

The River of God

The emergence of the Kathmandu Valley civilisation

The cities of the Kathmandu Valley, as many cities around the globe, are located next to a river. From the river comes the water for agriculture and the watering of flocks, for washing and cleaning. In the early days of settlement the river provided water for drinking and cooking as well.

As the best land for growing rice was in the bottoms [*dol*] near the river the early settlements, that later joined to form the Kathmandu Valley cities, were situated on the river bluffs [*tar*] immediately above. In Lalitpur these ancient settlements are represented now by the localities of Konti, Cyāsaḥ, Nyautā, Cāpatā, Guita, and Tyāgaḥ. These settlements were also in a good position to repel any attack by marauders.

As a tributary of the Ganges [Ganga] the Bāgmati shares in its religious significance. Water is seen everywhere as a purifying substance or cleansing agent. It is the flow of the water that can both absorb impurities and carry them away. Bathing in the river, therefore, is thought to be good not only for physical cleansing but also for one's spiritual life. Furthermore, anything taken from the river is considered pure. Traditionally, the sand, which is required for the seedbed on the first day of Mohani, Nala Swanegu, is excavated from the Bāgmati River at the Shankamul *ghāts*.

It is significant that the major Valley rivers are all located *outside* the boundaries of her cities. Purification, then, involves the material removal of dirt, and with it the ritual removal of spiritual impurity, by means of the physical transfer of the impure from city space.

In the same way, the river is a place for dying, cremation and purification. Each of the three main cremation grounds [*mashān*] of Lalitpur—Shankamul, Yappa, and Bāl Kumāri are situated on a bank of the Bāgmati River or near one of its tributaries.

Furthermore, items that have been used in Ancestor Worship [*shrāddha*] are thrown into the river after the ceremony. Until he has deposited these items and bathed in the river the one who has performed the *shrāddha* is considered highly impure. Likewise, at the close of certain festivals, such as Holi and Mohani, and at Swanti on the day following Kijā Pujā, the items used during the *pujā* are usually removed from the city to be thrown in the river.

In summary, in the Newar tradition the river has two important meanings:

1. It provides sustenance for the city.
2. It purifies by carrying away impurities.

The rivers of Eden

In the Bible, rivers are mentioned many times. They often have a great significance. As we saw in chapter one, the book of Genesis contains an account of the creation. In this account we are told that when the Lord God made the world he made man ‘in his image’ (Genesis 1:26-7). This means that God made man in a very special way—in a very real way like God himself. People can create things like God like God creates things. We communicate like God, and love like God. But we are not completely like God. For instance, people can not create anything out of nothing, and do not have complete knowledge of the future.

In the last chapter, I explained that the Creator planted a garden for the first man, Adam, and his wife, Eve—the Garden of Eden.

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. (Genesis 2:8-10)

They were given the responsibility and privilege of taking care of that garden. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow in that garden—trees that were pleasing to the eye

and good for food. A river watered the garden and the waters of that river sustained the trees.

A river gushes out of a rock

When water runs out it creates big problems. God had chosen a people for himself—the Israelites.¹ For 400 years they had lived in slavery in Egypt and then the Lord had brought them out by his great power.² Then they were in the desert and the water had run out.

The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, travelling from place to place as the Lord commended. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarrelled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.”

Moses replied, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?”

But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”

Then Moses cried out to the Lord, “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

The Lord answered Moses, “Walk on ahead of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. (Exodus 17:1-7)

They were in a desperate state—what were they to do? They complained to Moses their leader and God told Moses to take the elders and go to the rock at Horeb and strike it with his staff. Later, a song was written, which included the following verse:

He opened the rock, and water gushed out;
like a river it flowed in the desert. (Psalm 105:41)

The important thing to be learned here is that the rock had to be struck, broken open, in order for water to flow out and revive the thirsty people. The rock had to be broken in order that the people might live.

¹ The Israelites were also called Hebrews.

² See Exodus 1-12.

There is a river that makes glad the city of God

When the Israelites were settled in the Promised Land of Canaan they captured the city of Jerusalem and made it their capital. The great King David built himself a palace and his son Solomon built a temple. The temple was the place that God said he would meet his people. He had come to live among them. Jerusalem, the City of David, therefore, took on a huge significance in the minds of the Israelites. It was the city of God.

The Sons of Korah wrote a number of Psalms [*bhajan*], which we can read today in the Bible. In Psalm 46 we read about the river of God:

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.
God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day. (Psalm 46:1-5)

The river of God makes the city of God glad. This is the same river that we have seen in the Garden of Eden. It is the source of God's sustenance, His salvation from calamity.

Ezekiel's river

Ezekiel was a prophet of God who lived in exile at a time that the people of God had disobeyed the Lord. The Lord had disciplined them by sending the Babylonian army to defeat them, tear down their city and its temple, and drag many of its inhabitants away. In the last part of his prophecy Ezekiel tells us of a vision the Lord gave him (Ezekiel 40-48). In these visions he is shown a new city and a new temple. The new temple is an ideal temple. Ezekiel is taken in his vision to the entrance of the temple:

The man brought me back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple towards the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. He then brought me out through the

north gate and led me round the outside to the outer gate facing east, and the water was flowing from the south side.

As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to my waist. He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river no-one could cross. (Ezekiel 47:1-5)

Ezekiel is then shown a great number of trees on each side of the river. They are fruit trees. They never wither or fail to produce fruit.

Every month they will bear, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing. (Ezekiel 47:12)

According to this vision, this wonderful river is a life-giving river. It is life giving because of its source—the sanctuary. Within the sanctuary the river came out from under the altar. The altar is the place of sacrifice. In this ideal temple the ideal sacrifice gushes out life giving water. Just as the rock was broken at Horeb for the water to flow out, so here something else is broken. But here we have some new information—the object to be broken is a living being. A life has to be broken to bring life to others. Life comes out of death—the death of the perfect sacrifice. But Ezekiel's vision does not tell us what that sacrifice is.

The washing [*snāna*] of the Lord Jesus

Over 500 years after the vision was given to Ezekiel another prophet of God appeared on the scene in Canaan. His name was John.

And so John came, baptising [giving *snāna*] in the desert region and preaching a baptism [*snāna*] of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside went out to him. Confessing their sins they were baptised [given *snāna*] by him in the Jordan River. (Mark 1:4-5)

John was also given a message to preach to the people:

...among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. (John 1:26-27)³

The One who came after him was Jesus of Nazareth. But though John regarded Jesus as so much higher than he it was to John that Jesus came to take the water ceremony [*jal samskāra*] of purification. John was giving the washing [*snāna*] ritual to the Israelite people out in the desert in the River Jordan. By taking this washing people were demonstrating that they were sinners, that they were defiled and needed purification.

Jesus did not need to go through this ceremony in order to be pure. He was already pure. He had never sinned. He had never been defiled in any way. But he had to go through it in order to identify completely with sinful man, in order to become *like us*. Thus began three years of Jesus' ministry here on earth.

Living water

Later in John's account of Jesus' life we read of a very important incident in his life.

Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I

³ John the writer of this book is different from the John who was the herald of Jesus.

give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”
(John 4:4-14)

Jesus was walking through the region of Samaria. Jews, the ethnic group to which Jesus belonged, did not respect the Samaritans. They were the descendants of mixed marriages of Jews and non-Jews. When Jesus arrived outside the town of Sychar he sat down by an ancient well, dug by Jacob, the ancestor of the Jews. It was the sixth hour, i.e. midday by the Jewish way of reckoning. A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water and Jesus surprisingly asked her for a drink. A conversation started up and Jesus told the woman that if she knew who it was who was talking with her then the woman would ask him and he would give her *living water*. Jesus gives living water—not physical water that satisfies for a short time, but spiritual water that satisfies for eternity. That spiritual water is God’s salvation—eternal life. If she would receive that spiritual water the woman would be cleansed from her spiritual impurity, her sin [*pāp*].

The river of life

We have seen a river running out of the Garden of Eden, a river that runs out of a broken rock, a river that makes glad the city of God, a river running out from under the altar, and living water that comes from Jesus. Now we come to the final description of a river in the Bible. The Apostle John, who wrote the previous story of Jesus in Samaria, was probably the last of Jesus’ close friends to die. In the last book of the Bible we have an account of a ‘revelation’, an unveiling of the future, that is written in a similar style to the visions that Ezekiel recorded. In the last chapter of the book John is shown a river:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:1-2)

The similarities with Ezekiel’s vision are breathtaking. But the details are now clearer. The many trees of Ezekiel’s vision are now the one tree—the tree of life. The tree that gives sustenance and healing straddles the river of life. Without the life-giving waters of the river there would be no life-giving tree. And the water of life flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb. The altar is now a throne. The sacrificial lamb is now the King!

People are sinful. They are sick with sin. They need the healing flow of water to wash through them and purify them from that sickness, which is far more serious than physical sickness. The source of the river is in brokenness. Something must be broken in order for the healing and sustaining water to flow to the needy. The meaning of brokenness in this sense develops in the Bible. First we see a broken rock. Then it becomes a broken body, a sacrifice. Jesus says that he has the power to give living water. The river of the New Jerusalem comes from the throne of the Lamb of God. It is Jesus himself whose own sacrifice as the Lamb of God brings sustenance and healing. When we come to God recognising that we have offended him and ask the Lord Jesus for his living water then he gives us his salvation. We are made truly glad by his wonderful act of purification.