more. Many ancient creation myths involve a divine struggle with watery chaotic forces, such as Enuma Elis, or the Ugaritic Ba'al cycles, or a form of creation from water. Similarly, many ideas about the boundary between the land of the living and the land of the dead often find their expression in water symbolism, usually in the form of a river. Given that water is so commonly mentioned in the Hebrew bible, some 1386 times,¹ it is surprising that the essence of this has not been fully expounded before, but it is my belief that a fuller understanding of the Hebrew bible and other ancient communities cannot be gained without consideration of the vital role water played in these civilizations.

Very little direct research has been done on the matter, although studies on cosmology and mythology in the Hebrew Bible often partially acknowledge water. F.M. Cross for example discusses some mythology of water in his work on *Canaanite Myth and*

¹ These are as follows: Gen 110, Exod 116, Lev 46, Num 55, Deut 50, Josh 62, Judg 19, 1&2 Sam 40, 1&2 Kgs 83, 1&2 Chron 34, Ezra 20, Neh 17, Est 1, Job 70, **Ps 154**, Prov 36, Ecc 6, Songs 8, **Isaiah 130**, **Jer 168**, Lam 9, **Ezek 123**, Dan 23, Hos 10, Joel 7, Amos 15, Jon 15, Mic 6, Nah 9, Hab 10, Zeph 4, Hag 3, Zech 14. Ruth, Obadiah and Malachi are the only three books which do not refer to water at all. (Taken from the NRSV).

Within the Biblical books the water terminology is further broken down in terms of subject: Water 536, Sea 290, River(s) 209, Rain 84, Stream/Brook 82, Flood 40, Deep 36, Dew 36, Hail 31, Snow 22, Waves 19, Waterfall 1.

The reader will note that the prophetic books have noticeably more water terminology than any other when length and size is accounted for, and the four books with the highest number of references are (ordered highest to lowest) Jeremiah, Psalms, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. This in itself raises interesting points, as all four are poetic, cultic, all have exilic and post exilic authors (Psalms and Isaiah at least in part) and three of them are large prophetic collections. The relationship between these elements and the resulting high number of water references is beyond the scope of the study, but would be worth consideration elsewhere.

Hebrew Epic.² Although he is exploring the general connections between the mythology and literature of the two cultures, many of the connections have water as a tenet within them: sometimes central, sometimes underlying, but present. Stordalen also discusses paradisiacal water in his *Echoes of Eden*, incorporating discussion about 'divine irrigation' in Mesopotamian mythological gardens.³ Crouch and Strine are amongst the most direct contributors to the issue of water thus far, as their 'YHWH's Battle against Chaos in Ezekiel' focuses on water within the oracles against the nations and the laments of Ezekiel 17 and 19.⁴ Rebecca Watson's study of chaos in the Psalms is also noteworthy in the subject area. Thurman's *A Linguistic Exploration*⁵ is a direct study of rivers and related terms in Sumerian, the Semitic languages of the Ancient Near East, and the Hebrew Bible. She traces the etymology and use of river terminology from the mid-third millennium BCE down to the Hebrew Bible.

Apart from a handful of works, there is therefore, a clear gap in focussed research when it comes to water.⁶ The aim of this study is to highlight this lack of knowledge and to demonstrate that it is worth pursuing further. The texts considered are Ezekiel 13&38, 17&19, 26-28, 31 and 47. By demonstrating the variety of ways in which water is presented and used within Ezekiel, I hope that the significance of water can be clearly seen, and the range of areas for further study appreciated. The passages were chosen because they either have a high number of references to water or the references appear to be more significant than a simplistic reference. The significance of water in the Hebrew Bible has been neglected for too long, and the aim of this study is to persuade the reader that this is surely an area of biblical scholarship worthy of further attention.

I. Water as a Weapon; Ezekiel 13:11-13 and 38:9, 22.

Ezekiel 13:11-13 comes at the end of an indictment against false prophets within Israel. It is an oracle from YHWH, spoken through the prophet but, notably, in prosaic form, which, given the cosmic and almost poetic imagery, feels perhaps a little surprising when compared with these elements elsewhere in the prophetic literature. Our passage in Ezekiel 38 comes from the context of another prosaic oracle, this time against Gog of Magog, outside of and attacking Israel. Much has been said about Ezekiel 38-39, largely regarding the perceived apocalyptic nature and authorship of the chapters.⁷

² F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 44.

³ Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2-3 and Symbolism of the Garden of Eden in Biblical Hebrew Literature* (Contribution to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 25; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 357-361.

⁴ C.L. Crouch and C. Strine, 'YHWH's Battle against Chaos in Ezekiel: The Transformation of Judahite Mythology for a New Situation.' *Forthcoming*.

⁵ R. Thurman, "A Linguistic Exploration of the River and Related Terms in Sumerian and the Semitic Languages of the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2007).

⁶ That being said, Rebecca Watson is pursuing the role of the Sea in the Bible further with a post-doctoral research project at the University of Cambridge, so her work will be very important for future discussions of water when it comes out.

⁷ D.M.G. Stalker, *Ezekiel*. 263., Bowen, *Ezekiel*, 234., Fisch, *Ezekiel*, 253., R.E. Clements, *Ezekiel*, 173.

The noun גשם appears 35 times in the Hebrew Bible; but only in Ezekiel is it coupled with the participle שוטף.⁸ The imagery of ‘pouring’ or ‘overflowing’ rain is not uncommon (Isa 28:2, Hab 3:10 and Ps 77:18, all of which use variants of זרם מים) but here it is the author’s combination of terms that makes it unique.

גשם literally means ‘downpour’ (Ezek 1:28). The plural form (Ezek 34:26; Ezr 10:9, 13 and elsewhere) implies ‘heavy showers’ as do the genitive combinations מטרי גשם (Zech 10:1) and גשם מטרת (Job 37:6).⁹

The immediate image of Yahweh that springs to mind with these verses is that of a storm god, and the event is an outpouring of divine wrath. In *The Storm-God in the Ancient Near East*, Alberto Green notes that the storm god was the

“principal deity of both fecundating rainfall and stormy violence. He was simultaneously the principal god of the herdsman, the beneficent deity who sends the gentle fertilizing rains for the farmer, and the Warrior-god par excellence whose thunderous roar and flashes of lightening were portents of violence and destruction.”¹⁰

I am also grateful to Green for his list of passages within which Yahweh is portrayed as a Storm-god from the Hebrew Bible.¹¹ All include water, storms, or wind, while only two include fire (Ps 29:7, 18:12). This tends to confirm that two different things are happening in Ezekiel 13 and 38, reflecting a dual nature of the storm god as fertility god and warrior. This may be the reason for the difference between Yahweh’s wrath (in the form of storm god) expressed to those within Israel and to those outside of Israel: in Ezekiel 13 Yahweh is portrayed as an angered fertility God, as compared with Ezekiel 38 where the warrior side of the storm god is emphasized.

Through consideration of the water references, I think we can note two things: first, the unique language expressing a common idea and second, two differing presentations of the power of Yahweh drawing from established and attested wider traditions. The unique language expressing a known idea may be seen as a feature of Ezekiel, which raises the question: Is Ezekiel creating a new tradition and belief about water, or is he creatively using established tradition? John F. Kutsko notes that “Ezekiel, like any effective rhetorician, relies on a common body of knowledge from a shared

⁸ *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 8, ed. G.J. Butterwick, H. Ringgren and H-J Fabry, s.v. ‘מטר’, H.J. Zobel, 250-265. (Trans. D.E. Green from *Theologisches Worterbuch Zum Alten Testament*, Band iv, Lieferungen 5-9, Stuttgart: verlag W. Kohlhammer GmbH, 1983-1984. Cambridge: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997.), 253. (Hereafter TDOT)

⁹ TDOT 8, s.v. ‘מטר’, 251. גשם is attested elsewhere within Ezekiel, in a rather contrasting manner: גשמי ברכה or ‘rain of blessing’⁹ in Ezek 34:26. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament. Vol.1: The New Koehler-Baumgartner in English.* trans. and Ed. M.E.J. Richardson, (Leiden: Brill, 1994), s.v. ‘גשם’. (Hereafter HALOT)

¹⁰ Alberto R. W. Green, *The Storm-God in the Ancient Near East* (Biblical and Judaic Studies from the University of California, San Diego, Vol. 8, (ed.) W.H. Propp; Winona Lake; Indiana, Eisenbrauns, 2003), 15.

¹¹ (Exod 15:1-18, Ps 29, Hab 3, Dt 33, Ps 18 = 2 Sam 22, Ps 77:15-20, Ps 89). Green, *The Storm-God*, 258-259.

experience without necessarily explicitly referring to it.”¹² With this in mind, the differences which may seem small to us (indeed in Ezek 38:22 we speak of a difference of three nouns) may perhaps have been more obvious in Ezekiel’s time: his audience were surely better equipped to realize the significance of certain references than we are today. By established tradition we do not refer to a fixed singular myth or legend, but rather to a flexible but established body of ideas that linked water with divinity and the gods.

II. Water as Babylon: Ezekiel 17:5,7-8 and 19:10

מים רבים occurs three times in Ezekiel 17 and 19 (17:5, 8; 19:10) and refers to Babylon in all three instances¹³. Although מים רבים is often read as having cosmological connotations,¹⁴ in these cases it does not appear to be so. It is more likely that the ‘abundant waters’ referred to are a topographical reference to the Euphrates, Tigris, and/or the extensive irrigation networks of canals built off both these rivers. Compared to the lack of water in Israel and Judah, Babylon was certainly a place of abundance. As Watson rightly says, “the expression מים רבים is one which is not confined to any single sphere of allusion. As such, its significance cannot be determined in any absolute sense, but rather must in each case be determined by the context in which it occurs.”¹⁵ מים רבים here is potentially different from the same expression used elsewhere.

It is well known that water was regarded as a sign of blessing in the ancient world. As with most natural phenomena, when it was present enough to be beneficial it was regarded as a blessing from the god of that particular phenomenon and when it was lacking, or over-present, e.g. a flood, then it became a sign of displeasure of the deity. Thus, some of the earliest ideas of theodicy may well have formed around understandings of nature and divine provision.

In Ezekiel 17 and 19 the term מים רבים, translated as ‘abundant waters’, serves as an appellation for Babylon. The same technique is seen in the oracles against Tyre and Egypt in 26-28 and 29-32 respectively. There are three references to מים רבים in the 38 verses of Ezekiel 17 and 19. In the oracles against Tyre, the term בלב ימים is used in place of מים רבים to describe Tyre and it occurs 5 times in 66 verses. Within the oracles against Egypt, the term נהרתך replaces בלב ימים. It is worth noting that each of the water appellations refers to a unique aspect of the nation’s topography; rather than a general term for all three. In the parts of his oracles of judgement, topographical and geographical water features are used as appellations for major players within the chapters. Although in Ezekiel 17 and 19

¹² John F. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth. Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel* (Biblical and Judaic Studies, Vol. 7. Ed. W.H. Propp; Winona Lake; Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 102.

¹³ Contra C.L. Crouch and C.A. Strine. ‘YHWH’s Battle Against Chaos in Ezekiel: The Transformation of a Traditional Motif for a New Situation’ *JBL* 132.4 (2013): 883-903.

¹⁴ HALOT 2, s.v. מים, 577, gives the primary meaning as ‘water as a primeval element, above and below the firmament, Gen 1:2,7, and underneath the earth, Exod 20:4, Gen 7:10’ and the fifth most common meaning as ‘a dangerous power of the underworld’, appearing in Ps. 18:17, 32:6, 69:2, 15.

¹⁵ Rebecca S. Watson, *Chaos Uncreated: A Reassessment of the Theme of Chaos in the Hebrew Bible* (BZAW 341; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 61.

the text is negative towards Israel and the Judean monarchy, the major power is Babylon, identified as מים רבים. In the oracles specifically against Tyre and Egypt, both receive their own distinctive appellations, נהרתך בלב ימים and נהרתך.

It is noteworthy that Ezekiel chooses to use water, rather than any other feature. He does not use gods, temples, armies or monuments, presumably as each nation had their own versions of these and they were often fairly similar. Instead he chooses a feature which made each of these places recognisable enough to his audience, so much so that he does not need to refer to them by name. 'Abundant waters' has already been discussed as a primary feature of Babylon in Ezekiel's eyes. 'In the heart of the seas', to describe Tyre, has definite mythical connotations (see below) but is also an instantly recognisable feature of Tyre's geographical location. Similarly, 'your streams' as descriptive of Egypt may potentially have mythical connotations (see below) but also is recognisable as parts of the Nile.

III. In the Heart of the Seas: Ezekiel 27:25-27, 28:2, 28:8 27:25-27, 28:2

The poetic function of the appellation בלב ימים has already been discussed; the ideas behind the phrase will now be analysed. Geographically speaking, Tyre's unique position readily merits the name 'in the heart of the seas', so there could be grounds for reading it purely geographically. However the sea in prophetic literature is rarely just a geographical reference, and further consideration must take place.

A dwelling place in the midst of some form of water was often associated with divinity in ancient thought, for example Ea (Sumerian Enki) dwelling in the Apsu¹⁶ and Canaanite 'El dwelling at the source of the double deeps, or two rivers.¹⁷ Similarly, the Egyptian god Ra and the accompanying gods in the solar boat were believed to have ridden the eternal river each day and night and therefore eternally dwelt on the water. Thus, for a human city to dwell in the midst of the water could easily be seen as a claim to divine status. Gods were so often believed to dwell in water because of the role water was seen to have as separating the living and the dead. Water in this role represented the boundary of the known world, and only the gods knew what was beyond.

27:26 reads "your rowers have brought you into the high seas, The east wind has wrecked you in the heart of the seas." Clearly however, the Hebrew reads, "your rowers have brought you into the mayim rabbim..." Translators appear to interpret the מים רבים in light of the 'heart of the seas' referred to in v25 and v26b, and so changing many waters to high seas. The מים רבים found here is worth more attention, as it is unlikely to have got there by accident – the trade list from 27:5-25 demonstrates careful attention and structuring of the passage, and I think it likely that if our author intended to say high seas, they would have done. Although admittedly, it would only involve changing a

¹⁶ Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh and Others. Edited and Translated with an Introduction and Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 320.

¹⁷ E. Theodore Mullen, *The Assembly of the Gods: The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Michigan: Scholars Press, 1980), 133, 150.

couple of Hebrew characters to make high seas from מים רבים, there is nothing in the MT to indicate that the Masoretes thought there was any textual corruption present, and there is no mention of the versions having anything else. Therefore I think it likely that our author intended and wrote מים רבים.

What the author meant by or is referring to with this idea of a boat being rowed into the מים רבים is unclear. It could be an analogy, if the audience at the time would have associated מים רבים with danger or destruction then it would function as a metaphor of the boat of Tyre heading for destruction. This does fit well with the overall rhetoric, and it can be explained by reasoning that a landlocked nation would most likely have an almost inherent fear of the sea, as they wouldn't interact with it, and very few would have been able to swim. However as H.G. May famously noted in his 1955 article, מים רבים often has cosmic or mythological overtones, referring the reader back to the ideas surrounding water as chaos in the Hebrew bible and creation accounts.¹⁸

IV. 31:2-9, 14-15 – The Waters, the Rivers, the Deep and a Tree

The poetic beauty of Ezekiel 31 is such that it almost masks the incongruity beneath. The passage is full of inconsistencies and questions that it does nothing to answer, but instead works into typically Ezekielian rhetoric. Nevertheless, the water in this passage displays perfectly the ideas connected with the nourishing and positive side of water seen in the ancient Near East, as well as an indication of the understanding of water's place in the cosmology and theology of Israel at the time. The waters are under the earth (v7) and controlled by Yahweh (v15). They feed the land in the form of rivers and streams (v4) and through this allow wildlife and plants to grow (v6), thereby sustaining the human population. However, they also have a highly important secondary function – to act as the boundary between the living and the dead (vv. 15-16). Noticeably, there are no connotations of a battle between Yahweh and the water here: the waters in all their forms are firmly under Yahweh's control, and as such present a more positive side to water than we have seen elsewhere in Ezekiel.¹⁹

V. The Water that Flows From Beneath the Threshold: Ezekiel 47:1-12

מים occurs 15 times in the passages this dissertation is concerned with, 8 of these in Ezekiel 47. There is a clear progression in the passage from מים to נהל, directly related to the growth of the river. מים here serves in its simplest noun form meaning 'water,' removed from any chaotic connotations, though not completely lacking in divine ones.

¹⁸ H.G. May, 'Some Cosmic Connotations of Mayim Rabim, Many Waters' *JBL* 74 (1955): 9-21.

¹⁹ It is worth noting that water was viewed very highly as a form of blessing from a deity in the ancient world, something which is entirely unsurprising given the agricultural nature of their society. However, as we have seen already in Ezekiel, the destructive side is often emphasised more than the positive. This may be in part to do with the nature of the texts which use water in such a noticeable way; storm-god theophanies, oracles against the nations or leaders. Or, it may be to do with the nature of the book as a whole; as noted in footnote 1, the prophetic books, and in particular the exilic prophetic books, have more water terminology in them than any other. Whether this is to do with the socio/idiolect of the prophets in general, or more intrinsically tied to the type of text within them would be a project worth researching.

נַחַל occurs seven times in Ezekiel, all in chapter 47. This is particularly notable because Ezekiel refers to rivers elsewhere with the expected term נָהָר. נַחַל is slightly unclear in meaning; it can “indicate either the water flow or resultant gorge.”²⁰ HALOT gives the primary meaning of נַחַל as “river, wadi, or valley with a perennial supply of water (but more often only in winter).”²¹ Thurman’s definitions are similar: “Naru(m) appears throughout the ancient Near East and indicates a perennially flowing river, canal, or path of water and nahallu(m) indicates a wadi, an intermittent torrent of water or the resultant gorge.”²² It is therefore interesting and significant that Ezekiel refers to the river flowing from the temple as a נַחַל rather than a נָהָר. We would have expected Ezekiel to speak of the miraculous and transforming river of Yahweh in terms applicable to the large and reliable rivers known to the people of the ancient Near East. What Ezekiel does however is to use terminology applicable to (unreliable) wadis, which raises questions about Yahweh’s ability to sustain the river.

The symbolism of the river in Ezekiel 47 is a perfect example of the beneficent side of water in the Hebrew Bible and of the deity supplying it. As I have noted previously, the battle between Yahweh and the sea is well attested throughout the Hebrew Bible and the view of the sea as a destructive force is particularly prevalent in Ezekiel 26-28. It is useful to note here that rivers thus far in Ezekiel have been presented as passive or positive, whereas the sea is always presented negatively.²³ This awareness does not appear to fit so neatly with the simplistic reading of Ezekiel 47 given above, of a beneficiary river and act of Yahweh. Although it is those things, our reading of 47 must also involve an awareness of the conveyed positive role of rivers and the destructive role of the sea and thus when speaking of a suggested victory of the river over the sea, we are also dealing with a victory of positive over negative, and in this case, life over death. When sea, river, life and death

²⁰ Thurman, *A Linguistic Exploration*, 203.

²¹ HALOT 2, s.v. נַחַל, 687.

²² Thurman, *A Linguistic Exploration*, 2.

²³ This is a very interesting point to observe: the sea is presented as negative and destructive, whereas a river is presented in a positive light. Within Ezekiel, rivers are mentioned indirectly in chapters 17 and 19 (where they are presented as passive topographical features) 29 (where it is the dwelling place of the crocodile – though this does not seem to be a judgement on the water itself, as it is more about the judgement of pharaoh who has abused the water resources given to him by Yahweh) 31 (where streams nourish the great tree, until they are held back by Yahweh, causing the death of the tree [v15]) 32 (where the watercourses and streams are corrupted by the monster churning them up) and 47 (where the river is the river of transformation and a sign of Yahweh’s blessing). Thus the rivers in Ezekiel are all presented as either passive or positive.

The sea on the other hand occurs in chapter 26 (though only in v3 is it presented as violent) 27:25-27, 34 (as destructive and the sign of ultimate ruin for Tyre) 28:8 (as being associated with ‘violent death’) 32:2 (as the home of the dragon, although we should note, as with rivers, that this may not be a judgement on the water itself, but possibly more on the creature for corrupting it) and here in 47 (as the stagnant waters – which, for a wanderer in the desert signals death). Thus, when the sea is given an active role in Ezekiel: it is destructive, or linked with something that is destructive.

are found together in Hebrew Bible study, it is often in studies dealing with mythology, whether of Yahweh-Chaos, Baal-Yam, or Yahweh-Yam.²⁴

A powerful river of this size is almost universally in the ancient Near East referred to as נהר, *naru(m)*, or ID, yet here for Ezekiel, it is a נהל. Thurman found that bilingual texts demonstrate the translation of the Sumerian ^dID as parallel and cognate to the Akkadian *naru(m)*.²⁵ The usual semitic cognate of *naru* is נהר, and, for the most part, נהר retained the divine connotations of *naru*.²⁶ In the Hebrew Bible נהר occurs 119 times, almost all of which refer to rivers outside of Israel; the term נהל is used 142 times, expanded from its usual ancient Near Eastern usage, to signify any waterway within Israel²⁷. Thurman concludes that the authors of the Hebrew Bible deliberately change the normative use of waterway terminology²⁸ in order to reject the notion of divine rivers, river gods, or practices concerned with either, such as *huršanu*.

Thurman's argument makes perfect sense if we assume the Hebrew Bible had one author, or one editor, and one background. However, with even a basic knowledge of the complexities of the authorship, editorial groups and differing voices within ancient Israel, it is easy to see that Thurman's ideas concerning Israelite linguistic usage of נהל/נהר are too generalised and simplistic to be applied to the Hebrew Bible without encountering significant problems and questions. Despite some methodological problems, it cannot be denied that Thurman's thesis raises some important questions for the study of the Hebrew Bible. Hence, although there have been many ideas put forward to explain what the river symbolises in Ezekiel's vision, no one has previously thought to ask why it is a נהל and not a נהר. As stated, I suggest the terminological choice is representative of a topographical comparison that differentiated between Israelite waterways and foreign ones. This is not to say there is no element of theological differentiation between Israelite river practices and the foreign ones; rather that it coincides with and is subordinate to the topographical comparison and resultant linguistic differentiation.

²⁴ See Benedikt Otzen, Hans Gottlieb and Knud Jeppesen, *Myths in the Old Testament*, trans. Frederick Cryer (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1980), 31-44; J.W. Rogerson, *Myth in Old Testament Interpretation*, (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1974); Norman C. Habel, *Yahweh versus Baal: A Conflict of Religious Cultures. A Study in the Relevance of Ugaritic Materials for the Early Faith of Israel*, (New York: Bookman Associates, 1964); Robert Coote & David Ord, *In the Beginning: Creation and the Priestly History*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); F.M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 122-136; N. Wyatt, *Myths of Power: A Study of Royal Myth and Ideology in Ugaritic and Biblical Tradition*, (Munster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1996); C.L. Crouch, 'Adapting the Cosmological Tradition in Isaiah 40-55', *SJOT* 25.2, (2011): 260-275; C.L. Crouch, 'Ezekiel's Oracles'. Rebecca S. Watson, *Chaos Uncreated*.

²⁵ Erica Reiner, 'The Etiological Myth of the Seven Sages', *Orientalia*, 30 (1961): 1-11; S. Langdon, 'An Unplaced Fragment of the *Utukke Limnuti* Series', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1932):557-60. Cit. Thurman, *A Linguistic Exploration*, 41.

²⁶ Thurman, *A Linguistic Exploration*, 4. In particular, her observations of Ugaritic are helpful; where out of the four Ugaritic terms, *nhr*, *nhrm*, *nhl* and *nhlm*, only *nhr* is considered divine.

²⁷ Thurman, *A Linguistic Exploration*, 1.

²⁸ i.e. using נהל and נהר to distinguish between rivers in Israel and elsewhere – a geographical distinction – whereas other languages use the two terms to make a size and power comparison between larger rivers and smaller waterways.

VI. Towards some conclusions

From our brief analysis of water in Ezekiel three things stand out, firstly, the prevalence of water and ideas about water within Ezekiel, secondly, the variety of ways in which these are presented and thirdly, a distinction between the presentation of rivers (as positive) and the sea (as negative) is clearly made. Ezekiel 13 and 38 use water terminology as part of their use of storm god theophanies. Chapters 17 and 19 display ideas about water being a divine blessing which are common to the ancient near East and also allows us, in conjunction with the oracles against Tyre and Egypt, to note a poetic device of the author: using water terminology as an appellative term for the major characters of Babylon, Tyre and Egypt.

The oracles against Tyre display a range of mythological ideas used through a range of water references. By focussing on water terminology in the oracles against Egypt we were able to pinpoint two different traditions used – Judean and Egyptian. Ezekiel 47 opens up a fascinating discussion about the role of rivers in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient near East. The distinction between the positive and negative presentations of rivers and the sea is clear throughout Ezekiel, though it will be interesting to see if the same presentations are the same across a wider range of ancient texts; or if this is a widely acknowledged and subscribed to idea in Israelite thought. That we have such a range of ideas about water present in Ezekiel shows how much work is still to be done in this area. Questions of transference of mythological ideas between nations are among the first to be asked, while the internal status of water in the Hebrew Bible is also highlighted. There is much work to be done on the subject, but my hope is that it may be recognised as work worth doing.

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