

## CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND WATER

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**Keywords:** Symbolism, Prime Matter, Water, Cosmology, Mythology, Feng Shui, Sacred, Religion, Ritual

### Contents

1. Introduction

Bibliography

### Summary

Pre-socratic philosophers maintained that the universe was derived from a unique and original material: the “Prime Matter”. Water as one ancient text says, is one of the elemental forms through which the Infinite Unity, the Eternal Unrevealed, manifests itself. Water is the prime source, “all was water” state the Hindu texts: “the vast waters do not have borders”, says a Taoist text. The water is “Wu-ki”, say the Chinese, the “without summit”, the chaos, the foremost indistinction. This text conducts through a myriad of myths, thoughts, rituals and ancient beliefs, associated to water. At the summit all trends and tendencies convey to a major perception: The recognition of the sacred value of water and its intrinsic natural harmonizing power.

### 1. Introduction

Water is considered to be one of the essential elements of life, the “Prime Matter”. It is believed that the evolutionary path of man is linked to the evolution of the cosmos as a whole. Anthropogenesis is related to cosmogenesis. In studying the most ancient sources of human knowledge, we encounter a text from the Bhagavad Gita, which conceives of God as the origin of the universe in whose nature there are eight elemental forms: “My nature is made up of eight basic forms, known as: Earth, Water, Fire, Air, Ether, Mind, Reason and Individual Conscience”. “But, aside from these forms of my material nature, I have a spiritual nature which is superior and more noble: It is the principle which gives life to and sustains the universe.”

“You know that the elements of which I spoke are the matrix of all creation. I, however, am the source from which all creation stems and to which all returns.”

Pre-socratic philosophers maintained that the universe was derived from a unique and original material: the “Prime Matter”. Although they split up this universal and archetypal idea, they disagreed as to the identification of this substance. Thales de Miletus said that water is the origin of all things and is where everything returns, the source of movement and life in the universe. For this philosopher water is a divine element and God is the intelligence that makes all with water.

For Plato, the four basic elements were those which make up and destroy compounds.

Fire, Air, Water and Earth were only the apparent manifestations, the symbols of visible souls or spirits, which make up life. Plato and Pythagoreans called the Primordial Substance the soul of the world impregnated by the spirit of that which fertilizes the Primitive Waters.

The Kabbalah says that Ain-Sofh, the One God, the Invisible One, the Unknowable, manifests himself to Himself through the ten Sefirah. The unchangeable infinite cannot want, think or act. To do so he must convert himself into the finite and manifest himself through Sefira, the active power. When this active power surges within the unity, it is feminine; when he assumes the role of creator, it is masculine. Sefira forms the two first Sefirah: Abba, the father, and Amona, the Mother; Hokhmah, the masculine power and Binah, the feminine force. These two forces, together with Sefira, form a trinity, or the Kether Crown. The kabalists call the feminine Sefira the great sea, the Primordial Waters. The other seven Sefirah originate from this duality of Sefira.

The Sefirah are thus the various aspects of the being of God, his qualities and the means for his appearance to man, which is revealed from Ain-Sofh. Those who study the kabbalah used various synonyms for Sefirah such as: lights, names, stages, crowns, mirrors, sources and the internal faces of God. The Sefirat are described by the kabalists as receptacles or chalices, which make up the Tree of Life. This tree is one of the innumerable diagrams of the structure of creation, such as is manifested from Ain-Sofh from below, through the Sefirah. The Tree of the Sefirah represents the universe. The Sefirah is the connecting fabric between the infinite God and the finite world. Water as the primordial element of creation, can be considered a Sefirah, one of the ten divine emanations.

Water is as much a receptacle for the will of divine creation as it is its emanation. Water, as the ancient texts say, is one of the elemental forms through which the Infinite Unity, the Eternal Unrevealed, manifests itself.

Water is a typical symbolism of the unconscious, since it alludes to the origin, to abyssal depths, to the motherly womb.

The symbolic significance of water can be reduced to three dominant themes: source of life, medium of purification and center of regeneration. These three themes are found in the most ancient traditions, and form most varied imaginary combinations, as well as the most coherent ones.

Water, an undifferentiated mass, represents the infinitude of the possible, contains everything virtual, the informal, the germ of germs, all the promises of development, but also the threats of re-absorption. To submerge oneself in waters and to get out again without being dissolved in them completely, save for a symbolic death is to return to sources. Thus resorting to an immense deposit of potential and from there extract new strength: a transient phase of regression and disintegration that conditions a progressive phase of reintegration and regeneration (→**bath** → **baptism**).

In the different cultures these terms vary, but have an almost identical basis.

In Asia water is the origin of all life and the element of corporeal and spiritual regeneration, the symbol of fertility.

Water is the prime source, “all was water” state the Hindu texts; “the vast waters do not have borders,” says a Taoist text. “The water is Wu-ki”, say the Chinese, the “without summit”, the chaos, the foremost indistinction.

The notion of the primordial waters of ocean origins is almost universal. It is found in Polynesia, and the greater part of the Austro-Asiatic people consider water to be the cosmic power.

Source and vehicle of all life: the sap is water and, in certain tantric allegories, water represents prana, the breath of life. The water from skies makes the paddy, say the mountaineers of South Vietnam, who are also very perceptive to the regenerative function of water, which to them is the elixir of immortality.

Water is the instrument of ritual purification, from Islam to Japan, including the rites of the ancient Taoist fu-chuei (masters of consecrate water), not forgetting the aspersion of holy water by the Christians, to whom ablution carries out an essential role. In India and Southeast Asia the ablution of sacred statues and of the faithful (particularly in the New Year) is the time of purification and regeneration. “The nature of water leads to purity”, writes Wen-tse. It is “the emblem of supreme virtue”, teaches Lao-tse. It is also the symbol of Taoist wisdom, since it has no opposition - it is free and without bonds, it lets itself flow following the slopes of terrain. It is the measure, since strong wine must be mixed with water; this is the wine of knowledge.

Water, opposed to fire, is yin. It corresponds to the north, to the cold, to the solstice of winter, to the centers, to the black color. But in another way water is related to lightning, which is fire. In this manner, if “the reduction of water” by Chinese alchemists can be perfectly considered as a return to primordality, to the embryonic state, it is also said that this water is fire, and that hermetic ablutions must be understood as purification by fire.

It must be also pointed out that ritual water of Tibetan initiations is the symbol of vows, of commitments held by the postulant.

In Jewish and Christian traditions water symbolizes foremost the origin of creation. The Hebrew “em” (M) embodies the sensitive water: it is mother and matrix. Source of all things.

In every way water, along with all other symbols, can be acknowledged in two rigorously opposite levels. Water is the source of life and source of death, creator and destroyer.

In the Bible the desert wells and springs that offer themselves to nomads are places of joy and astonishment. Near spring and wells essential encounters take place; as sacred

locations, these spots have an incomparable role. Near them love flourishes and matrimony is prepared. The march of Hebrews and the walking of each man during his earthly pilgrimage are intimately related to exterior and interior contact with water; this results in a place of peace and light. Palestine is a land of torrents and springs; the pacific waters of Siloe irrigate Jerusalem. The rivers are agents of fertilization of divine origin; the rains and dew give it fecundity and manifest the benevolence of God. Without water the nomad would be condemned to death and burnt by the Palestinian sun, thus the water that he finds in his way is comparable to manna: quenching his thirst, it nourishes him. For this reason one pleads for water in prayers, it is an object of supplication. "Hearken God unto the cry of thy servant, send the showers and help find wells and springs." Hospitality demands that fresh water be offered to the guest and that his feet are washed, so as to assure his peaceful rest. All the Old Testament celebrates the magnificence of water. The New Testament receives this legacy and knows how to make use of it.

Yahweh compares Himself to spring rain, to the dew that makes flowers grow, to fresh waters that runs down from mountains, to torrents that wet. The pious one is similar to the tree planted at the shores of running waters; consequently water appears as a sign of blessing. However it is fitting to recognize in it precisely its divine origin. According to Jeremy, the people of Israel in their infidelity, disapproving Yahweh, forgetting His promises and stopping considering Him as source of living water, wish to dig their own cisterns but these crack and don't conserve water. Jeremy, censoring the posture of the people before their God, source of living water, laments saying "Thou shall make thy country a desert ". Foreign alliances are comparable to the waters of the Nile and Euphrates. The soul seeks its God as the thirsty deer seeks the presence of living water. The soul so resembles a dry and parched land; it waits the manifestation of God, just as the dry land longs to be soaked by the rains.

Yahweh bestows water to the earth, but there is another more mysterious water: it expresses wisdom, which directed the forming of waters in the creation. In the heart of the wise man resides water, he is similar to a well and a fountain, and his words have the strength of a torment. A man deprived of wisdom has a heart similar to a broken vase which lets leak knowledge. Ben Sira compares the Torah (the Sey) to Knowledge, since the Torah spills the water of Knowledge. Church priests consider the Holy Spirit as the author of the gift of Knowledge that it pours into thirsty hearts. The theologians of the Middle Ages represent this theme and give it an identical meaning. To Hugo of Saint Victor, Knowledge possesses its waters and the waters of Knowledge wash the soul.

It is natural that Orientals have first seen water as a sign and symbol of blessing: Is it not water that permits life? When Isaiah prophesized a new era he said: "I will make the desert a pool of water...the country of thirst will transformed into springs of water." The seer of Apocalypse speaks no differently: "The Lamb... shall guide them unto fountains of waters of life".

Water converts itself into the symbol of spiritual life and of the Spirit, offered by God and often rejected by men: "they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water".

Jesus also employs this symbolism in His conversation with the woman of Samaria: "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up unto eternal life."

Above all a symbol of life in the Old Testament, water converts itself to a symbol of the Spirit in the New Testament.

Here Jesus Christ reveals Himself as the Master of living water to the Samaritan woman. He is the fountain; "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink". As the stone of Moses, water sprouts from his breast and pours over the cross until it sheds water and blood from his open side. From the father spills living water, which communicates through the humanity of Christ and also through the gift of Holy Spirit and which, according to the text of a Pentecostal hymn, is **fons vivus** (font of living water), **ignis caritas** (fire of love), **Altissimi donum Dei** (gift of the Highest). Saint Anastasius specifies the meaning of this doctrine saying: "The Father is the fountain, the Son is called the river, and it is said that we drink from the Spirit".

Water in this manner is granted a sense of eternity; the one who drinks from this living water partakes in eternal life.

The living water, the water of life, presents itself as a cosmogonic symbol. It purifies, cures, rejuvenates and consequently introduces the eternal. According to Gregory of Nisa, wells contain stagnated water. "However the fountain of the Husband is a well of living waters. It has the depth of a well and the mobility of a river".

According to Tertullian the divine Spirit chooses water from the various elements; and to it goes his preferences, because it appears since the beginning as a perfect matter, fertile and simple, totally transparent (of baptism). It possesses by itself a purifying virtue and for this reason it is also considered sacred. Because of such it is used in ritual ablutions, due to its virtues removes all offenses and all taints. Because that comes the importance given to the pure waters in the Judaism. Only baptismal water can wash away sin and it is never bestowed more than once, since it permits the ascension of a new state: that of a new man. This rejection of old man, or in other words, death in a moment of history is comparable to a deluge, since it symbolizes disappearance, destruction: an old time was annihilated and a new one emerges.

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