



**Seven Weeks for Water 2011:**

**Biblical reflections on**

# **Water and Just Peace**

**Ecumenical Water Network**

**World Council of Churches**



7 Weeks for Water 2011:  
Biblical Reflections on Water and Just Peace

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## **7 Weeks for Water 2011: Water and Just Peace**

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## **Week 1:** **Adamah – the land from which we come from**

### **Land and Water**

Humankind is related to the land and the environment from the beginning of creation: “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7).

Today, many developed countries invest in land abroad to support their growing populations. Local communities get pushed off their lands without consultation. Control over the land often goes hand in hand with control over water resources.

Land and water grabbing are a threat to livelihoods of small-scale peasants, pastoralists and indigenous people.

### **Adamah – the land from which we come from** **Reflection by Ani Ghazaryan, Armenia/Switzerland**

*In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, <sup>5</sup>when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; <sup>6</sup>but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—<sup>7</sup>then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.*

Genesis 1:2,4b-7, [NRSV](#)

The Bible begins with the story of creation by God, with the *Genesis*<sup>[1]</sup> of the Earth. Before the creation of humankind, God creates the heaven and the earth; he then separates the earth from water which he called “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas” (Genesis 1:9). God then plants a garden and puts humankind in the middle of this garden to live there and to cultivate the land and take care of it and his creation (Genesis 2:15). Land is the place where humankind is invited to live and called upon to be its stewards.



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The life of humankind is totally dependent on the richness of the land and the fertility of its soil; the land is not only the context for humanity (Ps 115:16), but much more. There is a deep link between both. In Hebrew *adamah* (אדמה) means “the land” or “the ground”, and *adam* (אדם) means “humankind” or human being. Genesis 2:7 seems to imply that the land is the root of the name of Adam: “Then the Lord God formed a man (*adam*-אדם) from the dust of the ground (*adamah*: אדמה) and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”

Whether this is truly the etymological root of Adam’s name is contested among biblical scholars<sup>[2]</sup>. In any case, the story of creation depicts humankind as “earthborn”, the first human having been formed by God from the dust of the ground, the *adamah*. Humanity is an inseparable part of the Earth.

This vital link between humanity and the “land” has existed from the beginning of creation. Almost all ancient civilizations perceived this deep link between the land and humankind and express it by using such expressions as “Mother Earth”.

Despite the deep relationship of humankind to the earth, today, humankind overexploits the land and water for our own interests, forgetting that we were called to take care of the Earth, God’s creation. Our greediness is such that we covet ever more without thinking about the Earth and the needs of vulnerable people.

The Tenth commandment of God commends us to not covet our neighbour’s property (Exodus 20:17). However, today many companies and governments invest in land resources for large-scale industrial agriculture in very poor countries – in a way which often affects the livelihoods of local communities, such as peasant farmers, pastoralists, or Indigenous Peoples. For these people the link to the land, including its rivers, lakes, and springs, is strong and vital.



Fisherman in Kenya © Ralf Leonhard/EAA

How can we ignore the fact that millions of people are already suffering and dying because of the greediness of others? How should we address issues which are linked to the unjust sharing of land and water, such as land and water “grabbing”? How is it possible to come from the land, to be *adamah* and then to become a land grabber? To deprive people of the land from which they come - and to which we all will return eventually?

The biblical understanding of what it means to be a human being, an *adam*, stands in contradiction with the reality of some enriching themselves at the expense of others. There is an urgent need to act and struggle for justice, equity, solidarity, human development and environmental conservation. Adam was created to take care of the Earth (Genesis 1:28s), not to grab the land from others, to be a steward of and not overexploit the land and its natural resources.

In this context, it is important to remember that in the struggle of land nobody will remain on it, but the all human beings will return to the Earth from where they came: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19). Thus, we can see that the link between land and humankind continues to be very strong, for better or for worse. Solutions must be found to respect our environment which is adversely affected. Our solidarity with our neighbours needs strengthening, our sisters and brothers need our help and love. Jesus calls us to: “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12:31), not to greedily covet their property as is too often the case in today’s world.

*Ani Ghazaryan is a young theologian from the Armenian Apostolic Church. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland.*

[1] In Greek “Γένεσις” - “birth”, “beginning”.

[2] [www.newadvent.org/cathen/01129a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01129a.htm)

## Week 2:

# Transforming the bitter waters of Marah

## Oil and water in Nigeria

Oil was discovered in the Niger Delta in the 1950s. Since then, Nigeria has become the largest oil producer in Africa and the 11th largest producer globally. Oil has generated billions of dollars in profits, but these revenues have barely touched the local population.

In many cases, rural communities where crude oil is produced face severe environmental degradation. They lack access to safe drinking water, electricity and roads. Struggles over the resources generated by the oil operations have led to conflict within and between communities, conflict between the population and the oil companies, and fights between armed groups and the oil companies as well as Nigerian security forces.

The situation in the Niger delta shows how the unjust sharing of resources and the unrestrained exploitation of the environment reinforce poverty and conflict.

## Transforming the bitter waters of Marah

### Reflection by the Rev. Canon Dr Ezekiel Babatunde, Nigeria

*Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. That is why the place is called Marah. So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?" He cried out to the Lord; and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. Exodus 15, 22-25, [NIV](#)*

Since primordial times, people have struggled for basic natural resources, including water which is such a crucial element of life. We find examples of this struggle throughout the Bible. For instance, the biblical story in Exodus 15:22-27 tells how the Israelites searched for clean water to be able to survive after crossing the Red Sea into the wilderness. They arrive at a place



An Amnesty International mission delegate's fingers covered in oil from an oil spill at Ikarama, Bayelsa State, taken eight months after the spill. There are often long delays in clearing up after oil spills in the Niger Delta. Photo: Jenn Farr / Flickr

called Marah – Hebrew for “bitterness” – where they find water but discover that it is not fit for drinking.

The name of the place “Marah” can be interpreted simply as a literal reference to the “bitter” water. But we can also read it as a figurative description of the situation and of the mood of the people. Fleeing from the Egyptians and crossing the desert without water, the Israelites find themselves in a difficult moment. Their grumbling against Moses is also an expression of an inner bitterness, one that may be borne of feelings of fear, frustration, hopelessness, and, it seems, a lack or temporary loss of faith.

Today, in the Niger Delta area people are also thirsty, searching for clean water in order to survive, similar to the Israelites in Exodus. Their situation is “bitter” – despite an abundance of water around them, they have no water to drink. Searching for clean and drinkable water is a herculean task particularly for women and children who often walk more than three kilometers to get water for their families. Like many other blessed nations situated in sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria has abundant natural resources,

particularly oil, which has made it attractive to multinationals scrambling for its resources. Three decades of oil exploitation have caused ecological devastation in the region. Water provided by various rivers in the area has been polluted, making it undrinkable.

Most of the people are very poor and, as much as they struggle, cannot escape from this poverty. They are constantly humiliated and mistreated by local leaders while only demanding clean and good sanitation for the area. In Exodus the Israelites were humiliated by the Pharaoh during their stay in Egypt. Corruption and injustice create conflicts and violence.

The Niger delta seems to be indeed a place of bitterness. Yet its inhabitants have not lost their hope and faith. They cry out for justice every day. In Exodus, the Israelites were guided by Moses, God's chosen prophet, who leads the Israelites to salvation from the hold of the Pharaoh – a journey which begins with clean water being turned to blood in the first plague (Exodus 7, 20-21): "He raised his staff in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was changed into blood. The fish in the Nile died, and the river smelled so bad that the Egyptians could not drink its water."

Moses stood before those in power, the Pharaoh and his officials, challenging them to open their eyes and hearts, to stop the oppression of the Israel people. He led them to freedom. In Marah, he threw a tree into the bitter water and purified it.

The Nigerian people need such leaders, leaders who can liberate them, who can bring justice to the innocent men, women and children who have been mistreated, and to those to whom access to good drinkable water and a good life have been denied. Leaders who will, like Moses, not only purify water but heal the people and restore their trust.

Like the Israelites in the desert, the children of God in the Niger delta and elsewhere depend on drinkable water to live; such water is a sign of God's purpose to provide every good thing for life, so that we can all fulfill the purpose for which we were created. To deny access to water, to pollute and destroy natural sources of water is to be Pharaoh: refusing to listen to God, and God's will for humanity and all living beings. With Moses, we are all called to confront such Pharaohs in our different global contexts. When we are indifferent to the suffering of others, or in a way participate in economic

or political structures that deny water to those who thirst, we must confront the Pharaoh within ourselves.

When the "Marah" is removed from our hearts—the inner bitterness, borne of feelings of fear, frustration, hopelessness, and lack of faith—only then can we, with Moses at Marah, use that part of the tree of life which has been entrusted to us, and make access to drinkable water for all a reality. Then we hear the words of Jesus in a new way: "Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward" (Matthew 10.42)

**Rev. Canon Dr. Ezekiel Olusegun Babatunde** is a theologian from Immanuel College of Theology and director of the Institute of Church and Society of the Christian Council of Nigeria. He is priest and vicar of Christ Anglican Church, Kotami, Ojoo, in the Ibadan North Anglican Diocese, Nigeria.



Pipeline construction in Chad  
© Martin Petry/Brot für die Welt

## Week 3: The Earth is the Lord's

### Commodification of water

In Psalm 24 we read: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.” Despite this, we are used to “appropriating” the earth and its resources, including water.

The privatization and commercialization of water takes on many forms. Water supply systems being taken over by private companies is but one manifestation. We also see that the resource itself is turned into a commodity and a private good. For example, in “Week 1: Land and water” we looked at the acquisition of large areas of land and the resulting control over water resources exercised by a wealthy minority. Finally, water is widely used, polluted, and wasted to generate shareholder profits in agriculture and industry.

Private goods are by definition “exclusive” – others can be excluded from their use. Some promote this kind of “privatization” as a way to prevent the waste and pollution of water. Yet the struggles of communities around the world tell a different story of exclusion.



Coins in a pond. Photo: Heather / Flickr

## The Earth is the Lord's

### Reflection by Linwood Blizzard II & Shantha R. Alonso, WSCF

*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;  
for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.*

Psalm 24,1-2, [NRSV](#)

The psalmist once declared, “The Earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it” (Psalm 24:1). From generation to generation, we have a lifespan to enjoy and steward God’s Earth. However, in recent decades, industries that unsustainably extract from God’s Earth have been spinning out of control. Their actions challenge God’s sovereignty over the gifts that were created for sharing by all Creation and for all generations. Extractive and other industries have been privatizing the natural gifts of God’s Earth and have excluded local communities from sharing in these gifts.

The diamond and coal industries are common examples, but the extraction and processing of water is a particularly outrageous example of how God’s gifts are abused for the profit and private interests of some at the expense of others. If a company controls the exploitation of diamonds or coal, the local community often does not profit from the extraction, production, and sales, while bearing the burden of the devastation of their lands. If a company controls and exploits water, the same rules apply, but in addition the local community – and all God’s creatures that rely on water – may be excluded from this basic life-sustaining resource. . U.S. theologian James Cone once said, “The survival of the earth... is a moral issue for everybody. If we do not save the earth from destructive human behavior, no one will survive.”<sup>[1]</sup>

The commoditization of water with little or no regard for the people and ecosystems that rely upon water has become a rising trend. With the global economic crisis, privatizing water systems is increasingly being considered as a way for governments to offset costs. In many cases the excessive commercial use of ground and surface waters are affecting the quality and distribution of water.

When water is sold, polluted, and depleted for industrial purposes or for bottling, who really pays? It is God's Creation and God's people who pay a heavy price. Freshwater species that have taken millions of years to evolve are becoming endangered and extinct at an alarming rate.<sup>[2]</sup> One in eight people lack access to safe drinking water,<sup>[3]</sup> almost two thirds of whom live on less than US\$2 per day.<sup>[4]</sup>

Corporations and markets should not have control over life and death. Quaker Scottish theologian Alastair McIntosh calls people of faith critically to examine the marketing schemes of our day that try to fool us into believing buying more will bring us transcendent values such as beauty, purity, intelligence, power, confidence, or love. We must ask ourselves: does our desire to affirm our humanity in this way spring from the presence of God, or do we try to fill a void in our souls by consuming products will eliminate our need for God? McIntosh urges us to pull back the veil on companies' efforts to "commoditize the human soul" and engage in transformative communities that "call back the soul".<sup>[5]</sup>

As a federation of students, we have identified this work of "calling back the soul" as being deeply tied to water justice. Water exploitation creates a hierarchy of who lives and who dies; a hierarchy that is contrary to the order of God's Creation. If our generation and the generations that follow are raised to see something as basic as water as a mere commodity, what will keep us from seeing everything through the lens of commoditization including our relationships, our time, our life's work and our commitment to God?

If we indeed affirm that God alone is the giver of life, why would people of faith assent to allowing corporations to commoditize water – an essential gift for all life? Corporate advertising manipulates us to believe unrestrained indulgence in many of the products of privatized water is morally acceptable and desirable. Bottled water and sodas, all the latest gadgets, unbridled use of fossil fuels, and consuming factory farmed foods are part of the fabric of industrialized cultures such as ours in the United States. The devastation of one community for the advancement of another through the lower cost of consumer goods has become the norm as a result of this unrestrained indulgence.

The need for action is urgent. One percent of the world's water is what the Earth's people, creatures of the land, and creatures of freshwater share for drinking, cooking, sanitation, and habitat. This water does not belong to any single community or species, so one can neither truly purchase nor sell it. Watershed communities must share the costs of water treatment and restoration, not outsource stewardship to corporations whose primary interest is profit.

The students and young people of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), with many partners like the Ecumenical Water Network, are taking actions to increase the awareness about water justice. We invite you to join us in finding out where local water sources are, and whether your city or municipality is considering privatizing these sources. Consider ways of reducing the consumption of products that come from commoditized water to increase the just sharing of the world's water sources. As Mahatma Gandhi asserted, "the earth is sufficient for everyone's need, but not everyone's greed."<sup>[6]</sup>

One percent of fresh water has sustained generations in the past. As those whom God has entrusted to till and keep the Earth, we are only the stewards of water, to ensure its safe passage from one generation to the next. Our stewardship must include not only the safe passage, but also the understanding that water is not a commodity, but a gift on loan from the Lord for us to use and share.

***Shantha Ready Alonso** currently serves as Student Vice Chair of the World Student Christian Federation. She is employed with the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program in the United States. **Linwood Blizzard II** is in his last year at the Howard University School of Divinity in Washington D.C. and serves as Treasurer of the WSCF's North America Region.*

[1] James Cone (2007): "Whose Earth Is It Anyway?" p. 5.

[2] In the USA, 40 % of freshwater fish and amphibians are endangered or extinct. (US Environmental Protection Agency. Retrieved on March 1 at [www.epa.gov/bioiweb1/aquatic/freshwater.html](http://www.epa.gov/bioiweb1/aquatic/freshwater.html))

[3] UNICEF/WHO (2008): Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation.

[4] DfiD Sanitation Reference Group 2008.

[5] Alastair McIntosh. Climate Justice Seminar. WSCF Executive Committee Meeting, Beirut. October 2010.

[6] Cited in Leonardo Boff (1997): Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor, p. 2.

## Week 4:

# Water the source of life – and not of violence

## Women, water, violence

The biblical stories of women at wells speak of hope and conversion. Rebekah demonstrates her kindness and generosity to Abraham's servant and becomes the wife of Isaac. The Samaritan woman discovers the source of living water when Jesus defies all social conventions of the time and approaches her. Yet these positive experiences stand in sharp contrast to the every-day reality of many women and girls around the world.

Women and girls are particularly affected where clean water and safe sanitation are lacking. They are often responsible for fetching water, an exhausting task which deprives them of time and energy they could use to earn an income or go to school. The lack of clean water and sanitation is sorely felt by women and girls, for example during menstruation. It also puts them at risk of becoming victims of violence. Many women and girls face sexual harassment and rape when fetching water or when they have to go outside for lack of toilets in their homes. The burden of fetching water can aggravate domestic violence when women cannot cope with all the chores their husbands expect them to take on.



Women carrying water, Nile, Egypt.  
Photo: Walwyn/Flickr

## Water the source of life – and not of violence

### Reflection by the Rev. Dr Priscille Djomhoue, Cameroon

*So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. (Genesis 24,20)*

*The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. But some shepherds came and drove them away. Moses got up and came to their defence and watered their flock. (Exodus 2,16-17)*

*Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' (John 4, 13-14)*

All texts [NRSV](#)

Water is the source and powerhouse of life. Without it the earth would be an arid desert, where life would be impossible because of famine and drought. Even though we know that it can be the cause of death (through floods, drowning and water-borne diseases), water is generally seen and appreciated for the advantages and benefits that it brings to the life of living beings. When Christ's side was pierced and water flowed from it (John 19:34), he was like the rock from which water flowed to quench the thirst of God's people as they journeyed to the Promised Land (1 Cor. 10:4; John 7:38). He is also the temple (John 2:19ff) from which the river flows to sustain and give life to the New Jerusalem (John 3:37; Rev. 22:1 & 17). Moreover, the Holy Spirit, the life-giving power of God the creator, is compared to water (John 7:39), as a symbol of the whole of the Good News brought by Christ (John 7:37b-38), the symbol of the everlasting blessedness of the elect, whom the Lamb, their shepherd, leads to rich pastures.

Water is essential for life. We use it for washing ourselves, cleaning our homes, drinking, cooking, washing up, washing our clothes, and so on. However, in Africa, and in many developing countries, not everyone has access to drinking water. In towns and in rural areas water is worth its weight in gold. People often have to travel long distances to find a supply of

water in a river or a spring, and then carry it on their heads or their backs, exposing them to the risks of malformation of the spine or other back troubles. In many town areas, as is often the case in Cameroon, water has to be bought from a neighbour who has been able to have a well dug or who has mains water. That is not a new situation, since in the Bible, water was often such a scarce commodity that mention is made of people paying for it (Num. 20:17-19; Lam. 5:4).

Sadly, the laborious task of fetching water for the home in Africa falls to girls and women – as was the case in the Bible (Gen 24:11-19; Exod. 2:16-17; John 4:7). The text of Exodus 2: 15b-22 tells the story of seven daughters who were driven away by unknown shepherds and who had their right to draw water from the wells denied them. It was Moses, the foreign Egyptian, who rescued them from those who violated their rights. “They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. But some shepherds came and drove them away. Moses got up and came to their defence and watered their flock.” He was subsequently welcomed and given hospitality by the young women’s father. In Africa, many women are denied their rights and do not have the money to buy water from their neighbours. This situation makes them vulnerable when an urgent need for water arises. In September 2009 in Yaoundé, in an area called Mendong, two young girls under the age of 12 were regularly sexually abused by the man in charge of the well where they often had to go to fetch water for their mothers. The police took up the matter, but it was too late. The physical and psychological damage done to them was immense.

The story of Rebekah (Gen, 24:1-27) describes a situation similar to that in the rural areas of Africa. In the course of fetching water from remote wells, Rebekah meets Abraham’s servants, who had come in search of a wife for Abraham’s son. This episode shows how very vulnerable Rebekah was when she was approached by those unknown men who were going to take a decision that was going to affect her future life. Would that generally be unthinkable in today’s world...? No! That is the situation in several African countries, where women and girls are openly approached in this way. They have to walk for kilometres along lonely roads and across remote terrain to fetch water and they are often harassed or raped by men who lie in wait for them in places where there are few passers-by. That shows how immensely

vulnerable these women are, even though these encounters might equally well have a positive outcome, as was the case with Rebekah. Her situation was the opposite of that experienced by many women in Africa. She had come as usual to fetch water for all her family, but she also did it for the passing travellers and their camels. “So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels” (Gen. 24:20).

Rebekah's kindness, her service, her humility and modesty were much appreciated and she became Isaac’s wife. That gratitude does not come as a matter of course. Many wives find that they are shouted at and ill treated, because, after having spent a lot of time fetching water from a distance, they have not been able to do all the housework that their husbands demand. They are torn between having to get the housework done in time and the permanent lack of a water supply. In these modern days, we need to read again the story of Rebekah and learn from her visitors, so that we appreciate and value the service given by women to their families and husbands.

The provision of drinking water for all and the removal of the burden of fetching water are challenges for the whole of humankind. The words of our Lord Jesus, who symbolically offered water to the Samaritan woman so that she would no longer have to venture forth alone to the well at all hours, are a challenge to women and men to claim more decent living conditions: “Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14). Women should have access to, and control of, the resources for production, and have their say on government policies, particularly in the framing of legislation. This would enable them to work for their problems to be heard and to sweep away those cultural attitudes that conspire to reinforce their difficulties. The voice of Christ challenges men, women, and public authorities to focus on one of the most important priorities for life: drinking water for all.

*The Rev. Dr Priscille Djomhoue is a professor of Greek and New Testament at the Protestant University of Central Africa at Yaounde, Cameroon, and is a member of the Circle of Concerned African Woman Theologians.*

## Week 5: Wells of quarrel – space for peace

### Water conflict in the Holy Land

Lack of access to water and sanitation is a severe problem for Palestinians. Since it occupied the West Bank in 1967, Israel has denied them access to the waters of the Jordan River and severely limited their access to other local aquifers.

Discriminatory policies and practices in the development of water and sanitation infrastructure and in the allocation of the shared water resources are denying Palestinians access to sufficient amounts of water for domestic use as well as that required to secure livelihoods and food security.



A simple well provides very limited water to the shepherds of Um Al Khayr, sometimes as little as 20 litres per day for all purposes. Up to 200,000 Palestinians in similar rural communities have no access to running water at all. Photo: EAPPI

### Wells of quarrel – space for peace Reflection by Fr. Afrayem Elorshalimy

*So Isaac departed from there and camped in the valley of Gerar and settled there. Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham; for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the names that his father had given them. But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water, the herders of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herders, saying, 'The water is ours.' So he called the well Esek, because they contended with him. Then they dug another well and they quarreled over that one also; so he called it Sitnah. He moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth, saying, 'Now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.'*

Genesis 26.17-22, [NRSV](#)

Throughout history civilizations have flourished wherever there has been a source of water, whilst others have faded away or collapsed due to scarcity of water resources. People have fought and died for even small patches of water.

Since ancient times, water has been a source of quarrel between the competing inhabitants of the Holy Land. The book Genesis reveals such a quarrel between the ancient Israelites and the Philistines. Conflicts over water have continued ever since in this place. Today, the share of water for a Palestinian is one fourth of an Israeli share, and one sixth of the share of an Israeli settler in the West Bank. Israel has confiscated over 85% of the water resources in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. One of the reports prepared by the section on Palestine and occupied Arab territories at the Arab League revealed that Israel robs about 650- 800 Million Cubic Meters of water annually from the West Bank which is being pumped into Israel proper, and its illegal settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories.

And yet in the Bible, God promises plenty of water to quench the thirst of the thirsty (Isaiah: 41:17, Isaiah: 44:3,4). Nowadays, water has become increasingly important since we use it for cleaning our houses, cooking, bathing, and sanitation; also we use water to irrigate dry soil in agriculture so as to provide for food. Our industries use water more than any other

liquid form; we take advantage of the swift water flows in rivers to generate electricity.

While Genesis tells of the struggles between ancient peoples over water, it also reflects God's will that water is for all, not for one particular people over against another. Isaac moves from *Ezek* ("contention") and *Sitnah* ("quarrel, accusation"), the wells of dispute, to another place where he dug one more well which he called *Rehoboth* ("broad space"), a name that does not reflect his skills in finding water, nor his diplomatic or military abilities, but his recognition that land and water are the gift of God: "Now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land." There is room for both Philistine and Israelite to flourish in the land; God has provided water for both.

water is God's gift, and never anyone's property. God calls us to rename all our wells from *Ezek* and *Sitnah* to *Rehoboth*, for "the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land." This call remains vital from the ancient Philistines and Israelites all the way through time to the present Israelis and Palestinians.

*Fr. Afrayem Elorshalimy from the Coptic Orthodox Church was a monk at the St. Bishoy Monastery in Egypt and then spent 14 years as a priest of the Coptic Church in Jerusalem. Since 2010 he is priest of the Coptic community in Dublin, Ireland.*



A Bedouin village in the South Hebron Hills. On the horizon is a water tower belonging to an Israeli settlement. Photo: EAPPI

Wherever there is conflict over water today, and especially in the particular context of Israel and Palestine, the biblical narrative reminds us all that

## Week 6: Noah: an uprooted pilgrim

### Climate change refugees

Many fear that climate change may lead to increased levels of conflict among states, communities and people. For example, increasing water scarcity may lead to clashes between groups with conflicting water needs such as pastoralists and farmers.

Possible mass displacement is also looming in other parts of the world, like Bangladesh, where large scale population moves are foreseeable. Some small island states are already preparing for the possible disappearance of their territories.

It is crucial to ensure that the needs of climate victims, before, during, and after displacement, are at the heart of policies. Yet governments now tend to frame climate displacement as a defence and national security concern.

**A flooded village in Khulna district on the south-eastern coast of Bangladesh. "Suddenly water came into the village of these people and forced them to leave." Photo: Prodipan**



### Noah: an uprooted pilgrim Reflection by Dr Guillermo Kerber, WCC

*Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. Gen 6.11, [NRSV](#)*

Perhaps one of the most well known stories in the Bible is that of Noah. What do we remember from the story of Noah? I have some images that come immediately to my mind: the whole earth covered by the waters; the ark where a pair of every kind of animal is brought, together with Noah's family; the dove sent from the ark and coming back with a branch of olive tree, ...

What are the images that come to your mind? While reading Alastair McIntosh's book *Hell and High Water*, I was astonished to read how he relates the story of Noah with violence<sup>[1]</sup>. This would not have been my own highlight of the story. But it is true, chapter 6 of the book of Genesis, where the Noah story begins, refers, in several occasions to the corruption of the earth and violence of human beings. Before the verse that I have chosen as opening for this meditation we read: "The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time" (Gen 6.5 NIV).

We know what happened later: God calls Noah to build the ark, to bring into it his family and a pair of all living creatures. And then the floodwaters came to earth. When the waters receded, those in the ark were the only ones who have survived. A new covenant is established between God and creation with the solemn promise "never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen 9.8). And a rainbow is the sign of the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures (Gen 9.16).

Although today we don't see a single flood covering the whole earth, the increase of frequency and intensity of rains, hurricanes and cyclones have produced devastating floods across the earth. Millions of people have been displaced in Bangladesh, the Caribbean, Brazil, Australia and Europe. The increase of flooding is one of the consequences of human induced climate change. Today, it is not God, who provokes the flood, as in the Noah story,

but rather human beings are provoking the destructive flooding with their violent behaviour towards the earth and its creatures.

As in Noah's story, the whole creation is being affected. Biodiversity is quickly decreasing as a result of the current development pattern. Monocultures, deforestation, increase of ocean temperatures and the extension of megacities are dramatically affecting ecosystems and provoking the destruction of species.

Water related phenomena are some of the most catastrophic consequences of human-induced climate change. Together with the millions of people displaced because of floods, tens of thousands are being displaced in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa regions because of the change in rainfall patterns which alters the cycle of planting and harvesting, preventing people from having access to food. At the same time, global warming has provoked the rise of sea water making some populations need to resettle. This has been the case of the inhabitants of the Carteret Islands who had to be moved to Bougainville in Papua New Guinea. Other low lying islands states are currently holding crucial negotiations to resettle their populations, such as the Maldives in the Indian Ocean or Tuvalu and Kiribati in the Pacific. The salinization of fresh water and the bleaching of corals have already affected fauna and flora in these fragile ecosystems.

The resettlement of entire populations, the new reality of climate refugees or climate displaced peoples are a new face of uprooted peoples today. Together with refugees, forced migrants and internally displaced people, climate related uprooted people are increasing today in various regions of the world.

Noah himself became a displaced person. He is forced to leave his home, his land and has to travel to an unknown destination. Yet at the same time, he is a pilgrim, because through his journey of his faith and hope, he is able to begin anew.

Climate related displacement because of floods or rise of sea level does not occur without conflict. It is not easy for an uprooted community to adapt to a new situation, many times with a different culture, language, environment. It is not easy either for a community, for a region or a country to have to deal with thousands of newcomers who are fleeing from disasters. Many countries are closing more and more their borders to poor migrants, while



Mangroves and signs of erosion on the coastline of Viwa Island in the South Pacific. Photo: WCC

prejudices, xenophobia and racism have seen new developments because of these phenomena. The stranger is rejected everywhere.

The story of Noah is a call to conversion. If we look around we will easily find examples of the violent behaviour of human beings against our neighbours and against the earth. Overconsumption and extreme poverty are both a sign of injustice and structural sin in our societies. Air and water pollution, the generation of waste in mega-cities, wasteland because of monocultures or extractive industries and deforestation are just some examples of the violence and corruption of the earth we live within with irreparable consequences in ecosystems.

As the IEPC reminds us, there is no Peace in the earth without peace with the earth. The call for just peace is also a call to repentance, to convert our minds (*metanoia*) and behaviours, from the destruction of creation to caring for creation and welcoming the stranger in our midst. In other words, to become pilgrims with Noah, his family, and all the animals in the ark.

***Dr Guillermo Kerber*** is responsible for climate justice and care for creation at the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland.

[1] Cf. McINTOSH, Alastair, Hell and High Water. Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition, Edinburgh, Birlinn, 2008, p. 111.



### **When our situation presents us with unexpected dangers (vv. 1-3 and 16-17)**

In these verses the psalmist describes a situation of danger that leads him to cry out to God for God's protection and salvation.

What is being described is not a passing situation. It has been happening for some time, and thus the cry to God as well. Hence God's actions have resulted in joy, thanksgiving and praise.

The Guatemalan Lutheran Church (ILUGUA) has committed itself to protect nature and in particular the Las Granadillas mountain, initially because it contains the sources of the water supply for where we are living, and more recently because we have come to know and appreciate the biodiversity to be found on the mountain.

In the course of the years, we in the ILUGUA have seen how this commitment has exposed many of our church members to serious dangers as they have challenged the interests of powerful individuals. We have been threatened, insulted, abused and branded as criminals, and over many years we have been subjected to harassment by those who wish to destroy the forests and the water sources.

In this situation, we have cried out to God and we have seen how God has protected us, how God has enabled us to meet people who help, encourage and strengthen us. That has led us to give thanks daily, to recognize God's greatness and power, but, above all, to continue to cry out to God in face of the actions of those who oppose the protection of nature.

### **When dangers strengthen us (vv. 4-6 and 12-15)**

In the course of all these years of our struggle to defend the Las Granadillas mountain, we have been subjected to many, many lies on the part of those who are attempting to destroy the forests and the water sources. However, those of us who are part of the Guatemalan Lutheran Church can say with the psalmist, 'we do not look to those who turn aside to falsehood' (v.4b).

On the contrary, on that mountain we have witnessed the creative hand of God, whose greatness is to be seen in the trees, the animals and the water sources.



**Walking in solidarity: After an ecumenical prayer the eight members of ILUGUA and of the Association for the Protection of Las Granadillas Mountain were accompanied by many supporters to their hearing before the criminal court on 13 April. The case against them was dismissed. Photo: ILUGUA**

Moreover, in our daily struggle we have discovered how God has brought us to get to know one another better, and give greater support to one another. We have learned to protect one another, to appreciate one another and above all to realize more and more that we are brothers and sisters. Those are some of the wonders and purposes of God.

However, it is also certainly the case that we continue to need divine help and protection. When our opponents see how God is active in our church and in the individuals who are defending God's creation, they do not give up, but find different ways of harming us. So we continue to cry out to God, acknowledging in advance that our crying out to God is also a declaration of our confidence that God's promises will be fulfilled.

Those whose aim it is to destroy the created world have attempted over many years to put us to shame and to humiliate us. They have tried various ways, in the words of the psalmist 'to seek to take our life' (v.14). However, God has proved faithful, and we have never been put to shame, humiliated or captured. On the contrary, we have come out of each encounter strengthened to continue the fight, in the knowledge that the Las Granadillas mountain is a gift from God that we have to protect because in many respects our survival depends on it.

### **When our faith encourages us (vv. 7-11)**

In the course of this long journey we have discovered that we shall only be able to continue our struggle to protect creation if we strengthen our faith. Day by day we find in the Bible words that encourage, strengthen and guide us, and thus we can say with the psalmist, 'We desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within our heart' (v.8).

The struggle in which we are engaged and the choice that we have made are acknowledged day by day both by our supporters and by our opponents. However, in doing this we have total confidence that God's mercy and love will always be with us, until all will come to the truth, or (what is the same) until the Las Granadillas mountain becomes protected and is finally designated as a water protection area.

*The Rev. José Pilar Álvarez Cabrera is a pastor of the Guatemalan Lutheran Church (ILUGUA), and collaborator in the Association for the Defence and Protection of Las Granadillas Mountain.*

# Ecumenical Water Network

<http://water.oikoumene.org>



World Council of Churches  
150 route de Ferney  
P.O. Box 2100  
1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

Tel.: +41 22 791 6205

Fax: +41 22 788 0067

E-mail: [water@wcc-coe.org](mailto:water@wcc-coe.org)