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But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.

—John 19:34 (ESV)

The arresting image of Jesus’s pierced side has fed the spiritual imagination of countless believers over the centuries. The evangelist tells us that it “took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled” (John 19:36 ESV). Extending this line of thought, St. Thomas Aquinas goes so far as to compare the opened heart of Christ to the Scriptures as a whole, for the passion reveals the secret depths of God’s trinitarian love latent in the Word, both written and incarnate. The Fathers of the Church—Latin, Greek, and Syriac alike—also saw in the flow of blood and water a symbol of the sacraments of Christian worship. From the side of Christ, dead on the cross, divine life has been dispensed to humanity. The side of Christ is the fount of the divine life that believers receive, by God’s grace, through the humble, human signs of both Word and Sacrament.

Recognition of the life-giving symbiosis between Scripture and sacrament, so richly attested in the teaching of the Fathers of the Church, has proved difficult to maintain in the modern world. However much the Church has insisted upon the unity of Word and Sacrament, “the faithful are not always conscious of this connection,” so “there is great need for a deeper investigation of the relationship between word and sacrament in the Church’s pastoral activity and in theological reflection” (Benedict XVI, Verbum Domini 53).
This series seeks to contribute to that “deeper investigation” by offering a biblical theology of each of the seven sacraments.

One classic definition of theology is “faith seeking understanding.” Catholic theology operates with the conviction that the deposit of faith—that which theology seeks to understand—has been brought to completion in Jesus Christ, is reliably transmitted in Scripture and Tradition, and is authentically interpreted by the Church’s teaching office (see Dei Verbum 7–10). Accordingly, the teaching of the Catholic Church is the initium fidei or starting point of faith for theological reflection. The series does not aim primarily to demonstrate the truth of Catholic sacramental doctrine but to understand it more deeply. The purpose of the series, in short, is to foster a deeper appreciation of God’s gifts and call in the sacraments through a renewed encounter with his Word in Scripture.

The volumes in the series therefore explore the sacraments’ deep roots in the revelation of the Old and New Testaments. Since the study of Scripture should always be “the soul of sacred theology” (Dei Verbum 24), the expression “biblical theology” is used to indicate that the series engages in a theological reading of the Bible in order to enliven our understanding of the sacraments. The guidelines for such theological interpretation of Scripture are specified in Catechism of the Catholic Church 112–14 (cf. Dei Verbum 12): attention (1) to the entire content and unity of Scripture, (2) to the living Tradition of the whole Church, and (3) to the analogy of faith. A few words on each of these criteria are in order.

In keeping with the series’ character as “biblical theology,” the content and unity of Scripture is the criterion that largely governs the structure of each volume. The Catechism provides a helpful summary of the series’ approach to this criterion. Following “the divine pedagogy of salvation,” the volumes attempt to illuminate how the meaning of the seven sacraments, like that of all liturgical signs and symbols, “is rooted in the work of creation and in human culture, specified by the events of the Old Covenant and fully revealed in the person and work of Christ” (CCC 1145). Each volume explores (a) the Old Testament threads (including but not limited to discrete types of the sacraments) that (b) culminate in the ministry and above all in the paschal mystery of the incarnate Christ.

The series’ acceptance of the Church’s sacramental teaching ensures that the Church’s Tradition plays an integral role in the volumes’ engagement with the Bible. More directly, sidebars offer specific illustrations selected from the
teaching and practice of the postbiblical Church, showing the sometimes surprising ways in which Tradition embodies the Church’s ongoing reception of the biblical Word.

In the case of the sacraments, attention to the analogy of faith means, among other things, keeping always in mind their origin and end in the eternal life of the Blessed Trinity, their relationship to the missions of the Son and the Spirit, their ecclesial context, their doxological character, their soteriological purpose, their vocational entailments, and their eschatological horizon.

The series’ intended readership is broad. While the primary audience is Catholics of the Roman Rite, it is hoped that others will find much to appreciate, particularly Catholics of the non-Roman rites as well as Eastern Christians who are not in full communion with the Bishop of Rome but whose sacramental theory and practice are very close. Protestant Christians, of course, vary widely in their views of sacramental worship, and their reception of the series is likely to vary similarly. It is our hope that, at the very least, the series will help Protestant believers better understand how Catholic sacramental teaching is born of Scripture and animated by it.

We pray that all those who read these volumes will together delight in the rich food of God’s Word (cf. Isa. 55:2), seeking the unity in faith and charity to which we are called by our common baptism into the life of the Blessed Trinity. To him be the glory.

Timothy C. Gray
John Sehorn
Introduction

The Fountain of Salvation

You visit the earth and water it, 
you greatly enrich it;  
the river of God is full of water;  
you provide the people with grain,  
for so you have prepared it.  

—Psalm 65:9

Illumination . . . is the most beautiful and most magnificent of the gifts of God.  

—Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 40.3

Baptism was born in the land of Israel; we must interpret the material elements which it uses as a symbol according to the significance of these elements for the Jews of old. It is in a Jewish order of symbolism that we shall find the explanation of Baptism.  

—Jean Daniélou, The Bible and the Liturgy

According to Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher Thales of Miletus, speculating on the nature of the universe, suggested that everything is made of water.¹ From our twenty-first-century perspective, it would be easy to mock  

1. Aristotle, Metaphysics 1.983b.
this early attempt to make sense of the world. But if we stop to think about the importance of water, the idea, although still no doubt false, might appear less far-fetched. Around 70 percent of the human body is made of water. Roughly the same percentage of the earth’s surface is covered by the water of the world’s oceans, seas, and lakes. Every living organism on the planet depends on water for its life, whether directly or indirectly. Plants absorb it; animals drink it. In the natural realm, even if things are not made of water in the sense that Thales proposed, water is nevertheless the source of life. Little wonder, then, that this substance, so essential for every living thing, should also play a central role in God’s plan of salvation.

The Scriptures and the liturgy abound with water imagery. From the first page of the Christian Bible to the last, water serves as a potent symbol, signifying life, death, purity, and, in one of the most famous accounts of the biblical narrative, the path to freedom. The Catholic Church’s rite of blessing the baptismal waters draws on numerous accounts from both the Old and the New Testaments, appealing to a rich kaleidoscope of biblical symbols to illuminate the significance of baptism: the waters of creation, the flood, the crossing of the Red Sea, Christ’s own baptism in the Jordan, and the water and the blood flowing from the side of Christ on the cross. All these elements of the biblical account shed light on this foundational sacrament.

A Biblical Theology of Baptism

Over the course of the past century, several major works have appeared on the topic of baptism from a biblical perspective. These works share one common feature: each of them focuses predominantly, if not exclusively, on the texts of the New Testament. In most cases they begin no earlier than Jewish practices related to washing and purification around the time of the New Testament. The reason for this limitation should be obvious. The rite of baptism first appears in the New Testament, and the Old Testament says nothing explicitly about this foundational Christian sacrament.

Nevertheless, the approach of this study will be different, inspired by the writings of the Church Fathers as well as the Church’s liturgy. The present

work offers a broader understanding of the theology of baptism, drawing on numerous texts from the Old Testament. In his classic work *The Bible and the Liturgy*, Jean Daniélou writes, “If we wish to understand the true meaning of Baptism, it is quite clear that we must turn to the Old Testament.”3 The early Christians, following the lead of the New Testament writers, saw in several stories of the Old Testament prefigurations of baptism: creation, the flood and Noah’s ark, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the washing of Naaman the Syrian in the river Jordan, to name a few. In this study of baptism, we will consider these and other texts from the Old Testament, even some that have not traditionally been associated with baptism. The rationale behind this approach is that the primary stock of images for understanding the significance of baptism should come from the Bible itself. As already noted, water imagery abounds in the Old Testament. Even texts that have not been explicitly associated with baptism can contribute to the significance of the sacrament.

Part 1 of this work will explore four aspects of water imagery in the Old Testament for the light they shed on baptism. To borrow a wonderful turn of phrase from Richard Hays, one might describe this part of the study as an exercise in “reading backwards”—that is, reading the texts of the Old Testament afresh in light of the new revelation God has made in Christ.4 We will begin in chapter 1 by considering the connection between water, life, and salvation. The obvious starting point for this theme is the creation accounts of Genesis, but water frequently serves as an image of salvation in the prophetic texts of the Old Testament, especially, but not exclusively, in Isaiah. It is hardly surprising, then, that the first sacrament of Christian initiation should incorporate the use of water. Although water often connotes life in Scripture, it can also signify death. Chapter 2 will thus focus on some of the Old Testament texts in which the waters bring about death or at least threaten such destruction. The connection between this theme and Christian baptism should be obvious, particularly in light of the Pauline understanding of baptism as dying and rising with Christ (Rom. 6:1–11; Col. 2:11–12). One of the most famous episodes in all of Scripture, the crossing of the Red Sea, associates water with liberation, as God opens a path in the midst of the

waters to lead the Israelites to freedom. Many early Christians, taking their
cue from 1 Corinthians 10, saw in this event a type of baptism. The entry into
the land described in the book of Joshua, moreover, evokes the image of this
earlier crossing and fulfills the hope to which the Red Sea event points. These
two episodes, as well as traditions stemming from them, will be the subject
of chapter 3. Several baptismal texts in the New Testament also speak of
baptism as a purification. In order to understand these texts better, chapter 4
will explore the Old Testament notion of purity, both ritual and moral, to see
what light it can shed on the purificatory aspects of baptism. This typology
of the symbolism of water is no doubt artificial, and as we will see, there is
considerable overlap across categories. Nevertheless, it will be helpful to treat
each theme separately before offering a synthesis.

In part 2, we will shift our attention to the New Testament, focusing pri-
marily, but not exclusively, on explicit references to baptism. The first two
chapters of this section, 5 and 6, will consider the Gospels, studying Christ’s
own baptism by John the Baptist and the ubiquitous water imagery in the
Gospel of John. Chapter 7 will then explore the variations on the idea of
being baptized “in the name,” particularly as it relates to the Old Testament
understanding of the name of the Lord. The association of baptism with
the name of God, I suggest, implies that the rite relates to both the presence
and the worship of God. Like all the sacraments, baptism draws its power
from Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection. No one brings out this
connection more clearly than Paul. His understanding of baptism as a union
of the believer with these saving events will be the subject of chapter 8. In
addition to the image of dying and rising with Christ, Paul draws on clothing
imagery to describe what happens in baptism. Chapter 9 will examine this
theme, looking at baptismal texts in Galatians and Colossians as well as other
passages in which Paul uses clothing language as a mode of exhortation. The
fluidity of this image suggests that there is a close connection between baptism
and the Christian life. Chapter 10 focuses on the First Epistle of Peter, which
some interpreters have suggested has a close connection with early baptismal
liturgies. Whether or not this is the case, 1 Peter does make an important
statement about baptism (1 Pet. 3:21), and it also elaborates the theme of new
birth, which other New Testament texts associate with baptism. Addition-
ally, this letter develops the understanding of the Church as a temple and a

5. CCC 1115.
The Fountain of Salvation

royal priesthood. First Peter thus serves as a fitting transition to chapter 11, which discusses the New Testament understanding of purity as it relates to baptism. Whereas the law of Moses speaks broadly of two kinds of purity, ritual and moral, the New Testament texts about baptism seem to focus almost exclusively on purity as an ethical category. Nevertheless, the ethical understanding of purity still relates to ritual since baptism serves as the entrance to Christian worship. The final chapter of the study explores Paul’s various depictions of baptismal unity. For Paul, baptism is ordered to unity—the healing of divisions between Jews and Gentiles and, indeed, between people of all sorts of backgrounds. Nevertheless, this is not a unity that flattens out differences. Rather, the unity that baptism brings about is characterized by a diversity of gifts and roles. All of these roles serve to further the Church’s mission of bringing others into healing union with Christ.

**Baptismal Anointing**

The sacrament of baptism, both historically and as it is practiced in the Catholic Church today, incorporates a number of rites: exorcisms, clothing with a white garment, anointing with oil, and Scripture readings, among other acts. At the heart of the sacrament, however, lies the act of bathing with water, whether by pouring or by immersion. Although earlier studies of baptism with good reason include New Testament references to anointing or sealing, such as 2 Corinthians 1:22, I will limit this study primarily to the fundamental imagery of water. Nevertheless, we will see that even in texts that speak only of water, the idea of anointing is not far away. Christ’s baptism is his royal anointing, and in our baptism we are joined to him, anointed to serve him and to reign with him as part of the new creation, of which he is the firstborn. The waters of baptism are an instrumental fountain of salvation, drawing their power from the true fountain, Christ, who paradoxically gives us new life through death, liberating us and preparing us to worship in his new temple.
PART 1

WRITTEN for OUR INSTRUCTION

Water in the Old Testament
The Waters of Life

How fair are your tents, O Jacob,
your encampments, O Israel!
Like palm groves that stretch far away,
like gardens beside a river,
like aloes that the Lord has planted,
like cedar trees beside the waters.

—Numbers 24:5–6

The closing visions of the book of Revelation present an ambivalent picture of the role of water in the new heavens and the new earth. On the one hand, the waters of the sea, frequently interpreted in antiquity as the source of chaos and danger, will have no place in the new creation (Rev. 21:1).1 On the other hand, the very next chapter draws on the imagery of water as a source of life (22:1–2). Both these images—the sea as a destructive force and the river as a source of life—appear in the opening book of the Bible. Water thus forms bookends around the Bible as a whole, suggesting its importance as a biblical image. The life-giving and destructive properties of water both play

1. The classic study on the chaotic portrayal of water and its relation to eschatology is Hermann Gunkel, Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921); for a recent criticism of some of Gunkel’s ideas, see David Toshio Tsumura, Creation and Destruction: A Reappraisal of the Chaoskampf Theory in the Old Testament (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005).
an important role in the Christian understanding of baptism (see, e.g., Rom. 6:3–4). We will begin our study with the theme of water as a source of life.

The Waters of Creation

When it comes to the role of water in bringing about new life, the early chapters of Genesis provide fertile ground for the Christian imagination. At the beginning of the first creation account, in the chaotic conditions that precede God’s ordering of the universe, there is only water and a “mighty wind” that sweeps across these primordial waters (Gen. 1:2 [NRSV marginal note]). Not long after this description of the chaotic state of things, life begins to emerge from the waters. We read that, on the third day, God said, “‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’ And it was so” (Gen. 1:9). Out of the waters appears the dry land, and from it the first life appears, various kinds of vegetation (1:11). The “fertility” of the waters reappears on the fifth day as God begins to fill the sea with inhabitants (1:20). Despite the initially menacing and chaotic appearance of the waters, under God’s creative word, water becomes a source of life.

This connection between water and life continues in Genesis 2, with its description of the garden of Eden. Genesis describes this garden as a place of fertility and life, though also a place with the potential for disaster (as the reader soon discovers in Gen. 3). A passage that many modern interpreters see as perhaps an intrusion into the text identifies one of the important sources of life for the trees in the midst of Eden: the river flowing out of the garden (Gen. 2:10). This river splits into four rivers, two of which (the Tigris and the Euphrates) are well known and the other two of which (the Pishon and the Gihon) are harder to pinpoint. The exact identity of the rivers does not matter for our purposes. The important point is that Genesis gives the impression that this river from Eden is the source of life. As some interpreters have

2. The language with which the text speaks of this wind is ambiguous, which for a variety of reasons led later readers to interpret the “wind” of Gen. 1:2 as a reference to the Spirit of God (indeed, the Hebrew phrase can be interpreted literally as “the Spirit of God,” as older translations such as the RSV and the KJV do). As in many ancient languages, one word in Hebrew (ruaḥ) can mean “breath,” “wind,” or “spirit.” The modifier elohim literally means “god” or “gods,” but it can also be used as a superlative (hence the translation “a mighty wind”).

noted, the division into four rivers most likely symbolizes completeness, and so one can easily understand the river as the source of life for the whole world.4

The rest of the account of the events in the garden never mentions the river again; this is one of the reasons many interpreters see the description of the river as an insertion into the text.5 Nevertheless, the association of water with life and salvation appears frequently throughout the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms and the Prophets.

The Waters of Life in the Psalms

The opening poem of the Psalter draws on this imagery to describe the one who meditates on the Torah.

He is like a tree
planted by streams of water,


that yields its fruit in its season,  
and its leaf does not wither.  
In all that he does, he prospers. (Ps. 1:3 ESV)\(^6\)

The water imagery, of course, functions as a simile; the psalmist is not talking about literal water. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of water with the notion of meditating on God’s Word serves as a beautiful image for the close connection between baptism and the Word of God. Baptism is a sacrament of faith, one that combines word and physical action; it serves as the beginning of a life devoted to meditating on God’s Word. Without such meditation, the baptized will wither like a tree planted in the desert.

One of the most famous and popular of the psalms also uses water to describe the refreshment that the Lord provides for his people:

> The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
> he leads me beside still waters;  
> he restores my soul.  
> He leads me in right paths  
> for his name’s sake. (Ps. 23:1–3)\(^7\)

As in Psalm 1, the water of which the psalmist speaks here is metaphorical. Nevertheless, and also as in Psalm 1, the imagery of Psalm 23 can shed light

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6. The NRSV, striving to maintain inclusive language, uses plural pronouns to refer to the subject of the verbs. Unfortunately, this obscures the psalm’s use of the gendered noun ish, which was later interpreted messianically.

7. Throughout this work italics in biblical quotations indicate my own emphasis.
on the significance of baptism. In the waters of baptism, the Lord restores the life of the baptized. He does so “for his name’s sake,” and the baptized receive the name of God in the sacrament. Moreover, baptism is but the beginning of a life of walking in “paths of righteousness” (as Paul makes clear in Rom. 6).

Psalm 36, a meditation on the foolishness of the wicked and the faithfulness of God, also draws on the image of water to speak of God’s care for his people. Describing the way that God preserves his people, the psalmist writes:

How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light. (Ps. 36:7–9)

8. See chap. 7 below.

The Biblical Theology of Baptisteries

The symbolism of ancient baptisteries offers a fascinating window into how early Christians interpreted the theology of baptism. Many of these baptisteries include images from both the Old and the New Testaments, which also appear in some patristic writings on baptism. One of the most common motifs is drawn from the creation accounts of Genesis 1–2: fruit trees, birds, the four rivers flowing out from Eden (see figure 1). The Psalms also influenced the decoration of some of these baptisteries, especially those psalms that speak of water. Deer frequently appear in these spaces, alluding to Psalm 42 and the panting of the deer for water (v. 1). Some baptisteries include images of the Good Shepherd, reflecting a common representation of Jesus in the Gospels, as well as the famous Psalm 23. These baptisteries show that, from very early on, Christians drew on the Old Testament to flesh out the significance of the sacrament.

It is possible that the psalm alludes to the garden of Eden, as the word “delights” in the phrase here translated “the river of your delights” literally refers to Eden (which in Hebrew simply means “delight”). The juxtaposition of water imagery with light (“With you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light”) is also significant. One of the most common names for baptism among early Christians was “illumination” because of the enlightenment that the catechumens received with the gift of the Holy Spirit. One can see this connection between light and water in the imagery of John 8–9 and in the reference to being “enlightened” in Hebrews 6:2–4, as well as in other texts.

Rejoicing over the gift of water and the life that it produces appears once more in Psalm 65, which speaks both of God’s acts of deliverance (vv. 5–8) and of his basic provision of life (vv. 9–13). Whereas the middle stanza draws on water’s destructive power—a point to which we will return in the next chapter—the final stanza emphasizes the life that water brings:

You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.
You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth. (Ps. 65:9–10)

No less than four times the psalmist explicitly underscores the importance of water in generating life, and the other blessings the people enjoy—grain, pastures, flocks (Ps. 65:12–13)—all depend on water for their existence.

One more psalm brings out the connection between water and life. Psalm 114 offers praise to God for the act of deliverance he accomplished for Israel by bringing the people out of Egypt. Most of this psalm reflects on God’s control over the power of the sea, but the final verses point to another important episode in the Pentateuch:

10. See chaps. 6 and 11 below.
Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the LORD,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,
who turns the rock into a pool of water,
the flint into a spring of water. (Ps. 114:7–8)

Twice in the story of the exodus and Israel’s wandering in the wilderness, the people grumble at their lack of water, fearing that they will die in the wilderness (Exod. 17; Num. 20). Twice, God provides water from a rock, sustaining their life. Although one might more commonly associate this image with the Eucharist (as St. Paul seems to do in 1 Cor. 10), the life-giving properties of water, which are shown forth in all the psalms considered in this section, also illuminate the significance of baptism, the sacrament that brings about entry into life and access to the Eucharist.

The Waters of Life in the Prophets

The life-giving property of water also appears frequently throughout the writings of the prophets. Water imagery pervades the book of Isaiah. The reason for this is not hard to find. For a people at the mercy of the rains for food, as the Israelites were—and indeed, as nearly all inhabitants of the ancient Near East were—water naturally came to symbolize life and salvation. An important text in this regard appears toward the end of the first major section of Isaiah.11 In fact, in this section we see two common uses of water in the Old Testament—one pointing backward to the exodus and the other drawing on the imagery of a wellspring to speak of salvation.

The oracles of Isaiah 11–12 bring together four significant themes throughout the book: the hope for a Davidic king, the evocation of Edenic imagery, the expectation of a new exodus, and the significance of the temple. Chapter 11 begins by describing Israel’s hopes for a deliverer from the family of David (v. 1). In one of the most famous passages in Isaiah, the prophet describes the arrival of this figure as leading to Edenic conditions, including peaceful interactions between predator and prey (vv. 6–9). With verse 10 the prophet again takes up this hope for a Davidic king, referring once again to the “root of Jesse.” This second oracle also expresses hope for an act of deliverance.

akin to the exodus from Egypt (v. 11). As at the first exodus the Lord parted the sea to make a path for the people of Israel, so he will do in this new act, the prophet writes:

And the Lord will utterly destroy
the tongue of the sea of Egypt;
and will wave his hand over the River
with his scorching wind;
and will split it into seven channels,
and make a way to cross on foot. (Isa. 11:15)

We will return to this imagery in chapter 3. For now, it merely serves the purpose of setting up another important use of water in this early section of Isaiah.

Isaiah 12 consists of a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God for his forgiveness and salvation. This hymn continues to develop exodus motifs, referring to God as “my salvation” (12:2; cf. Exod. 15:2) and speaking of how the Lord acts “gloriously” (Isa. 12:5; cf. Exod. 15:2). At the heart of the hymn, the prophet shifts to a different symbolic use of water, speaking now of a fountain: “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (Isa. 12:3). In light of the Edenic imagery in Isaiah 11:6–9, this water imagery may also allude to the conditions of the garden. In support of such an interpretation, it is worth noting that the chapter ends with an exclamation of joy at God’s presence in Zion (12:6). As God dwelt with human beings in the garden, a garden made fertile by the waters of the river of Eden, so now God dwells in Zion, and the people rejoice at the prospect of drawing water, here a symbol of life. The connection between water imagery and Zion fittingly prefigures baptism, because baptism is the sacrament that introduces the believer into the Church’s liturgical life. As we will see, the Old Testament frequently associates water symbolism with the worship of God.

Like the early chapters of Genesis, the song of praise in Isaiah 12 associates the life-giving property of water with life and salvation. Moreover, it situates that salvation in the sanctuary setting of Zion. This theme appears frequently throughout the book as well as in other parts of the Old Testament prophetic corpus.

12. For the temple imagery in the garden of Gen. 2–3, see again Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism”; Jon D. Levenson, Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 143–44.
The exuberance of Isaiah 12:1–6 finds a counterpart in Isaiah 35. This passage, the last prophetic oracle in the first half of Isaiah and one that can be viewed as a bridge to the second half of the book, describes the return of the exiles to Zion with joy. Once again, one of the primary images for this act of redemption is fertility, a fertility made possible by the infusion of water into the desert.

The oracle begins on an exultant note, describing the joy and the new life that will come about in the wilderness (Isa. 35:1–2a). As is often the case in Isaiah, this new life in the midst of apparent aridity signals the presence of God with his people Israel. Those who experience this transformation are promised a vision of God (35:2b). The return of God and the people to Zion (35:10) brings about strength, salvation, and healing. The prophet exhorts the people to take confidence in God and his redeeming activity (35:3–4). The oracle then continues, describing this salvation as involving the healing of various ailments (35:5–6a). The salvation proclaimed by the prophet thus extends to the whole body.

In this context the prophet turns again to the imagery of water to symbolize the anticipated transformation of Israel’s situation:

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes. (Isa. 35:6b–7)

The connection between the various forms of water appearing in the wilderness and the healings described in the preceding verses is no doubt a poetic one. Nevertheless, this connection contributes to the multifaceted imagery of water in the Old Testament. Water serves as a potent symbol for Israel’s hopes, a sign of God’s healing and redemption. The rest of the oracle proceeds to describe God’s act of creating a highway for the exiles and bringing them back to Zion (Isa. 35:10). New life, salvation, joy—these are the conditions symbolized by the flow of running waters in the wilderness. Moreover, the reference to Zion would also evoke Israel’s hopes for a return to the worship of God in the temple. Many of these images reappear in the second half of Isaiah.

As is well known, the second major section of Isaiah (chs. 40–55) begins with words of comfort (Isa. 40:1), as God promises to bring the Jewish exiles back from Babylon. In a famous passage the prophet announces, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (40:3). The image of a highway reflects the oracle of Isaiah 35 just considered (35:8–10). More important for our purposes, however, is the wilderness motif, which appears several times in Isaiah 40–55.

Isaiah 41 bears a number of resemblances to Isaiah 35. Like the earlier text, Isaiah 41 speaks of reversal and redemption for Israel. God promises the people that their enemies will be put to shame and brought to nothing (41:11–12). Despite Israel’s apparent insignificance (41:14), God will make them capable of cutting through mountains and hills, leading them to glory in him (41:16).

In this context the prophet once again promises that there will be water and refreshment in the wilderness. As they pass through the wilderness, the Lord will transform it, providing water for the Israelites and turning the desert into a fertile place (Isa. 41:17). As in Isaiah 35, the water God provides for the people takes on various forms, thus underscoring the abundance of the supply:

\[
\text{I will open rivers on the bare heights,} \\
\text{and fountains in the midst of the valleys;} \\
\text{I will make the wilderness a pool of water,} \\
\text{and the dry land springs of water. (Isa. 41:18)}
\]

Some interpreters take this description to refer to literal water in a dry land. While that may be the case, the literal fulfillment of this promise would nevertheless still point to the symbolic significance of water as a source of salvation and new life. The subsequent verses, in fact, connect this water supply with garden imagery, speaking of the growth of an abundance of trees in the wilderness (Isa. 41:19–20). Once again, God appears as the source of the waters of life and the fertility that they generate.

The desert imagery that predominates in the second part of Isaiah serves once again as the setting for God’s provision of water for his people in chapter

43. Exodus imagery functions as the paradigm for the act of redemption by which God promises to bring the people out of Babylon. Two different aspects of water imagery play an important part in this promise.

First, the prophet appeals again to the great act of deliverance God brought about at the Red Sea, rescuing the people from the Egyptians. Moreover, the prophet introduces the Lord as Israel’s king, an image that has resonances with the crossing of the Red Sea (Isa. 43:15; cf. Exod. 15:18). He then identifies the God of Israel more explicitly as the one who brought about the exodus:

Thus says the LORD,  
who makes a way in the sea,  
a path in the mighty waters,  
who brings out chariot and horse,  
army and warrior;  
they lie down, they cannot rise,  
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick. (Isa. 43:16–17)

This earlier act of deliverance serves as the foundation for a new act that God is about to accomplish for Israel. This new act is in continuity with other aspects of Israel’s escape from Egypt, too, and water plays a second important role in this deliverance.

Just as the Lord provided water for the Israelites during their time in the wilderness (Exod. 15:22–25; Num. 20:2–13), so now he promises to provide rivers of water even in apparently desolate places:

I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert.  
The wild animals will honor me,  
the jackals and the ostriches;  
for I give water in the wilderness,  
rivers in the desert,  
to give drink to my chosen people,  
the people whom I formed for myself  
so that they might declare my praise. (Isa. 43:19–21)

15. We will return to this text in chap. 3 to consider it from the perspective of the exodus.
Life-giving water in the midst of a wasteland functions as a symbol of the miraculous nature of God’s act of deliverance. Moreover, the “way in the wilderness,” as some interpreters suggest, most likely corresponds to the highway described in Isaiah 40:3. This imagery reappears not long after this oracle, but with the added elements of God’s Spirit and the blessing.

The prophet returns to the theme of redemption in Isaiah 44. Once again the Lord acts on behalf of his chosen people (44:1–2). As in Isaiah 41 and 43, here the prophet symbolizes salvation as an outpouring of water (44:3a). Thus far, the oracle resembles the earlier promises of water in the desert in an unremarkable way. In the words that follow, however, the prophet adds a new element, interpreting the water as a symbol of the gift of God’s Spirit and his blessing: “I will pour my spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your offspring” (44:3b). In some texts of the Old Testament, God’s Spirit is portrayed as the source of life (Gen. 2:7; Ezek. 37:1–14). Other texts, most famously the book of Deuteronomy, closely associate blessing and life (Deut. 30:15, 19–20). The water imagery of this oracle from Isaiah, then, symbolizes two of the most prized possessions for the ancient Israelite—God’s Spirit and blessing, which are also closely related to the promise of life that God made to Israel on the cusp of their entering the promised land.

The prophet proceeds to describe this blessing in terms of fertility (Isa. 44:4). Once again, water serves as the source of fertility and life. The prophet also describes this blessing as the particular relationship God has with his people Israel (44:5). A personal relationship with the Lord, the true source of all life, forms the substance of the blessing promised to the Israelites, the blessing God will give them by the gift of his Spirit. Whether intentional or not, this conjunction of water, life, blessing, and garden imagery (44:4) resembles the garden of Eden, where a river flowed out to give life to the garden and the first man and woman lived in communion with God, the source of blessing. One could see this prophetic promise as offering an initial reversal of the curse human beings experienced for their transgression in Eden.

Even texts that lament Israel’s disobedience use water imagery to describe the good life the people might have enjoyed had they obeyed. Toward the end

of Isaiah 48 the prophet recalls Israel’s disregard for the commandments, by which the Lord sought to teach them for their own well-being (48:17). Grieving over their disobedience, God says through the prophet:

O that you had paid attention to my commandments!
Then your prosperity would have been like a river,
and your success like the waves of the sea. (Isa. 48:18)

Israel’s stubbornness prevented them from receiving God’s blessing, but even so, the prophet holds out hope that the Lord will now fulfill his promises. As in Isaiah 43, the text describes Israel’s return from exile in Babylon by drawing on exodus imagery—specifically, God’s provision of water during the people’s wandering in the wilderness:

They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts;
he made water flow for them from the rock;
he split open the rock and the water gushed out. (Isa. 48:21; cf. Exod. 17:1–7)

Over and over again, water serves as a symbol of redemption.
Indeed, in the subsequent chapter, Isaiah once again uses the images of thirst and of water to describe the salvation God is about to accomplish for his people. Announcing the imminent day of salvation, God calls the imprisoned out of their captivity (Isa. 49:8–9). The prophet goes on to describe their return:

They shall not hunger or thirst,
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,
for he who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them. (Isa. 49:10)

Water—the difference between life and death in a wilderness—will be readily available to those returning to the land. As is so often the case throughout this section of Isaiah (see, e.g., Isa. 40:3), God’s act of salvation consists of making a road for the people in the wilderness (49:11–12). The provision of water along such a road assures the people of continued life on the way.

One of the final oracles of Isaiah 40–55 returns briefly once again to the image of water. The prophet’s description of prosperity and abundance begins with the imagery of thirst:

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price. (Isa. 55:1)

Because it is readily available in contemporary Western society, it might not occur to modern readers just how costly water could be in antiquity.20 In addition to the financial burden, one also ought to consider the physical toil involved in carrying water from its source to one’s home. In this light, one can understand how appealing the promises of guidance beside springs of water and of obtaining water without cost would be, as well as why such promises would symbolize salvation and life.

Water is only the first of a list of nourishments offered by God through the prophet. He also offers wine and milk as well as rich food (Isa. 55:2). All these supplies indicate the fullness of life that God is offering. In a way, however,

20. See Willis, Images of Water in Isaiah, 102.
they also serve as pointers to the ultimate source of life, God himself. As John Willis suggests, the invitation to come to the waters and drink seems to parallel God’s call to draw near to him: “Incline your ear, and *come to me* [cf. “come to the waters” in 55:1]; listen, *so that you may live*” (Isa. 55:3a). As water maintains people in deserted places, so the Lord’s instruction functions as a source of life. Indeed, from a biblical perspective, one could say that the Lord himself is *the* source of life, a life mediated through things like water. The connection between water and the Lord’s instruction is unsurprising in light of the way other Old Testament texts portray God. Psalm 36 describes the Lord as “the fountain of life” (v. 9), and the prophet Jeremiah twice refers to him as “the fountain of living water” (Jer. 2:13; 17:13). Just as God brought forth the waters of creation, so he provides for the needs of those who call upon him, offering literal water for their physical needs and, even more importantly, spiritual water welling up to eternal life (John 4:14). The use of water in the rite of baptism fittingly brings these two realities together, as God provides spiritual life through the use of physical water.

Isaiah 55 offers one more reference to the life-giving power of water. In a famous image, the prophet compares the power of the rain and the snow to bring fertility with the power of God’s word:

> For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
> and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
> making it bring forth and sprout,  
> giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
> so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
> it shall not return to me empty,  
> but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
> and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa. 55:10–11)

Once again, the juxtaposition of water and word is a potent symbol for baptism, in which physical water and the power of God’s word together bring new life to the baptized.

One final oracle, from the third part of Isaiah (chaps. 56–66), draws on both water and garden imagery to describe the state of the redeemed. In Isaiah 58 the prophet explains why the people’s acts of piety—specifically, fasting and observing the sabbath—go unheeded. Without acts of justice, the prophet

says, fasting and sabbath observance remain empty. Fasting that does not result in compassion for one’s neighbor is worthless. In the context of this exhortation, the Lord describes how their situation will change if they care for the needy and comfort the sorrowful:

The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail. (Isa. 58:11)

The combined reference to both a spring of water and a watered garden underscores the gift of fertility and life.

Water imagery as a sign of salvation also appears in two texts from the Minor Prophets. More specifically, these passages identify the temple as the source of this water. The last oracle of Joel describes the salvation of Judah in language resembling the oracle of Isaiah 55, combining the symbols of milk, wine, and water:

In that day
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
the hills shall flow with milk,
and all the stream beds of Judah
shall flow with water;
a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord
and water the Wadi Shittim. (Joel 3:18)

Judah’s salvation is to be characterized by the sources of life and joy. The rest of the oracle suggests that water lies at the heart of the promise. In contrast to the salvation and prosperity that God will bring about for his people, the prophet speaks of the desolation of Egypt and Edom (Joel 3:19–20). Fertility and life result from the water flowing from the house of the Lord, implicitly making the land of Judah like a garden in contrast to the desolation of the lands of Egypt and Edom.

A much briefer instance of the same motif appears toward the end of the book of Zechariah: “On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; it shall...
continue in summer as in winter” (Zech. 14:8). Zechariah does not explicitly connect the water with the temple, but in light of this prophetic motif it seems likely that the house of the Lord once again serves as the source of this living and (implicitly) life-giving water.

The clearest and most extensive example of this imagery of life-giving water appears in a famous vision toward the end of Ezekiel, which recapitulates the language of Eden. The last nine chapters of the book (Ezek. 40–48) present a lengthy description of a new temple, which is a promise of hope to the Jews living in exile after the destruction of Solomon’s temple by the Babylonians in the sixth century BC. Toward the end of that vision Ezekiel describes the outpouring of a stream of water from the temple.

Following an extensive account of the dimensions of the temple and its sacrifices, Ezekiel returns to the entrance of the temple, where he has a vision similar to the ones described in Joel and Zechariah, only more elaborate: “Water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar” (Ezek. 47:1b). Over the course of the vision, Ezekiel is brought further along this stream, and the flow of water becomes deeper and stronger. As he moves down the stream, the water reaches Ezekiel’s ankles, then his knees, then his waist (47:3–4). Eventually, the water becomes a river so deep that it cannot be crossed on foot, one in which a person can swim (47:5).

More important than the depth of the river, however, is the effect the river has on its surroundings. Much like the waters of creation under God’s directive word, the river becomes a source of life, bearing fruit and giving life to a variety of living creatures (Ezek. 47:8–9, 12). Although the waters of the river give life, it is important to note what the source of this life is. Their life-giving power is not intrinsic to the waters themselves but rather stems from the place of their origin: “because the water for them flows from the sanctuary,” as the Lord tells Ezekiel (47:12). The vision thus describes the water of the river as an instrument of God’s own life-giving power.

“For with You Is the Fountain of Life”

Baptism is the sacrament of new life; through baptism believers are joined to Christ and given new birth. In light of the abundant evidence of the connection between water and life in the Old Testament, it is hardly surprising...
that physical water came to serve as an instrumental means of God’s grace in the sacrament. Many of the texts above make clear, however, that the waters receive their life-giving power from another source. As Lawrence DiPaolo rightly points out with respect to the Psalms, God is the one who makes the waters life-giving. In the order of grace, the power of baptism comes not from any natural properties of water but rather from the God who uses his creation as a means of imparting life.

Life is not the only effect of the waters of baptism, however. As Paul teaches, baptism brings about life through death and burial with Christ (Rom. 6:3–11). The life-giving power of water, so amply attested throughout the Old Testament, is also balanced by its destructive power. To this aspect of water we now turn.