Thinking of Water in Late Persian/Early Hellenistic Judah: An Exploration

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1. Introduction

Water was, of course, vital to the existence of the community in Judah during the late Persian/early Hellenistic period in very practical terms. In fact, water is vital to the existence of any human community or even to most eco-systems anywhere and anytime, both directly and indirectly. Precisely because water is a vital resource and is widely acknowledged as such, because it is experienced by all, and directly and indirectly touches most aspects of human and community life, water often develops into a very important ideological and linguistic symbol that stands for and evokes central concepts (or networks of concepts). To be sure, these concepts, and even the symbolic values socially assigned to ‘water,’ may vary from group to group and are historically dependent. This being the case, the study of ‘water’ itself, that is, of what ‘water’ may stand for in a particular community and of the roles played by ‘thinking of water’ in such a community is likely to shape a pathway leading to a better understanding of matters that are important to that community and to its social mindscape in general.

Since every member of the community interacts with water at multiple levels (both in the ‘literal’ and seemingly less literal, or ‘symbolic,’ meaning of the term), one is to expect that within the discourse of the community, water will carry numerous associations. To be sure, not all of these associations are equally important for the reconstruction of the social mindscape of the community; there are obvious issues of mind-share. For instance, in Canada, water is more likely to evoke and stand symbolically for wilderness, purity, glaciers and rivers, or conversely, in particular settings, for pollution, eco-degradation and the like. It is far less likely that the first associations a person in Canada would come up with after hearing or reading the term ‘water’ would be those conveyed by expressions such as ‘treading water’ and ‘does not hold water,’ even if these are widely used expressions.

In our case, it is my contention that one may learn much about the social mindscape of the community in Yehud by exploring ‘thinking of
water’ and concepts expressed through references to water within the symbolic system of the late Persian/early Hellenistic period. From a methodological perspective, two somewhat related approaches seem to me to hold much promise as heuristic tools for exploring these matters.

The first approach is an analysis of the main sets of social memories that were embodied in central ‘water’ sites of memory. For example, one may explore particular rivers, chief among them the Jordan,¹ but also Edenic rivers and other mnemonically important rivers such as the Euphrates and the Wadi of Egypt. One may also explore seas, such as the Reed Sea, or the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, which is, among others, the sea of Jonah and the sailors’ adventures. One may also explore memories of ‘the flood,’ particular springs as sites of memory (e.g., the Gihon) and other mnemonic water sites. These may evoke particular events—e.g., the presence or absence of rain or dew—or certain locations or water bodies—e.g., wells, pools.

If one proceeds in this way, one is to look at central areas of conceptual overlap in the messages conveyed by ‘water’ in these sites of memory and then advance general considerations about ‘water’ and how ‘water’ contributed to the shaping and re-shaping of these sites of memory. Given my own general approaches to the reconstruction of the social mindscape of the community and my research focus on social memory in ancient Israel, this is the approach that I would usually take to deal with these matters. This approach has much to commend it, and I am glad that other contributors to this volume are taking it, in one way or another. There is one minor caveat though: this approach is somewhat systemically weighed down by the fact that it does not focus directly on ‘water’ per se or ‘thinking of water,’ but on particular mnemonic places or events. This problem can be dealt with, but requires attention.

A complementary approach for understanding ‘water’ and ‘thinking of water’ within the social mindscape of the community is to look at the use of ‘water’ in metaphors as part of the common way in which the community formulated, reformulated and expressed concepts. To be sure, this endeavour assumes an approach to metaphor according to which metaphors are “categorical, class-inclusion assertions” and in which the ‘vehicle’ (here, ‘water’) is meant to exemplify a cognitive, readily available conceptual category and serves to frame a blended

conceptual space that includes both the ‘topic’ and the ‘vehicle’ of the metaphor.²

To explore the matters mentioned above within this research path, one has to look at the main categories formulated, expressed, represented and exemplified by ‘water’ in particular texts within the discourse of the community and at some of the mentioned blended spaces. Such an analysis would serve as a starting point for exploring the main features and significations that ‘water’ evoked and even the semantic or pragmatic (depending on one’s definition of these two terms) meanings of ‘water’³ within the community. In turn, given that ‘water’ was communally acknowledged as vital, such considerations are likely to shed light on what the community considered to be very important, as well as on the roles that ‘thinking of water’ may have played in the community.

In either case, whether one studies memories or metaphors involving water (and at times the boundaries are clearly porous), one should explore the discursive, underlying grammar that made the use of ‘water’ in these particular ways possible. The same holds true for exploring the ways in which ‘water’ participated in integrated networks of meaning and in the formulation and expression of concepts, without which ‘water’ itself would lose its ability to convey (and facilitate the construction of) meaning within the community. Only such an approach may help us to reconstruct what water meant and evoked, that is, to reconstruct the ‘water’ that existed within the general social mindscape of the relevant communities and the social and cognitive roles associated with ‘thinking of water.’

Even a preliminary survey of all these issues as they relate to late Persian/early Hellenistic Judah (or its literati whose world was shaped and reflected in their central textual repertoire) stands beyond the scope of this or any paper. Thus, choices have to be made. My choice here is to focus on some metaphors and the conceptual categories that they evoked so as to illustrate how they may relate to conceptual networks, social memories and generative grammars, and in order that we may gain insights as to what ‘thinking of water’ involved.


For the present purposes and given the practical constrains on any essay, I have decided to deal with only some of the conceptual sets shaped by and around associations with ‘water.’ Water simply appears, directly or indirectly, in far too many metaphors within the textual repertoire of the period. It is impossible to deal with them all in one paper, or even a collection of papers.

Before going ahead, a final methodological consideration must be stressed, namely the differentiation between ‘topic’ and ‘vehicle.’ To state that ‘YHWH is water’ is neither semantically nor pragmatically necessarily the same as to state that ‘water is YHWH.’

2. Thinking of ‘Water’: ‘Water’ and YHWH

Ancient readers of Jer 2:13 learned through their reading of a godly text that YHWH is מַכְּרוֹ מֶשׁ יוֹם “the fountain of living water.” A similar concept is expressed in Ps 36:9–10. Readers of Jer 17:13 are required to conceptualize YHWH as מַכְּרוֹ יַעֲקֹב. The text reads:

ומַכְּרוֹ יַעֲקֹב יִשְׁמַע יַעֲקֹב יִשְׁמַע יִשְׁמַע יִשְׁמַע יִשְׁמַע יִשְׁמַע מַכְּרוֹ יַעֲקֹב יִשְׁמַע יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲקֹוב יַעֲq

which is often translated as follows:

“O hope of Israel! O LORD! All who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be recorded in the underworld, for they have forsaken the fountain of living water, the LORD” (NRSV).

Although מַכְּרוֹ means ‘hope’ (cf. Jer 14:8; Ezra 10:2 and 1 Chr 29:15), it also carries, at least by connotation, a secondary sense of ‘body of water’ or ‘pool’ as demonstrated by the fact that מַכְּרוֹ is explicitly associated to מַיִם־חַיִים “the fountain of living water” through a clear, textually inscribed parallel structure and as suggested by the occurrence of the verb ובש, which carries the sense of “shall be ashamed” (root בוש in the Q stem) but visually and phonetically evokes a sense of ‘dry up.’ Thus, מַכְּרוֹ in Jer 17:13 carries the meaning of ‘the hope of Israel’ and at the very least in a connoted sense, ‘the gathering place

of (living) waters.’ The authors, and more importantly, the readers of the text, that is, the community, used ‘water’ to conceptualize YHWH.

Other texts within the repertoire of the community caused their ancient readers to imagine YHWH in ‘water’ terms. An interesting example is Isa 58:11, which reads:

"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" (NRSV).

This text is particularly relevant, because not only is a concept of YHWH obviously expressed and formulated in ‘water’ terms—water is the only fluid that can satisfy the needs of the community in parched places—but also because the readers are asked to imagine that the community that drinks such ‘water’ imitates the deity and becomes itself a reliable spring of water. In this case, water is used to think of and express (partial) imitatio Dei and thus, partial deification of the community whose ‘water’ is divine.

The metaphorical language of thirsting for YHWH implies and evokes the motif of YHWH as ‘water’ (see Ps 42:3; 63:2). A similar motif and a similar generative grammar is at work in conceptual images of people thirsting for YHWH’s words (Amos 8:11, see below).

As mentioned above, today water may evoke concepts of pristine purity, but, in part precisely because it evokes such images, it is likely to be successfully used to evoke concepts of environmental degradation, pollution and ecological disaster. In fact, water is at the center of many contemporary dystopias. A similar, discursive generative grammar was at work in the communities discussed here. Conceptualizations of YHWH in terms of ‘water’ (including source of ‘water’) were used to formulate and express blessings, and also calamity.

Thus YHWH has terrifying waves (see Ps 88:8), or may be conceptualized in terms of a deceitful brook whose water is unreliable (see Jer 15:18), or even as the source of poisonous water (see Jer 8:14; 9:15; 23:15). YHWH is conceptualized as ‘water’ in the form of ‘dew’ in Hos 14:5 in the context of an utopian future, and thus YHWH/dew is associated with a sense of a ‘water’ that makes the land/people blossom. But there is a negative aspect of ‘dew’ as well; sinful people who reject YHWH can also be thought of in terms of ‘dew,’ particularly in a dys-

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5 Compare and contrast with Isa 1:30. These basic metaphors provided the shared generative grammar that led to diverse texts in various books.
topian context (Hos 13:3). In such a case ‘dew’ does not evoke fertility, but a lack thereof, and above all it evokes ephemerality; it serves to construe and communicate an image of something (in this case, a ‘water’) that vanishes quickly and which cannot but fail to provide any life-giving water, therefore leading the community to images such as those of chaff. Within this world of ‘water’ facilitated discourse, when the people are imagined as ‘dew,’ YHWH is not; and vice versa, when YHWH is like ‘dew’ the people are certainly not.

There can also be no doubt that YHWH was conceived as both the source of water and of lack of water (e.g., Ps 74:15; a numerous references to divinely caused drought).

In addition, since Israel was often imagined as—and condemned for—being irrational and having an unnatural tendency to follow para-gods (including the ‘work of their hands’) who could never provide what YHWH provides, there was a generative conceptual grammar at work that facilitated thinking about and communicating these matters in ‘water’ terms—namely, necessarily failing and remembering that failed ‘water’ was associated with Israel’s failed attempts at replacing YHWH with para-gods (e.g., Jer 2:13, 18). 6

Metaphors are “categorical, class inclusion assertions.” YHWH is ‘water’ or the source of ‘water,’ because both YHWH and ‘water’ can partake in a particular blended category in which both are conceptualized as vital resources. The closest superordinate category in this set is construed as that of crucial, vital resources, without which there is no life.

But, of course, there are other ‘vital’ resources. YHWH may partake in other blended categories by using different vehicles. Thus YHWH is also, inter alia, conceptualized in terms of ‘fire’ (e.g., Deut 4:24; 9:3) and ‘light’ (e.g., Isa 10: 17; 60:1; Ps 18:28; 27:1; and see theophoric names, such as the one of the prophet Uriahu in Jer 26:20–23). To be sure, this does not mean that ‘water’ was identified with, or conceptualized as, ‘fire’ or ‘light’ or the like, even metaphorically. The fact that constructions such as ‘water is fire/light’ do not emerge within a community in which ‘YHWH is water’ and ‘YHWH is fire or light,’ demonstrates be-

6  "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.” (Jer 2:13)

“What then do you gain by going to Egypt, to drink the waters of the Nile? Or what do you gain by going to Assyria, to drink the waters of the Euphrates?” (Jer 2:18)
Beyond any doubt that topics and vehicles are not interchangeable, and therefore, that a certain topic may be associated with two different vehicles without conceptually equating the latter two.

This consideration is general and certainly applies not only to ancient Israel. A simple example suffices: Romeo’s references to Juliet as ‘sun’ and ‘bright angel,’ even as they appear in textual close proximity, do not mean that ‘sun’ has been conceptually equated with, or ‘means,’ ‘bright angel.’ Here, as in the previous cases, one is dealing with different superordinate categories. It is also worth noting that each vehicle carries its own set of semantic and/or pragmatic constrains. There is a reason why an Israelite could refer to YHWH as ‘my light’ but never as ‘my water.’

This being said, the fact that the same ‘topic’ may be conceptualized and expressed in terms of different vehicles tends to create cognitive and mnemonic networks that may well relate at least some vehicles to one another. For instance, thinking of YHWH may bring up concepts of ‘water’ and ‘light’ or ‘fire,’ and cause the community to think of ‘water’ and ‘fire’ together. The community notices and remembers that references to one superordinate category may lead to references to the other (see Ps 36:10). Their attention is drawn again to the point that life cannot exist without water, or without light or fire, both ‘literally’ and in seemingly less literal (and often referred to as ‘metaphorical’) ways. Thinking of ‘water,’ ‘fire’ or ‘light’ becomes somewhat interconnected. A reference to one may facilitate the production of a reference to the other and vice versa (e.g., Ps 29:3–7). Moreover, at times ‘water’ and ‘light’ or ‘fire’ may appear as conceptual pairs (e.g., Ps 66:12; Prov 25:21–22).

Of course, this general situation facilitated the adoption of shared conceptualizations, even in very different contexts. Thus, for instance, concepts of ‘fire’ and ‘water’ interacted with each other and constructed a conceptual realm of substances that encircle, penetrate and cook meat (see 2 Chr 35:13). It is worth noting that, in this case, what we may call ‘literal’ and seemingly less ‘literal’ meanings of both are evoked by, and necessary for, formulating and applying the new conceptual category.

To be sure, differences remain. Thinking of YHWH in terms of ‘water’ or in terms of ‘fire’ makes a difference in relation to which divine attributes are emphasized and which are not, and which theophanic

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traditions (and social memories) are evoked. The point is still that a common network is created in which some features of ‘water,’ ‘fire’ or ‘light’ are emphasized or de-emphasized and that some conceptual functional similarities do emerge. After all, something connects, in some way, the ‘sun’ to the ‘bright angel,’ and both to Juliet.

3. Thinking of ‘Water’: ‘Water’ and YHWH-related Concepts

If YHWH is the source of living water, finding images within the community of YHWH’s proper house and city (i.e., Jerusalem) as fountains of living/cosmic waters is only to be expected (e.g., Ezek 47:1–12; Zech 13:1; 14:8; Ps 46:5; cf. Isa 33:21; Ps 29:10). Conversely, when Jerusalem is imagined as an ‘anti-YHWH’ place, it becomes a source of waters that bring destruction (see Jer 6:7, כֶּסֶף בָּרָם תמָשֶׂים וּפְרָסָר רְצִיסָה ‘as a well keeps its water fresh/cool, so she [Jerusalem] keeps fresh/cool her wickedness’).

‘Water’ imagery is associated with images of nations other than Israel and their wealth flowing to Jerusalem when YHWH’s empire is established (e.g., Isa 2:2; 66:12; Mic 4:2; cf. and ct. Jer 51:44). To be sure, the formulation of the concepts communicated by these texts in terms of ‘water’ is strongly influenced by the role of water as both a transport medium and as the main resource being transported. But that is not all. The nations other than Israel flow to Jerusalem bringing numerous goods and wealth, but they cannot bring ‘water’ to Jerusalem, because they cannot be the fountain of ‘water.’ Instead, Jerusalem is conceptualized as the fountain of ‘water’ for the nations.

8 Note also that Jerusalem is also imagined as a source of light (see Isa 60:1–3 as read in a way informed by Isa 60:19–20). See discussion above. The motif of cosmic waters at the ‘center of the world’ (and thus the abode of the central deity) is well-attested in the ancient Near East as a whole, both in Mesopotamia and in Western areas (see Ugarit). See, for instance, R. C. Van Leeuwen, “Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Mesopotamia and Israel,” in Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel (ed. R. J. Clifford; SBLSymS 36; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 67–90; reprinted in a slightly revised version as “Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Ancient Mesopotamia and Israel,” in From the Foundations to the Crenellations. Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible (ed. M. J. Boda and J. Novotny; AOAT 366; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 399–421. For ways in which Jerusalemite traditions partake in this general tendency, see, for instance, B. C. Ollenburger, Zion, the City of the Great King: A Theological Symbol of the Jerusalem Cult (JSOTSup 41; Sheffield: JSOT Press 1987), esp. 50–51.
Thinking of Water

As comparisons with the ancient Near East show, this ‘water,’ of course, is wisdom; a wisdom that is necessary for the maintenance of the proper world in the cosmos. In Jerusalem this ‘water’ was directly associated with YHWH and this deity’s wisdom, which was in turn, by the late Persian/early Hellenistic Yehud/Judah, associated with YHWH’s torah.

The process of thinking of wisdom (and closely related concepts) in terms of ‘water’ is reflected in, and communally activated by reading a variety of texts. For instance, the community read that ‘מַיִם חַיִים’ “the teaching of the wise is an enlivening/giving life fountain” (Prov 13:14). Of course, within the discourse of the late Persian/early Hellenistic Yehud/Judah, no one is wiser than YHWH (see Job; cf. Isa 31:2). Moreover, since the concepts of wisdom and righteousness evoked each other in the discourse of the community, and given the considerations advanced before about networks of meaning, it is not surprising that the repertoire of the community included an expression such as ‘מקור פִּקּוֹר צַדִיק מ’ “the mouth of the righteous is a giving life/enlivening fountain” (Prov 10:11).

To be sure, there are other enlivening fountains, and all partake in a network of meanings. For instance, “the fear of YHWH is a giving life fountain” (Prov 14:27). As is well known, by the late Persian/early Hellenistic period, “the fear of YHWH” was closely associated with W/wisdom (cf. Prov 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Ps 111:10).

Thinking of W/wisdom in terms of ‘water’ draws attention to other aspects of W/wisdom. For instance, there is a well-known image of personified Wisdom inviting people to come to her banquet (Prov 9). The rhetorical situation here clearly requires that ‘literal’ water be substituted with tastier, and thus more desirable ‘water,’ namely ‘wine.’ Another network of associations is at work here. Clearly, conceptualizing, imagining and remembering Wisdom within this setting brings up strong associations between (tasty, desirable) ‘water’ (i.e., wine) and (tasty, desirable) food, and between the two of them with Wisdom. Just as ‘water’ partakes in a cognitive and mnemonic network with ‘fire’ and ‘light,’ here ‘water’ partakes in another network, with ‘food.’ Not surprisingly, given the semantic links between Wisdom and the word of YHWH, the latter network is also conceptualized through the

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9 נַפְרוֹ קַמַּר תִּיס; significantly, the term יִסְפּוֹר alone already activates the sense of ‘source’ or ‘spring’ for fluids, mostly water. For an exception see Lev 20:18).

10 For ‘great food’ and Wisdom, see also Prov 24:13–14.
metaphor of thirst for water and hunger for bread (Amos 8:11). A very similar pattern is at work in Isa 55:1-3.11

Another set of water metaphors particularly relevant for the present discussion is facilitated by the double meaning of the root רֶה “water (as a verb)/teach.” One may mention expressions such as וֶה גַם־מַר וּאֹהוּ יוֹר “one who gives water/teaches” (Prov 11:25), which clearly evokes an image of ‘watering’ or ‘raining’ while at the same time conveying a sense of teaching. This text asks the community to conceptualize teaching as ‘water,’ and the teacher as both a recipient and distributor of ‘water,’ that is, wisdom.

Another example: the presence of YHWH was construed in terms of assured rain in Hos 6:3, while at the same time, the text connoted an image of YHWH teaching the earth and thus making it fertile, just as the rain does. YHWH/YHWH’s teachings ‘water’ the earth. Here again, the conceptualization involves both the ‘literal’ and the seemingly less literal meanings of ‘water.’ Likewise when the literati read Hos 10:12, they cannot but think of a YHWH who may rain upon, or teach righteousness to, the community. Not surprisingly, righteousness (and justice), are both YHWH-related concepts, and both are associated elsewhere with ‘water’ (e.g., Amos 5:24).

It was not necessary for the community to resort to the double meaning of רֶה to convey these significations; for instance, the community remembered that Moses sang: “May my teaching (חִיְּלִק) drop like the rain (ךַּפִּים), my speech (אֱלֹהֵי) condense like the dew; like showers (רִבְצֵי הָעִיר) on grass, like droplets (בִּיבִים) on new growth” (Deut 32:2).

The same holds true in Isa 55:10–11.12 The community reading this text is asked to understand YHWH’s word in terms of ‘rain’ and ‘snow’ (both ‘water’). This is done so as to formulate and communicate a concept of YHWH’s word as an entity that, by its very nature, cannot fail to deliver that which it was intended to. ‘Just’ as watering the earth necessarily—within the world evoked by this text—makes “it bring forth and sprout” and thus provides seed to the ‘sower’ and bread to the ‘eater,’ so ‘water’/YHWH’s word fulfills its intended purpose. Within this process of blending concepts and superordinate categorization, not only

11 Cf., for instance, Sir 15:3; 24:21; 51:24.

12 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.”
are ‘water’ and YHWH’s word conceptualized in particular terms, but
given that YHWH’s word cannot but produce its intended effect, its
source, YHWH, is also thought of as one who always succeeds, through
his word. Thus YHWH is conceived of in the same way as ‘water’ is in
the natural and human world (note the reference to the sower and the
eater).

The preceding considerations show without a doubt that the under-
lying discursive grammar generating and making memorable these
images/conceptualizations was not dependent on the potential for for-
tunate plays on words, but on networks of meanings and other concep-
tualizations deeply ingrained in the social mindscape of the commu-
nity.

As a final example for this section, ‘water’ terms were used to think
of knowledge of (the ‘glory’ of) YHWH, though in a different way than
the ones at work in the preceding examples. Thinking of ‘water’ (and
by means of ‘water’) in the cases reflected on and expressed in Isa 11:9
and Hab 2:14 does not mean thinking of rain, dew, snow, or rivers, but
of the sea. Thinking of the sea was meant to bring forth an image of the
sea covered by (‘literal’) waters so as to express the concept of land,
which is the abode of human beings, covered with ‘water,’ that is, with
knowledge of YHWH.

In all the cases reviewed in this section, the superordinate category
that we may call ‘water’ serves to explain the absolutely necessary
character of the resource YHWH/‘water,’ as in the examples in the pre-
vious section. But this is only part of the story. In each of the cases dis-
cussed above, particular semantic networks were activated and these
played a very significant role in terms of formulating and expressing
concepts. Moreover, in each of them a particular generative discursive
logic was at work. The case of the pair of ‘water’ and ‘food’ was men-
tioned above. This expected pairing led to two similar, but not identi-
cal, superordinate blended conceptual categories for YHWH-related
concepts. To illustrate this, water and food are both indispensable, but
wisdom/YHWH’s word as food cannot be imagined as flowing from
fountains. Moreover, ‘water’ is ‘eternally’ unchangeable; ‘food’ cannot
stand forever and must be replenished.

A different kind of pair, this time not structured around ‘common
life’ experience (e.g., food and drink), but one that reflected a deep-
seated way of constructing teaching, namely, the association of rain
and teaching carried a sense of ‘natural’ essence to teaching and helped
bring to mind a strong fertility overtone (cf. the similar role of the pair
‘rain’ and ‘snow’ as a tool for formulating YHWH-related concepts).
This emphatic overtone of essential, successful fertility, along with the
ideological and mnemonic preference to construe the flood as a unique event (see Gen 9:9–17) shaped within the discourse of the community a relatively strong tendency to imagine YHWH as raining a substance other than ‘water’ when causing a catastrophic destruction. An alternative substance such as sulfur or fire may be rained in such instances.13 Not incidentally, ‘sulfur’ and ‘fire’ appear as replacements for ‘water’ in other formulations of destruction and calamity (see references to ‘streams of sulfur’ in Isa 30:33; 34:9) or as necessary companions of ‘water’ in others, see Ezek 38:22.14

In other cases, it is a very different pair, namely ‘land and sea,’ that is brought to bear to help the community formulate, express, vicariously experience through reading, and hope for the realization of the world in which knowledge of YHWH covers all; e.g.,

כַסִיםֲם מַיִם לַיָּאָרֶץ דֵעָאָל הָה כָּלַמְּיָאָל לַיָּרָאָאָל

“for the earth will be full of the knowledge of YHWH” as the waters cover the sea (Isa 11:9).

Reading and remembering a text such as כָּלַמְּיָאָל אֵית כָּבָּעָרֶץ דֵעָאָל אֶת־יהוה כַמַיִם לַיָּאָרֶץ (Amos 5:24) rendered other sets of potential attributes that may be expressed by and assigned to the category of ‘water’ particularly salient. In this case, ‘water’ that is ‘justice’ is conceptualized as eminently powerful, and righteousness is conceptualized as constant.15

The figure of Lady Wisdom offering a banquet is, of course, a female figure. Wisdom was strongly characterized as female within the community in the last Persian period/early Hellenistic period, as well as in the entire region and beyond for a long time. Given that in the discourse of the community W/wisdom was YHWH’s and his creation (traditionally, W/wisdom was the [main] daughter of a male deity; see Prov 8:22–31), and consequently by that time, W/wisdom was associated with YHWH’s teachings/instructions (cf., among others, Deut 4:5–8; Isa 2:3; Mic 4:2) and the latter were partially construed as female as

13 See, for instance, רָאָא הָה יִם מֶשָּׁאָש וַאֵש מֵאֵת יהוה מִן־הַרְּיָיָמ וְעַל־עֲמֹרָאָל וְעַל־סָּדְוָאָל יִמ וַיהוה הִמ (Gen 19:24) or the similar רִית פָאָךְ גָּפִים אֵש וַשָּׁאָש עַל־הָיָמ (Ps 11:6).
14 A way to associate destruction with ‘water’ was to turn drops of rain into a rain of ‘hailstones’ (see Josh 10:11 and discussion below) or to attached to ‘water’ other elements whose presence strongly marked the negative characteristics of the relevant ‘water’ that was being rained. See Ezek 38:22.
well. One may note that when Wisdom is associated with these banquets, what she offers, being wisdom, is a ‘water’ that is an alluring, very desirable ‘water,’ that is, ‘wine.’ In these cases, thinking of ‘water’ is thinking of gendered ‘water.’ It is worth noting that when ‘water’ is associated with YHWH, ‘water’ is, at least for the most part, male; when it is associated with YHWH-related concepts (e.g., wisdom, YHWH’s instructions) it may be female. Yet, to be sure, human teachers tend strongly to be male (see wisdom literature). The ‘agent’ is often male; the ‘product’ may be ‘female.’ Needless to say, hierarchical considerations well embedded in the social mindscape of this, and many other communities in the ancient world, were at work here.

4. ‘Water’ and creation stories/acts of ordering

Creation stories in which ‘water’ is identified with chaos and thus has to be defeated by the ordering deity so as to create order are well attested in the ancient Near East. A version of these stories appears in Genesis 1:1–2:3. Primordial ‘water’ in these chapters stood for chaos and had to be set in proper order, through the division and separation of different types of water. Post-creation ‘water’ is thus properly subdued, ordered ‘water,’ and as such attests to the power of the creator (see, for instance, Ps 95:3–5; 98:7–8).

Of course, YHWH’s ordered ‘water’ is still powerful ‘water,’ but it is YHWH’s (see, for instance, Ps 29:3, 10). The concept of powerful ‘water,’ facilitates the development of images of ‘water’ as YHWH’s direct tool for destruction, as in the case of the flood, but also in cases such as those encoded in and evoked by, for instance, Josh 10:11; 2 Sam 5:20; Isa 30:28, 30; 1 Chr 14:11, or as YHWH’s indirect tool of destruction (see, for instance, Isa 8:6–8).

To be sure, the mighty, destructive potential of ‘water’ expressed in these formulations was balanced by its counterpart, the extremely positive character of ‘gentle waters.’ Needless to say, people should accept rather than reject the ‘gentle waters.’ If they fail to do so, they are to be construed as liable to be punished, according to a commonly accepted

16 Cf. with some gender implication of the imagery of YHWH’s torah in Ps 119:77, 92, 174. It is worth mentioning that, given the elevated character of this female, she may invite people and express her desire to educate them (see also Prov 8:31; cf. Prov 8:30).
17 Another version appears in Prov 8:22–31.
logic, by means of destructive ‘waters.’ In fact, the literati who read Isa 8:6 remembered that Judah’s (and from their perspective ‘Israel’s) rejection of ‘gentle waters’ led to its punishment by means of ‘mighty, destroying waters.’ Thus, whereas ‘water’ functions as an essential element in YHWH’s future, utopian Jerusalem (see above), it is also associated with the city’s calamity and the sin that caused it.

Returning to the issue of creation and ‘water,’ there is a secondary act of creation within the memory of the community. A world without a temple for the deity and without priests for the deity is not complete. Within the discourse of ‘Israel’ in the late Persian/early Hellenistic period, the next step in the creation of the ordered world had to be, and was, the creation of ‘Israel.’ Significantly, Israel’s birth was associated with separating the waters at the Reed Sea and later at the Jordan. YHWH was understood as the father of the world (and of wisdom), but also directly as the father of ‘Israel.’ The water imagery and the description of the birth of the latter may also carry an image of a father who not only fathers the ‘boy’ but also fulfills the role of the midwife at his birth. Again, conceptualizations of ‘water,’ along with widely attested cross-cultural associations between birth and ‘water’ play an important role in this regard.

But, of course, the completion of the creation was not fulfilled with the creation of ‘Israel,’ but with the establishment of the future, permanent temple. This event was also associated with ‘water’ (Ezek 47:1–12; Zech 14:8), though in a very different way. ‘Water’ in its various manifestations was an important tool to formulate, express and imagine creation at its multiple stages. Thinking of creation in this community required thinking of ‘water.’ One may also say that within the community, thinking of ‘water’ went hand in hand with thinking of creation, given the general ideological perspective of the community.

One final observation to conclude this section: networks of meanings and their constraints played important roles in establishing the ways in which ‘water’ could be used to formulate ideas and images of the temple. Since ‘water,’ particularly in the form of ‘rivers,’ was—for obvious reasons—rarely associated with a ‘high place,’ and given that temples were usually construed as standing high (i.e., dominant from an architectural viewpoint) and the utopian Jerusalem temple as standing at the highest place (i.e., the most dominant from an architectural

19 There are multiple examples of this logic, see, for instance, Jer 5:19; 1 Chr 28:9.
21 An expression of this ideological perspective is in Ps 19:2.
perspective), there was a very strong need for additional, complementary blended categories to formulate and express the temple that will be. The most relevant of them is, of course, the ‘temple mount’ (e.g., Isa 2:2; Mic 4:1).

5. ‘Water’ and Condition Change

‘Literal’ water played (and still plays in many communities) a role in ritual performances that effects a change of condition. Thus, within the mnemonic world of late Persian/early Hellenistic Judah/Yehud, ‘water’ played an important role, for instance, in rituals for the general consecration of the people at Mt. Sinai (Exod 19:10) and in the ordination of Aaron and his sons (Exod 29:4). In addition, ‘water’ played a role in the removal of ritual impurities associated with skin diseases (see Lev 14:8–9), bodily discharges (Lev 15; Deut 23:11–12) and the like. Purification water was also central in some utopian images of the future (see Zech 13:1).

Of course, in all the previous cases, ‘water’ was conceptually integrated into ritual patterns that included various communally instituted cleansing rituals, which often involved other elements such as animal sacrifices and blood. But the scope of the use of ‘water’ for condition-changing rituals is not restricted to this type of rituals. To illustrate, ‘water’ played an important role in performing the change of condition of David in 2 Sam 12:20 and of Na’aman in 2 Kgs 5:10–14.

In all these cases and across these very different types of ritual, ‘water’ became associated with a liminal stage that had to be crossed in order to move from condition (a) to condition (b). This use of ‘water’ activates the semantic network in which ‘water’ as conceptually associated with ‘birthing water’ is obviously created (see above about Israel’s birth, both at the Reed Sea and at the Jordan). Because ‘water’ activated

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22 See, for instance, Milgrom’s words concerning the Levites’ induction:

...the threefold purificatory rites prescribed for the Levites. The Levites are bathed (laundering implies bathing, vv. 7, 21), sprinkled with purificatory waters (containing the ashes of a red cow), and expiation is made for them by a purification bull. Bathing cleanses them of minor impurities; the purificatory water, of corpse contamination; the purification bull—of their severe impurities, which, according to the Priestly system described above, have impinged on the sanctuary and polluted its altar. Thus this induction rite purifies the Levites of their impurities and the altar of its contamination...

also the semantic network in which it was conceived mainly in terms of ‘bathing’ and ‘laundrying,’ it served to formulate and express, at least by connotation, a sense of ‘cleansing’ and ‘removing stain.’ The conceptual category expressed by ‘water’ in this section, presents attributes to which little or no attention is drawn in other conceptual categories shaped by ‘water,’ such as those discussed in previous sections. Thinking of water in the cases discussed here meant thinking of something different. But here too, a combination of some ‘literal’ and some often considered less ‘literal’ aspects of water was essential for ‘water’ to fulfill its role in the symbolic system of the community.

6. Conclusion

Expressions of ‘thinking of water’ within the authoritative repertoire of the community are abundant. The number of examples could be easily multiplied and different choices regarding their inclusion and exclusion for explicit discussion here could be made. The goal of the present paper was not to provide any kind of comprehensive study of any particular aspect of ‘thinking of water,’ but to suggest in broad strokes something that is representative of the general discourse of the community, and for that reason, texts expressing and reflecting ways of ‘thinking of water’ and what was thought of by means of ‘thinking of water’ were taken from all across the different literary genres that existed within the authoritative repertoire of the community.

The exploration of these issues led to some clear results and suggested venues for future research. For instance, it has shown the pervasiveness of ‘water’ as a vehicle for metaphor construction. It has shown that the superordinate, blended category that these metaphors created tended to stress different aspects of basic qualities associated with, and evoked by the term ‘water’ in the discourse of the late Persian/early Hellenistic period. It has demonstrated that the meanings associated with ‘water’ were never context-independent, that different semantic networks were activated depending on the context and that often the so-called ‘literal’ and ‘non-literal’ meanings associated with ‘water’ were both necessary to shape the meanings expressed by ‘water.’ ‘Water’ was often intertwined with different sets of concepts, such as ‘fire,’ ‘light,’ ‘land,’ ‘righteousness,’ ‘food,’ ‘sacrificial offerings’ and ‘blood,’ but thinking of ‘water’ also included taking directly experienced and remembered water in the form of seas, rivers, showers, dew, and a daily resource for cooking, laundering and washing into account. Even the image of the nations flowing to Jerusalem carries, in some form, a
connection to the ‘literal’ water as a fluid and its ability to transport goods and people. At the same time, water is never only ‘literal’ in these metaphors.

The present exploration has shown that ‘water’ was associated with ‘birth’ and ‘death and destruction,’ with fertility and providing for life and also with causing doom, with images of a future, ideal Jerusalem and with Jerusalem’s calamity. ‘Water’ stood for both chaos and order. Water may be raging or quiet, threatening or comforting, or even Edenic. It may convey a sense of permanence and unfailing nature, as well as extreme impermanence. In other words, ‘water’ itself embodied fuzziness and the complementary character, from cognitive and social memory perspectives, of these seemingly mutually exclusionary oppositions. Given that this tendency was at work and dominant across the entire discourse of the period and the social mindscape of the community, it is no surprise that such a central concept as ‘water’ was construed as embodying this preference as well.

This paper has shown that although ‘sinners’ were construed, at times, as conceiving ‘water’ as belonging to failed para-gods (e.g., Egypt), the community knew that ‘water’ is YHWH’s. But ‘water’ was not only YHWH’s, it was also a helpful and at times necessary tool to enable the community to formulate expressions meant to shape and communicate YHWH and YHWH-related concepts. In other words, YHWH and YHWH-related concepts were often conceptualized through ‘water’ metaphors. ‘Water’ in these cases was not only an essential resource, but at times, one that could elevate its recipients and make them godly. Divine teaching was ‘water’ and godly teachers provided ‘water.’ ‘Water’ was also associated with liminal spaces and contributed much to the ability of individuals and the community as a whole to cross through them.

In sum, this study has shown that ‘water’ turned into a central semantic playground in which the community could express, formulate, reformulate and communicate in intelligible ways concepts that would have been difficult for them to express in other manners. Thinking of water was, to some extent, a way to facilitate thinking of a plethora of

various matters that were central to the community and above all, a way to facilitate thinking. It is to be stressed that many of these considerations are not unique at all to ‘thinking of water’ in Judah in the late Persian or early Hellenistic period. There is a reason for that too. Neither Judah, nor Judah in this period specifically, was so unique. That said, and to state the obvious, a study of ‘thinking of water’ and ‘water’ in other ancient Near Eastern cultures (or in the late Second Temple period in Judah—e.g., Qumran—or in later communities such as those in which early Christianities or Judaisms emerged) requires separate essays. See the essays by Samuel Thomas (Qumran) and Stephanie Anthonioz (ancient Mesopotamia) in this volume.