

Water: a Matter of Life and Death

Norman Habel and Peter Trudinger (eds.)

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“Water cleanses, purifies, blesses, heals, nurtures, sustains, protects and redeems and it establishes powerful, timeless links between cultures, faiths and traditions.” (50)

This collection of essays contains an extensive diversity of topics, methodologies and contents on the same subject – water. It is at once scholarly, readable, accessible and practical. Water is a matter of life and death. Water wars could soon tragically replace oil wars. This book leads the reader to reflect and challenges us to do what we can do now. There is a diversity of authors from wide-ranging backgrounds, not just theologians or biblical scholars, but professionals from other fields such as law, agriculture, ecology, TEAR Australia, evolutionary biology, comparative literature and cultural studies who contribute a wealth of wisdom and knowledge providing rich and absorbing contents. The authors also come from a variety of institutions and continents.

The biblical chapters of the collection discuss, among other things, water and the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and their political arrangements and the blessings that flow from them which so often occur at and involve the use of water sources. Many of the patriarchal and matriarchal colourful stories took place at wells – “springs and wells are places where anything can happen” (66). The section on the story of Jonah focuses uniquely on the role of the non-human characters with a creative and highly imaginative use of the sea as the narrator of Jonah’s tale. Luke 8:22-25 – the calming of the wind and the waters on Lake Gennesaret – perceives Jesus in partnership with these elements rather than having power over them – a refreshing and different perception. The linguistic analysis of the Greek text of this incident is scholarly and insightful. ‘Give the girl a drink’ is the quirky and intriguing title of a chapter on the Samaritan woman’s meeting with Jesus at the well. The Samaritan woman is even respectfully given a name based on traditional sources. This essay provides an astute comparison of the raped (?) Dinah from Genesis 34 and the Samaritan woman.

A fascinating chapter on the history of water laws offers with clarity a succinct summary of a complex subject. Australia appears competent in its different approach to the legal use of water but has one stumbling block - the constitution. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) actually mandated and recognised in 1994 that “the environment is a legitimate water user requiring its own allocation” (23-24) of water. All the more poignant is the above resolution of COAG when it is also pointed out in another chapter that we do spend millions on engineering solutions to the water problems in Australia but this only deals with the symptoms and not the causes “water

for human use is valued more highly than water for the environment”(19). This is both a solution and a problem.

The rising sea is a cultural and ecological problem for the peoples of Oceania and beyond. A moving solution for this problem is presented by life in the diaspora, maintaining language and preserving stories all of which can provide home. In keeping with cultural issues one chapter also mentions multi-faith perspectives on water very briefly. Perhaps more could have been developed on the multi-faith topic as well as Australian indigenous perceptions on water usage and the water crisis. Conceivably this could also be the focus for another collection of essays on the preciousness of water. This particular essay on ‘water as more than a symbol’ provided five practical solutions. The final chapter of this thought provoking collection supplied research on a little known tradition and practice of some early Christian groups who used water as the drink at Eucharistic gatherings rather than wine. This is a “profoundly” and unexpected “‘sacramental’ view of water.” (124)

A couple of typing errors do little to mar this work. It may have been an enhancement to have provided an explanation of the aboriginal artwork on the cover. Nonetheless *Water: A Matter of Life and Death* is a timely and significant collection of readable essays with something for everyone to ponder. I would highly recommend it.

Reviewer: *Antoinette Collins has taught in tertiary institutions including Sydney University, the Australian Catholic University, Catholic Institute of Sydney and St Paul’s National Seminary. She is a member of the Council of Christians and Jews, the Australian Catholic Biblical Association, the Australian Association Jewish Studies, the Federation of Biblical Studies VIC and NSW and Mandelbaum House Jewish Studies Centre – Sydney University. Antoinette is currently lecturing at the Broken Bay Institute and the University of Newcastle.*

Email: acollins11@bigpond.com
