
Waters Cry Out: Water Protectors, Watershed Justice, and the Voice of Waters in Revelation 16:4–6, 21:6 and 22:17¹

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Do waters cry out? Do wetlands have a voice? Are rivers persons? Gordon Straw and other Native leaders teach us that waters and their living communities are alive, speaking God's voice to us. One aspect of Gordon's work that intersects most closely with my biblical work on the apocalyptic tradition is the idea that waters and other natural elements have their own spirit, their own personhood. This truth can help us face the climate crisis today, including advocating for the legal rights of nature. This essay argues that this perspective so important to Indigenous traditions can also be heard in ancient Christian and Jewish biblical apocalyptic literature. Waters have a voice in Revelation, and they are crying out for justice.

The voice of the waters was spoken at Ray Pickett's installation service in California, in a wonderful litany of Thanksgiving for Baptismal Waters, written by Pastor Melissa Reed of Oregon. Pastor Reed foregrounds the voice of baptismal waters speaking God's "Yes" to us, over against the multiple "No" voices of unjust systems—represented as "they":

When they say: you are alone.

These waters say: You are "with."

When they say: You are too broken, damaged goods, too wounded, not enough.

These waters say: Enough, beloved. Enough.

When they say: You are too brown, child. Too black. Too queer, child. Too fat.

These waters say: Beautiful, child. Beautiful.

When they say: You are too addicted, stranger. Immigrant, alien. Criminal. Too far gone, stranger.

These waters say: Home, neighbor. Welcome home.

When they say: We could sell these waters and turn a profit!

These waters say: We are the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Pacific, the waters of the Bay.² We are the

1. A version of this paper was presented at the CWM DARE (Discernment and Radical Engagement) conference in Taipei, Taiwan, Summer 2019.

2. Melissa Reed, pastor of Salt & Light Lutheran and Leaven Community notes, "as we've shared this litany in our community here in Portland we've changed 'the waters of the Bay' to 'the waters of the Columbia.'"

Today, we need to listen to the voice of waters crying out "Life!" Our world's rivers and waters are dying, along with human communities that depend on them.

waters of your Mother's womb, and we are free!

When they say: Fear.

These waters say: Trust.

When they say: Commodify. Consume.

These waters say: Life.

Today, we need to listen to the voice of waters crying out "Life!" Our world's rivers and waters are dying, along with human communities that depend on them. More than 1.6 billion people live in nations subject to water scarcity, exacerbated by climate change. All the major impacts of the climate crisis "one way or another come through water... Climate change is really about hydrological change,"³ says the author of a World Bank Study on water scarcity.

In Revelation and other apocalyptic texts, waters are personified by their angels or messengers who communicate with God—somewhat similar to indigenous understandings of cosmology and spirits. We can listen for apocalyptic calls for discernment of spirits, including the spirits of living ecosystems. The Bible's prophetic critique of economic systems that make water unaffordable can help us address watershed justice issues today. In Revelation the rivers and fresh waters cry out, bringing a lawsuit on their behalf and on behalf of peoples against oppressive empires and corporate polluters.

3. Richard Damania et al, "Uncharted Waters: The New Economics of Water Scarcity and Variability," 2017. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/28096> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO. for quotes, see Chris Mooney, "World Bank: The way climate change is really going to hurt us is through water," Washington Post, May 3, 2016.

The Earth Bible Project articulates six principles for interpreting biblical texts⁴ including: the principle of Voice: “Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice;” and the principle of Resistance: “Earth and its components not only suffer from human injustices but actively resist them in the struggle for justice.” In this paper I explore how the Earth Bible’s principle of “voice” for ecosystems—more specifically a legal voice—resonates with Native perspectives and can help water protector communities seeking biblical resources for today.

In Revelation, ecosystems have a voice. They have legal representation by a guardian angel or messenger (*angelos*) who functions as a sort of “prosecutorial witness.”⁵ Waters are active participants, not passive spectators, when unjust empires commit violence. They cry out in resistance when they are being polluted with blood. This personal understanding of waters in voicing a legal case against violent oppressors coheres with the apocalyptic tradition of elements of nature having angels or messengers who represent them. Messengers voice their laments and legal complaints when they are polluted by humans.

That an ecosystem—Water—is represented by an angelic messenger or guardian in Revelation is typical apocalyptic imagery. Other elements of nature and the cosmos in Revelation also have angelic figures who serve as their guardians.⁶ These include the four winds in Rev 7:1–2, and the angel with authority over fire in 14:18. Sea animals are portrayed as having “souls” (*psyche*, Rev 16:3, similar to 8:9), hearkening back to Genesis.⁷ Living creatures and human communities suffer together and cry out for justice. The cosmology of Revelation and other apocalypses assumes a strong solidarity between humans and the natural world, and between visible and invisible powers.

This biblical apocalyptic cosmology of spirit and angelic representation of nature has sometimes been overlooked in mainline Western Christianity. As Walter Wink noted in his 1986 trilogy on the powers, *Unmasking the Powers*, “Many in North America are looking to Eastern religions or esoteric traditions to find the spiritual resources to cherish and preserve nature. Yet these very sources have languished, unused, in the very heart of our own tradition, in the angels of nature.”⁸ The apocalyptic understanding of powers, spirits, and angels of nature is central to the entire New Testament, as it is to indigenous spirituality. Systems of oppression and empire

4. Other Earth Bible principles include: the principle of intrinsic worth; the principle of interconnectedness; the principle of purpose; the purpose of mutual custodianship. See Norman Habel and Peter Trudinger, eds., *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 46, 2008).

5. James W. Perkinson, “Protecting Water in the Anthropocene: River Spirits and Political Struggles in Detroit, Standing Rock, and the Bible,” *CrossCurrents* December 2016, 464.

6. “guardians” is the terminology of David Aune, *Revelation* (Word Biblical Commentary 52b; Nashville: Thomas Nelson), 884.

7. Peter Perry, “Things Having Lives: Ecology, Allusion and Performance in Revelation.” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37 (2010): 105–113.

8. Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 164.

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have a corporate spirit, described in language of the demonic or multi-headed beasts. “‘Satan’ is the world-encompassing spirit of the Domination System,” Wink argues.⁹ This language of powers, spirits, and the demonic can be of help in analyzing the structural evil of climate change and water injustice today.

Waters Bring a Lawsuit Against Oppressors in Revelation 16

In Revelation 16, the angel of Water voices a complaint about those who shed blood, in the third of seven bowl plagues. Each of the first four bowls afflicts an element of nature: the Earth, the sea, the springs of water, the sun. The bowls recapitulate the same Exodus-related plagues events as the seven trumpets of Revelation 8–9, now with double the destructive intensity. Human communities’ prayers and cries for vindication are also implicitly present, since the golden bowls the angels pour are the same bowls as in 6:9–11. As Brian Blount describes the relationship, “Those prayers motivate divine action throughout the book [of Revelation]...Apparently God is so overwhelmed by the people’s cries that God’s passion for them takes tangible shape.”¹⁰

Parallel use of the same verb “pour out, shed” (*ekcheo*) for both a crime and its consequences in the third bowl sequence underscores the logic of reciprocity, using legal language. The “shedding” or “pouring out” of each bowl’s contents of judgment (16:1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 17) reciprocates Rome’s own “shedding/pouring” of blood (16:6), described by the same verb. Those who shed blood are punished by blood. Measure for measure, God’s judgments against evildoers match their offense.¹¹

The logic of consequences is made explicit in the liturgical doxology by the angel of the waters about blood (16:6), after the third bowl. The waters’ extended antiphonal doxology is much longer than any of the other six bowl descriptions. The angel explains that it is precisely because oppressors “shed” the blood of saints and prophets that the waters have turned to blood, and God will now give the oppressors blood to drink. As in Isa 49:26,

9. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 26.

10. Brian Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (New Testament Library; Westminster John Knox, 2009), 292–293.

11. Brian Blount, *Revelation* (2009), 294.

the bloodthirsty are made to choke on the very blood they shed.¹²

The angel interprets these consequences as “axiomatic” (*axios*) or “worthy,” in the sense of self-evident: “Just you are, who is as was, the holy one, for you have judged these things, it is their due (*axios*).” A personified talking altar then responds to affirm the just judgments of God: “Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, your judgments are true and just” (16:7). As Richard explains, antiphonal liturgy breaks in at this point in the narrative “so that the community may be actively present; indeed, whenever the liturgy appears in the text, the community is making an appearance. Far from being a spectator to the Exodus that God is bringing about in the Roman empire, the community is involved in it, as expressed symbolically in liturgy.”¹³

Adela Yarbro Collins calls the third bowl a “vindication doxology”¹⁴ while Hans Dieter Betz calls it “judgment doxology,” with the messenger of the waters praising God’s judgment or justice. In searching for the sources of this imagery, Betz notes that the judgment doxology parallels other apocalyptic texts in which four elements of the world (Air, Earth, Water, and Fire) play a major role.¹⁵ This is similar to 1 Enoch, where angelic beings represent the sea, hoarfrost, hail, snow, mist, dew, and rain.¹⁶

As Betz suggests, the tradition behind Revelation 16 may also include that of the Egyptian hermetic document *Kore Kosmou*, in which the four elements of the world cry out to God for purification from the pollution of bloodshed by oppressors. In *Kore Kosmou* each of the four elements voices its legal complaint in the form of prayers or liturgy. A personified figure of Fire speaks first, then Air (voicing a complaint against air-pollution that would describe our present crisis), then Water, and finally Earth. Water’s complaint is the most relevant for Rev 16:

Water was given leave to speak, and spoke thus: “O Father, self-begotten and Maker of Nature, that power which generates all things to give thee pleasure, it is high time for thee to give command that my streams be kept pure; for the rivers and seas are ever washing off the defilement of the slayers, and receiving the corpses

of the slain.” (*Corp. Herm.* 23:58; trans. W. Scott Hermetica 1:489)¹⁷

In response to these speeches by the four cosmic elements, God responds by promising to send a redeemer (Osiris) to judge oppressors’ misdeeds, a promise that satisfies the elements: “Another shall now come down to dwell among you... He shall be judge of the living—a judge none can deceive... Thereupon the Elements ceased from their entreating.”

The resemblance of *Kore Kosmou* to Revelation 16 is closest in the cry for justice by Water against human wrongdoing. In both texts, Water cries out, accusing warring oppressors of misusing the water from rivers and the sea with violence. The warring parties are using water to wash blood from themselves, throwing the dead people they have slain into the water. In addition to the Egyptian *Kore Kosmou*, Betz traces a trajectory of such personified imagery through early Jewish and later Christian texts such as the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies, and even the third century Apocalypse of Paul. All share a “basic agreement” in the use of a similar tradition of the cosmic elements personified or represented by angels and crying out for vindication against human injustice¹⁸—to which I would add: the injustice of empires.

Empire was not the focus of Betz’s 1969 investigation, to be sure, nor of Adela Yarbro Collins extension of his argument in 1977, analyzing the angel of waters’ accusation in Rev 16:4–7. Yet we can extend their argument in light of newer scholarship on apocalypses, making clear a political/military and structural violence aspect of “human wrongdoing” behind the common ancient tradition of personified elements crying out for justice. This anti-imperial dimension of biblical critique can help us address water injustice today, drawing on work by Wink and also recent scholarship by Anatheia Poitier Young, Richard Horsley, and others.

The fifth bowl makes clear the anti-imperial dimension of the bowl sequence. The fifth bowl is poured out not on any element of nature, but on the “throne of the beast,” namely the seat of Empire. The kingdom (*basileia*) of the beast is plunged into darkness. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes, the fifth, sixth, and seventh bowl announce the “destruction of Babylon/Rome, which will be elaborated further in the narrative of chapters 17–18.”¹⁹ The focus on Empire’s injustices can be seen already here in the bowl sequence, in the voice of the angel of the waters and the other bowls.

Liberation scholar Pablo Richard draws an expanded analogy of the bowl plagues to multiple forms of imperial oppression today, identifying the plagues of Revelation today as “the disastrous results of ecological destruction, the arms race, irrational consumerism, the idolatrous logic of the market.”²⁰ It is important

12. Blount, *Revelation* (2009), 97.

13. Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People’s Commentary* (Orbis, 1995), 83.

14. Adela Yarbro Collins, “The History-of-Religions Approach to Apocalypticism and the ‘Angel of the Waters’ (Rev 16:4–7),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1977): 369.

15. Hans Dieter Betz, “On the Problem of the Religio-Historical Understanding of Apocalypticism” *Journal of Theology and Church* 6 (1969): 139–154.

16. 1 Enoch 60:12–22; 61:10 mentions angels of the water; see also 66:1–2, “The Lord of Spirits commanded the angels who were going forth, that they not raise their hands, but that they keep watch; for these angels were in charge of the power of the waters.” (trans. George Nickelsburg, and James VanderKam, *1 Enoch* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004); 69:22; 75:3. Aune also cites Jub 2:2, where angels created on the first day represent elements of the cosmos such as winds, clouds, darkness, snow, hail, and frost; and from Qumran hymns 1QH 1:8–13.

17. See discussion in David Aune, *Revelation* (Word Biblical Commentary 52b; Nashville: Thomas Nelson), 887.

18. Betz, 151.

19. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Proclamation Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 94.

20. Pablo Richard, 86.

to underscore that the plagues unleashed by the bowls are targeted not against humankind in general, but only against oppressors—against the beast (the Empire) and its followers.²¹

The good news of the messenger of the Waters is that oppressors who commit acts of violence will unleash their own destructive consequences against themselves. It is “axiomatic” (my translation of *axios*). A similar ecological logic can be seen in the Exodus plagues, the antecedent for John’s bowls. The response from the personified altar (16:7) engages the community in active liturgical response to the empire’s own violence—a violence that “de-creates the very fabric of the world,” as Anatheia Poitier Young describes.

Apocalypses’ Origins as Resistance Literature Against Military Domination

Anatheia Poitier Young’s landmark study of the origins of apocalyptic as “resistance literature” examines the early Jewish apocalypses of 1 Enoch and Daniel in the context of tyrannical occupation and violence as described in 1 Maccabees and other historical texts. She shows that the violence of bloodshed/injustice being critiqued by angelic voices of water and other cosmic elements in 1 Enoch is specifically the military violence of the Seleucids, who conquered Judea and carried out a program of political terror, including torture. In the case of the state terror of Antiochus IV in 167 BCE, the empire engaged in such brutality that Poitier Young calls it “decreation,” undoing the world. Apocalyptic literature developed in early Judaism as resistance literature—resisting Empires’ “totalizing” claims. Like state terror in Argentina in the 1980s and elsewhere, she shows that regimes have a “logic” to what they do. Jewish and Christian apocalypses seek to answer that logic.

Regimes use military and political force to lay claim to time and space in totalizing ways: re-setting calendars, re-naming places (such as the re-naming of Jerusalem to Antioch), re-mapping the cartography of the world, disrupting fundamental structures of order, erasing people’s memory. Apocalypses “countered the totalizing narrative of the Seleucid empire with an even grander total vision of history, cosmos, and the reign of God.”²² They provide a new cartography. Through their use of symbolism and myth, apocalypses engender embodied resistance and praxis. In the face of trauma, they “answered terror with radical visions of hope.” The Book of the Watchers, the earliest apocalyptic section of 1 Enoch, uses visionary rhetoric and revealed knowledge to “contest the very epistemological claims and... the cosmologies that authorize the system itself.”

Invisible and visible powers, and the symbolism of monsters, show the “monstrosity of imperial rule.”²³ The Book of Watchers describes the destruction brought by the watchers and their giant offspring, and how “the earth brought an accusation against the oppressors” (1 Enoch 7:6).²⁴ The imperial domination system most

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easily perpetuates itself by rendering the structures of domination invisible. “Apocalyptic writings rendered them visible and characterized them as monstrous or demonic precisely to enable full-fledged resistance of the mind, spirit and body.”²⁵

Similarly, Richard Horsley describes the function of angels in the Book of the Watchers in 1 Enoch: “The problem that drives the Book of Watchers, mentioned again and again, is the violence and destruction wrought by imperial regimes on subject people. The only way the Enoch scribes can explain it is from rebellion against the divine governance of the universe by rebel heavenly forces who disobey the divine commands. And the only solution to imperial violence and destruction on earth is for God and the obedient heavenly forces to control, bind, and punish, the rebel heavenly forces.”

In such an analysis, the angelic personification of natural elements such as Water may be similar to indigenous people’s cosmologies and resistance today—diagnosing as monstrous the brutal structures and systems that colonize and pollute waterways for private gain and deprive people of access to water.

Water is Life: New Jerusalem, Standing Rock, and Hope for Water Justice Today

Apocalypses not only diagnose imperial pathology. They also give the counter-imperial vision of hope. Jesus, God’s Lamb, leads God’s people to “springs of living water” (Rev 7:17). “Living water” in Rev 7:17 hints at the idea that Water is itself alive with its own living spirit. In contrast to the deadly waters of blood that become undrinkable in Revelation 16, God’s “springs” of the water of life and river of life in New Jerusalem offer healing. In contrast to the antiphonal judgment doxology of Rev 16:4, the antiphonal liturgy of Rev 22:17 invites all who are thirsty to drink from God’s living water. In contrast to Lamentations’ description of the sufferings of military occupation (“We must pay for the water that we drink,” Lam 5:1–4) the New Jerusalem vision offers an economy in which water is available without cost. Water is priceless (*dorean*).

As a prophetic economic vision, the New Jerusalem vision can

21. Pablo Richard, 84.

22. Anatheia Poitier Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Eerdmans, 2011), xxiii.

23. Poitier Young, 170.

24. See discussion in Micah Kiel, *Apocalyptic Ecology: The Book*

of Revelation, the Earth, and the Future (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017).

25. Poitier Young, 35.

speak on behalf of rivers, watersheds, and their living communities today. God offers the water of life to everyone who thirsts as a “gift,” free of charge—without payment—echoing the promise of Isa 55:1. The word *dorean* (“without cost,” “without money,” Rev 21:6, 22:17) underscores the promise of water justice even for those who have been excluded from the commodify or “festishize” everything in a market economy.²⁶ The antiphonal “Come” (Rev 22:17) of the spirit and the bride is a eucharistic invitation, and more. It voices a positive liturgical litany of waters, a promise of water for all who are thirsty: “The spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ and let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift (*dorean*).” The gift of water in the New Jerusalem vision offers a new social imaginary, a corrective to the imperial violence critiqued by the angel of waters in Revelation 16.

Military siege is one common thread between ancient apocalyptic texts and communities advocating for water justice today. Indigenous communities camped at Standing Rock, North Dakota, during the Fall of 2016, underscored that they were “Water Protectors,” not protesters. Prayer was the focus of all public actions. Prayerfully and nonviolently, standing on the bridge, they sought to protect the Missouri River and their drinking water supply from the threat of oil spills from the Dakota Access Pipeline. They portrayed the oil pipeline as a monstrous black snake, slithering across the landscape for miles. Their declaration “Water is Life” affirmed that sacred dimension. Yet nonviolent water protectors were met with militarized police violence and water canons.

I visited Standing Rock in November 2016, as part of an LSTC delegation. While Gordon Straw did not visit Standing Rock himself during the Fall of 2016, he helped to advise two LSTC groups of student and faculty visitors. He moderated community forums at the seminary. He wrote a blog post about “Standing

26. Pablo Richard, *Revelation*, 130.

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with Standing Rock Takes All of Us” in which he embodied the generous vision he brought to LSTC. Gordon drew on the Dakota concept of *metakuye oyasín*, “**all my relatives,**” a “recognition that every aspect of existence is connected to every other aspect of existence, because all things have a single origin, the Creator.” As he wrote, “we stand with the Standing Rock Nation and all other nations in declaring that Water is Life. No amount of tainting the earth’s fresh water supply with oil or chemicals is acceptable. Our nation’s dependence upon fossil fuels (that’s each and every one of us, folks) is threatening our Mother, the Earth, especially the waterways which bring life.”

Today, the waterways which bring life are more imperiled today than when Gordon wrote those words almost three years ago. New tar sands pipelines are being constructed by private corporations, crossing wetlands and waterways. Sovereignty of tribal lands is being violated. Fossil fuel corporations are endangering the world. Yet it is not too late to stand with those who protect the waters, wetlands, and communities whose life depends on them. We can listen to Native American and indigenous wisdom, and to apocalyptic biblical voices and spirits. We can hear the voice of waters crying out to us.