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#RAINMUSTFALL – A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON DROUGHT, THIRST, AND THE WATER OF LIFE¹

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the rhetorical interplay between drought, thirst, and the water of life in a time of drought. The negotiation of meaning that occurs in the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4) reflects the struggle for meaning that occurs when water is rhetorically ambiguous in a time of water scarcity. This paper argues that the theological rhetoric of water is embedded in soteriological imagination, which requires remembering – through the sacrament of baptism – the significance of the giving God who wills human and ecological flourishing.² Moreover, it is argued that the good news of salvation brings rhetoric and ethics, doctrine and life, into a dynamic communicative process, so that water, as that which is freely given by God, has nothing less than abundant life or ecological and human flourishing as its apparent intended focus.

- 1 Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Theological Society of South Africa in Pretoria, 11-15 July 2016, with the theme: From farm to fork: Theological and ethical reflections on the production, distribution and consumption of food. The meeting formed part of the Third Joint Conference on Religion and Theology, with the overarching theme: Faith and South African realities. See also Marais (forthcoming).
- 2 For a theological analysis of the rhetoric of human flourishing, including key points of critique raised against the use of the term “flourish”, see Marais (2015).

1. INTRODUCTION

South Africa recently experienced one of its worst droughts. Water, and specifically the *lack* of water – or how the experience of thirst performs rhetorically in a time of drought – is, therefore, the focus of this article. Of the many possible approaches to water and water-related issues, few focus on rhetoric – or the underlying dynamic of the theological grammar of thirst and water of life. The hashtag #rainmustfall³ is a Twitter handle that was created in response to the “succession of heatwaves and worsening El Nino-driven drought” toward the end of 2015,⁴ and suggests – if nothing else – the rhetorical ambiguity of water talk in a time of drought. Doing theology in a time of drought may, therefore, very well include the hermeneutical task of tracing meaning within the language of water employed in prayers, music, hashtags!, and biblical stories such as the story wherein Jesus and a nameless Samaritan woman discuss the meaning of water beside a well.

2. THEOLOGY IN A TIME OF DROUGHT

Theological reflection on water has been described in various ways, including “hydrotheology” (Russel 2007), “aquacentric theology” (De Gruchy 2010:198), and “blue theology” (Ferris 2014).⁵ De Gruchy (2010:197) would point out the important association of water with life – and not simply life, but *abundant* life. Water is “the giver of life [so that] without water there is no life” (De Gruchy 2010:198). Moreover, “all life

3 On the one hand, this is a fitting title for a paper that explores the rhetoric of water in a time of drought, not only because a number of prayer days for rain would be organised under this banner, but also because the very call for rain to fall stands in the tradition of the #RhodesMustFall and #feesmustfall protests. On the other hand, the reference to #rainmustfall is perhaps somewhat misleading, in that this paper does not intend to analyse religious ceremonies and prayers for rain in times of drought, nor does it want to reflect upon how God acts within El Nino and La Nina. Yet, the intended meaning of #rainmustfall is by no means clear – and as such it is rhetorically ambiguous. For instance, is #rainmustfall protest theodicy, a theological response to the #mustfall tradition, in which it stands? Is #rainmustfall a cry of despair? A cry of hope? A wish? A prayer?

4 See Dlamini *et al.* (2015).

5 Blue theology is “a theology of water conservation” (Ferris 2014:195) that is shaped by ecotheology, feminist theology, liberation theology (Ferris 2014:198), and process theology (Ferris 2014:206). Stated somewhat differently, “[b]lue theology is a new branch of ecotheology that is emerging as a leading voice for conservation of all the world’s waters” (Ferris 2014:195).

evolves from water” in that there is no life beyond the “hydrological cycle” (De Gruchy 2010:198).⁶ In short, for De Gruchy, water *is* life, insofar as water is *life’s foundation*,⁷ *God’s special gift*,⁸ and a *divine symbol*⁹ (see Warmback 2012:34).

However, the notion “water of life” is by no means uncomplicated. The association of water with life raises numerous questions, including questions regarding water as gift given by the God of life, as illustrated in the kind of rhetoric evident in the responses of churches and religious communities to the lack of rain and lowering water reserves during the drought. Others have written extensively on rain and water symbolism in Southern African religious systems (Müller & Kruger 2013); water in the global economy (Peppard 2014); water and sewage (De Gruchy 2009; Conradie 2014); water and cholera (De Gruchy 2010); water and human dignity (Peppard 2016), and water in the liturgy (Guðmarsdóttir 2014). Already in this illustration of approaches it should become clear that water stands at the intersection of numerous issues and, in particular, at the intersection of economics and ecology (De Gruchy 2009:53; Warmback 2012:34). There are, in short, many interesting and important ways to approach a theological reflection on water. Such approaches may, however, need to take seriously not only ethics and life, but also rhetoric and doctrine.

The intuition that rhetoric may yet play a role in theological reflection on water would arguably be reflected in De Gruchy’s later theological

6 A longer quote might make this point even clearer: “There is only one stream of water. What passes through the bodies of humans passes through the bodies of animals, insects and plants. It flushes through our sanitation systems, flows through the rivers, seeps through the wetlands, rises to the heavens to become clouds, and returns to nourish us and all living things.” (De Gruchy 2010:198). This also comes to expression in De Gruchy’s use of what he calls “a Jordan River motif” (De Gruchy 2009:60-61), whereby he means the “image of standing before the Jordan River and taking responsibility for what it means to live in the land that one is entering” (De Gruchy 2009:60). However, this means “[r]ecognizing that ‘we all live downstream’, and that between the waters of life and the waters of death lies the path of human choice” (De Gruchy 2009:61). Indeed, the Jordan River motif “links the *living* water of the Sea of Galilee to the *dying* water of the Dead Sea” (De Gruchy 2009:61, original emphasis). See also Veldsman (2015:6-7), in particular footnote 18.

7 See De Gruchy (n.d.(a)).

8 See De Gruchy (n.d.(b)).

9 See De Gruchy (n.d.(c)).

work (Warmback 2012:34).¹⁰ In a paper subtitled “Theology in the time of cholera”, De Gruchy (2010:188) remarks that theological talk of water and Spirit (in reference to John 3:4-5) “lies at the heart of Christian faith” and yet takes on a more complicated dynamic when read “in the light of cholera”. This is significant, De Gruchy (2010:192) argues, because it challenges the association of water with *life* by illustrating the relationship of water to *death*.¹¹ This indicates

the juxtaposition of water and death, and the resultant cognitive shock that something we understand to be given by God – namely water – works not for life but for death. This point should destabilize any simple talk about “life” by theologians as if we know what it means (De Gruchy 2010:197).

Similarly, one can ask, not what *cholera* means,¹² but what *drought* means. It is important to ask such questions of meaning, argues De Gruchy (2010:197), “because theology is at heart a hermeneutical task” (see Russel 2007:183). This task includes the study of rhetoric, for “[h]ermeneutical theologies must inevitably rely on some relation to rhetoric, the ancient art

10 Warmback (2012:34, footnote 46) points out that De Gruchy turned to water in the last stage of his life. He writes that this “interest in water as an academic subject was shown in the paper he gave on 22 January 2009 to the Third World Forum on Liberation and Theology meeting on the theme “Water, Earth, Theology – for Another Possible World”, in Belém, northeast Brazil”. This address would form the basis for De Gruchy’s article (2009:1, footnote 1).

11 Yet, relating water to both life *and* death is by no means a recent contribution. Tillich (1948:104), for example, writes about water as follows: “[W]ater, on the one hand, is a symbol for the origin of life in the womb of the mother, which is a symbol for the creative source of all things, and ... on the other hand, it is a symbol of death – the return to the origin of things.”

12 De Gruchy (2010:192) argues that cholera is a sign of social dislocation that came in the wake of the industrial revolution and urbanisation, which caused water to become “something it was not”. De Gruchy (2010:192-195) makes four important remarks in his discussion of the availability of fresh water, as the water that gives life. First, the supply of fresh water is limited. Secondly, fresh water is unevenly distributed throughout the world. Thirdly, most of the available fresh water is used in industrial agriculture, or to grow food. Fourthly, fresh water is unevenly distributed with regards to social power, or to who has access to fresh water sources. He draws the conclusion that cholera outbreaks illustrate two aspects: it is the poor – as those without access to clean water and proper sanitation – who suffer most, and water causes death. It is interesting to note that Peppard (2016:421) makes a similar link between the water of life and fresh water – although she hastens to add that “[t]he focus on fresh water ought not to minimize the importance of saline or brackish water, which are also (though differently) vital”.

of persuasion” (Compier 1999:19). Imagination plays a pivotal role herein. By using the verb “imagining”, Kelsey (2005:43-44) means to describe the attempt

to grasp the whole of something in its singular and concrete particularity rather than by abstracting various aspects of it, concept by concept.¹³

This involves the recognition and description of rhetorical patterns amidst a complex whole (Kelsey 2005:98). In short,

because *religion* is imaginative ... and *theology* is hermeneutical ... [i]ts job is to *interpret* the metaphorical language of religious life and faith (Green 1998:134; original emphasis).

This includes asking such questions as: How do we do theology in a time of drought? How do we speak theologically about thirst and the water of life in a time of drought? Which rhetorical strategies are employed in interpreting the “water of life”? Is water “simply” (Tillich 1948:97) or “just” (Mikoski 2013; Peppard 2014) water?¹⁴

13 Indeed, “[w]hile the verb *imagine* can mean ‘to make up’ or invent, it can also mean ‘to grasp a concrete particular as some kind of whole’” (Kelsey 2005:43-44, original italics). Kelsey opts for this second sense of “imagination” and the act of “imagining”. For Kelsey (2005:97), “imagining” is not employed to formulate that which is “imaginary”: “fantastical, unreal, or false” (the first sense). Rather, “imagining” points to that which is ‘imaginative’: “insightful, advancing knowledge of the truth, or deepening understanding of reality” (the second sense) (Kelsey 2005:97). Kelsey (2005:98) argues that it is unnecessary and misleading to oppose reason and imagination, scientific inquiry and theology. Following Green (1998:65-66), Kelsey (2005:98) shows that there are three levels of philosophical inquiry into “imagination”, namely as it relates to experience, perception and interpretation.

14 Various other questions may be added to these: “What happens to water when the fluid images of water are transformed into theological language, symbols and sacraments? How much openness can the divine water systems tolerate, inscribed as they are by endless layers of texts, bodies and bodily desires?” (Guðmarsdóttir 2014:112). Perhaps, such questions should stand at the centre of theological reflection on water – as, interestingly, questions also characterise and structure the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The questions of the Samaritan woman reflect the politics of drinking, and it is through her that the reader is led to understand the water of life. For example, how is it that you – a Jew – asks me – a Samaritan woman – for a drink? (John 4:9) Where do you get the living water from? (John 4:11) Surely you are not greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, his sons and his animals? (John 4:12) The Samaritan woman

The conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman besides a well (John 4:7-15) is a classic example of the rhetorical ambiguity of water talk within the Christian faith.¹⁵ The notion “water of life” may immediately raise questions regarding meaning. Why the insistent association with life, particularly if there is also a clear association with death? Is there some special quality to this water? What could the qualification “living” imply? It is, therefore, as Peppard (2014:171) points out, “worth revisiting this particular well, and this particular woman, with a hydrological hermeneutic”.¹⁶

3. RHETORICAL INTERPLAY: THIRST, WATER, LIFE

Water talk is embedded in many biblical stories, for, as De Gruchy (2010:199) points out, “[m]any stories of the Bible would collapse if there were no river, no flood, no well, no pool, no sea, no fountain”. It is the association of the Bible with life, and life with water, that makes water such an important element in biblical texts (De Gruchy 2010:199). However, the association of water with life is – as De Gruchy (2010) and Veldsman (2015) have pointed out – by no means uncomplicated. A classic example of a biblical story wherein the notion “water of life” or “living water” is the site of confusion, contestation, and ultimately reinterpretation is that of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John.

In John 4, a thirsty Jesus¹⁷ approaches a Samaritan woman and asks her for a drink of water. Yet this is no simple or straightforward request. Rather,

becomes the hermeneutical guide through whom the readers’ questions can be addressed to Jesus.

- 15 This should by no means be interpreted as being the only, or best, or ideal water story in the Bible. Veldsman (2015:5) also points to other New Testament texts wherein water-related themes emerge – water as tears (Luke 7:44); water as sickness (Luke 14); water as medicine (1 Tim. 5:23), and water as purification and baptism (Matt. 3:1-6; Mark 1:4-5; John 1:26-33; Hebrews 10:22). However, I chose this specific text because it is a classic example of the rhetorical interplay evident in theological interpretations that invoke or employ water talk. Our theological struggles for the meaning of water amidst drought are reflected in the struggle for meaning in which Jesus and the Samaritan woman engage.
- 16 Some also describe this as “a cleansed hermeneutic” (see Williamson 2005:73-75), whereby biblical figures such as Miriam (Ex. 15:20-21), Anna (Luke 2:36-38), and the Samaritan woman emerge as proclaimers of the good news of God’s salvation (Williamson 2005:73-74).
- 17 Although the text itself does not refer to Jesus’ thirst, but rather to his weariness or tiredness (κεκοπιαχώς; John 4:6), Moore interprets the conversation about thirst, between the Samaritan woman and Jesus, *vis-à-vis* Jesus’ thirst on the

a conversation about the “water of life” ensues (De Wit 2008:44), wherein it becomes apparent that the underlying relationships between water, life, and thirst are rhetorically ambiguous and open for reinterpretation. At first, Jesus approaches the Samaritan woman with a request for water.¹⁸ The mutual experience of thirst draws Jesus and this unnamed woman together (De Wit 2008:43). However, not only does the shared experience of thirst *enable* the ensuing conversation on water, it also *frames* the conversation about water. It is, I would argue, of rhetorical significance in what follows as the contestation of what “water of life” means. The significance of the “water of life” is defined exactly in the characteristic or ability to satisfy thirst *permanently* – a quality that the water in the well does not share. A clear distinction between the Samaritan woman’s water and Jesus’ water, between well water and living water, is maintained in the experience of thirst – an experience that becomes the litmus test for distinguishing one kind of water from another.¹⁹

cross (John 19:28) (Peppard 2014:175; see Moore 1997). In Moore’s (1997:288, in Peppard 2014:176) words, “The hierarchical opposition established at the well is inverted at the cross, the ostensibly superior, pleromatic term (living water, Spirit) being shown to depend for its effective existence on the inferior, insufficient term (literal well-water) contrary to everything that the Gospel has led us to expect”. Indeed, “the reader arrives at the cross, then, only to be returned, in effect, to the well, carried by the current of a stream that flows equally between literality and figurality” (Moore 1997:292, in Peppard 2014:176). Peppard (2014:175) then asks: “Why is this so?”. She points out that there is a “mutual necessity” in John’s waters, so that “[w]ater for living and living waters depend on one another, inextricably” (Peppard 2014:176). Stated somewhat differently: “Well water and living water, matter and spirit, are all part of the same flow” (Peppard 2014:176).

18 Others have written extensively on the cultural dynamics evident in, and the theological significance of Jesus’ approach of, and interaction with the Samaritan woman. See, in particular, the excellent study of John 4 by De Wit (2008), in his book *“My God,” she said, “ships make me so crazy”* (on empirical hermeneutics, interculturality, and biblical texts). See also an excellent chapter in Peppard (2014:171-183). In this instance, I focus only on the rhetorical interplay in the water talk of John 4, and not on other interesting perspectives or studies on this text.

19 In the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, the experience of thirst is embedded in the politics of drinking. The rhetorical interplay between thirst, water, and life is possible because the Samaritan woman misunderstands Jesus’ water talk. The negotiation of meaning that ensues is, however, neither simple nor straightforward – even less so if the power relations between the woman and Jesus (between woman and man, Samaritan and Jew, drawer of water and giver of life) are taken into consideration. One meaning (spiritual thirst and metaphorical water) wins out over another (physical thirst and literal

It is worth considering some of the many meanings of the “living water” – that is the topic of conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman – in greater detail.²⁰ The *New Interpreter’s Bible* notes that ὕδωρ ζῶν (John 4:10) may have two possible meanings, namely “fresh, running water” (such as spring water) or “life-giving water” (Keck 1995:566). Perhaps both meanings are intended in this instance (Keck 1995:566). Indeed, throughout the Bible, “living water” “is water that moves, is fresh, and flows from springs, as against stagnant water from cisterns or jugs” (Thiselton 2015:41). However, other meanings are also read into the portrayal of “living water” in this story. One such a meaning is that of “spiritual water”, which is regarded as superior in quality and function to the water in the well (Ngewa 2006:1259). Indeed, the fresh water may allude to the Spirit (Thiselton 2015:286; Brown 1966:170)²¹ or to Jesus himself (Brown 1966:170). Some would even describe the water of life as “heavenly water”, insofar as it grants eternal life (Brown 1966:177) or “satisfies our spiritual thirst as the pleasures of this world never will” (Augustine) (Elowsky 2006:146, 152).

water). Although thirst and water are folded into the portrayal of salvation as life, it is a *particular kind* of thirst and a *particular kind* of water that shapes the soteriology expressed in this instance. Yet the woman’s interpretation of thirst and water is not totally eradicated. It remains necessary to Jesus’ interpretation of thirst and water, in that the metaphorical interpretation of the water of life would become incoherent if not for prior understanding of literal, physical water. The rhetorical interplay between thirst, water, and life relies upon the negotiation between these two interpretations, in that the portrayal of salvation (never thirsting again, eternal life) becomes possible only amidst the contestation of the meaning of the water of life. The litmus test provided for these two interpretations is the experience of *not* thirsting after drinking the water. Stated somewhat differently, the water that gives life must satisfy the longing for God and fullness of life.

- 20 It should, however, be noted from the outset that there is a great variety of meanings read into this text, and specifically regarding what “living water” means. De Wit (2008:48) points out that no less than 50 different meanings were found in an empirical study of 57 bible study groups from 16 different countries (see also Van Dyk 2004). These would include the interpretations of “[l]iving water as message, as Gospel, as Word of God, as the Holy Spirit, as an image of personal faith, as redemption, as Jesus himself, as the Kingdom” – as well as “the literal, physical meaning [of] water moving and flowing” (De Wit 2008:48).
- 21 Early commentators such as Augustine would follow this interpretation – namely, that, in this instance, as in John 7:37-39, the Holy Spirit is the water that satisfies thirst (Elowsky 2006:146). Stated somewhat differently, it is the Spirit “who is the fountain of eternal life” (Ambrose) and “which gushes forth from within” (Apollinaris) (Elowsky 2006:146).

Another meaning may be that the stale or stagnant or “flat” water of the well is contrasted with the much preferred fresh, running water of a spring (Augustine, Heracleon) (Elowsky 2006:146, 149), as “‘water of life’ can mean flowing, running water, in contrast to stale supplies” (Thiselton 2015:380). Augustine judges that “[w]ater collected from rain in pools and cisterns is not called living water”, because it stands disconnected or separated from its source and is not “taken as it flows” (Elowsky 2006:150). Perhaps the water of life that John has in mind is not only fresh, but possibly also regarded as vibrant and active – it “wells up” or “leaps” or “jumps” (ἀλλομένου; John 4:14), a description which “is used of quick movement by living beings” with “the only instance of its being applied to the action of water” found in this instance (Brown 1966:171).²²

Yet the Samaritan woman wonders where one can get this living water (John 4:12). In response to her question, Jesus portrays water not only as life, but also as a gift freely given. On the one hand, this story illustrates the giver of the gift. The water of life is the gift that Jesus gives (ἐγὼ δώσω),²³ whereas the water in the well is the gift that Jacob gave (Ngewa 2006:1259). Alternatively, Jesus is the gift of God who, in turn, gives the water of life (Haenchen 1984:220). On the other hand, the story also points to that which the gift itself gives. The water from the well gives temporary relief from thirst (John 4:13), whereas the water of life gives eternal life (John 4:14) (Ngewa 2006:1260).²⁴ In short, the water of life is a gift given, for God *gives* Jesus who *gives* water that *gives* life (Keck 1995:566). In this instance, the language of gift-giving is, in other words, soteriological – both in reference to the Giver and the nature of the gift – so that the living water comes to be embedded in the salvation that God gives (Haenchen 1984:220).

22 This contrast is, however, somewhat problematic, for, as Haenchen (1984:220) points out, the references to “well” and “fountain” “are used interchangeably without affecting the meaning”.

23 Several commentators describe the water as God’s gift, however, including Augustine, who points out that “elsewhere in the Gospel itself ... this water is called the gift of God” (Elowsky 2006:149; see also Ngewa 2006:1259; Haenchen 1984:220; Brown 1966:170-171).

24 However, as Peppard (2014:175) points out, “the mainstream interpretation of the woman at the well yielded dualisms – between living water and well water, Jesus and the Samaritan woman, purity and impurity, spirit and flesh”. Not only is the text often read dualistically, but “[i]nterpreters throughout Christian history have been tempted to value the former (purity, spirit, living water, Jesus) and devalue the latter (impurity, flesh, well water, woman)” (Peppard 2014:175).

An important rhetorical dynamic, in this instance, is the association of the water of life with the sacrament of baptism.²⁵ The grammar or language of “drinking” and “baptism” are closely linked in the interpretations of early commentators such as Caesarius (Elowsky 2006:146), in that “a drink functions as baptism in living water” (Haenchen 1984:220). The telling contrast between drinking water routinely (that does not satisfy thirst once and for all) (4:13) and drinking water that satisfies thirst forever (4:14) points toward the longing that only God – in Jesus – can satisfy (Haenchen 1984:220).²⁶ Whereas drinking becomes a metaphor for baptism, thirst becomes a metaphor for the longing for salvation. Maximus of Turin describes *Jesus’* thirst not only as *physical thirst* (“He thirsted, to be sure ... for human drink ... for the water of this world”), but also as *metaphorical thirst* (“He thirsted ... for salvation ... for the redemption of the human race”) (Elowsky 2006:147). In this instance, water points to the salvation that God gives freely, by grace, and the good news of salvation that comes to expression in the rhetorical ambiguity of the water of life. In short, “the drink given is the gospel” (Eusebius of Caesarea) (Elowsky 2006:149) and the sacrament of baptism is the remedy of salvation (Caesarius of Arles) (Elowsky 2006:150).

However, the issue in this instance is not only the salvation that God gives, but also the Samaritan woman as a *mediator of salvation*. For

25 In an essay on “Nature and sacrament”, Tillich (1948:102-103) reflects on the element of water in the sacrament of baptism, and argues that natural elements such as water are the bearers of salvation. Nature, he argues (1948:102), must be interpreted “in the context of the history of salvation”, because in this way “natural objects become bearers of transcendent power and meaning”. He argues for the necessity of water in the sacrament of baptism – against the views that the use of water in administering baptism is “arbitrary” or even “accidental” (see Tillich 1948:95) – by holding to “[a] special character or quality” or natural power of water, which makes water suitable “to become the bearer of sacral power and thus also to become a sacramental element” (Tillich 1948:96). However, this does not mean that water *by itself* is enough to bear the good news of God’s salvation (see Tillich 1948:110-111). Water must be accompanied by meaningful language (and, in the case of baptism, the Word of God, in particular) (Tillich 1948:101-102), because “[n]o sacrament, in Christian thought, can be understood apart from its relation to the new being in Jesus as the Christ” (Tillich 1948:102). Indeed, Tillich argues that, when the natural element of water is brought into a relation with historical salvation in Christ, it becomes the bearer of sacral power, the symbol of divine presence bubbling in water.

26 Early commentators would even describe this water as that which quenches “the fiery darts of the wicked one (Chrysostom) as well as the fires of Gehenna through baptism (Maximus of Turin)” (Elowsky 2006:146, 153).

whoever is led to God by Jesus through his Spirit becomes himself (*sic*) a spring, a bearer of salvation for others (Haenchen 1984:220).

This is, of course, fulfilled when the Samaritan woman brings her city to faith (John 4:39-42) (Haenchen 1984:221). She brings a gift not of water, but of grace, holiness, and “the fullness of Christ” (Maximus of Turin) (Elowsky 2006:147). The Samaritan woman is justified by the salvation freely given, but she is also sanctified by faith in Christ (Maximus of Turin) (Elowsky 2006:147). “[T]he living water of the saving gospel” justifies and sanctifies such as the Samaritan woman (Eusebius of Ceasarea) (Elowsky 2006:149). Again, the living water points to the water of baptism, which justifies the sinner and vivifies the saved (Maximus of Turin) (Elowsky 2006:153).

The rhetorical interplay between drought, thirst, and water remain deeply embedded in the Johannine emphasis on *life* (see Brown 2015). The recognition that the “water of life” functions as a soteriological metaphor follows the rhetorical effect of the persuasive conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Without Jesus’ request for water, without the Samaritan woman’s misunderstanding, and without the inclusion of strategic questions by both characters throughout, it is scarcely possible to be beguiled into the soteriological (re)interpretation of water that Jesus offers. Water becomes the bearer of salvation, as the gift freely given in response to the experience of thirst. Stated somewhat differently, the rhetoric of the water of life becomes a soteriological image of, or metaphor for human and ecological flourishing.

4. WATER OF LIFE FOR HUMAN AND ECOLOGICAL FLOURISHING?

Rhetorical theology is shaped by the realities wherein it must seek meaning and (re)interpretation. In a time of drought, questions regarding the theological meaning of water take on a different dynamic, which includes careful, but critical consideration of spiritualised interpretations, that strips water of its wateriness and approaches water as pure metaphor. A rhetorical theological analysis raises questions regarding how talk of water performs. For instance: Is anything but very literal water enough amidst experiences of a very literal drought? Does the promise of (the metaphorical) water of life not ring hollow when crops fail, food becomes scarce, entire flocks of cattle and sheep have to be slaughtered, and water restrictions are put in place? Is it not the Samaritan woman’s interpretation of water – rather than Jesus’ interpretation of water – that is needed in a

time of drought, when the literal thirst of human beings, animals and plants is urgent and unavoidable?

The reflections on the rhetorical interplay between drought, thirst, and water represent one attempt to (re)read a story, wherein different meanings of water are contested and negotiated. I have argued that such an analysis of the theological rhetoric of water relies on imagination, and I have pointed out that imagination involves recognising and tracing rhetorical patterns, for it “is the means by which we are able to represent anything not directly accessible” (Kelsey 2005:101, quoting Green 1998:66). Such an imagination plays a transformative role, in that it

enables us to retrieve memory in order to re-describe and give fresh and meaningful form to human experiences of reality, to find the words and images necessary to express meaning that derives from seeing things differently (De Gruchy 2013:28).

Moreover, an imagination that has to do with the flourishing of life calls for “creative”, “open”, “healing” and “socially transformative” responses to reality. In short, imagination gives birth to words and deeds that speak to human and ecological realities and “cry for *the flourishing of life*” (De Gruchy 2013:29; my emphasis – NM).

The exploration of soteriological images such as the water of life is, therefore, inseparable from the quest for language to express what it means for human beings and the ecology to flourish. After all, such images “express the soteriological reality” (Van der Watt 2005:520) and

[d]ifferent soteriologies ... give varying accounts of what people are saved from, what they are saved for, and the means or mediators of salvation (Sherry 2003:19).

I have pointed out elsewhere (see Marais 2015) that, even though the language of human flourishing is not exclusive to theologians, this way of speaking about the good life, the full life, meaningful lives of human beings, implies a move toward critical engagement with own theological resources. A time of drought calls for “blue theological responses” (Ferris 2014:211), with the protection of the aquatic environment and water conservation in mind (Ferris 2014:211), and inviting “new methodologies for reunderstanding water’s spiritual significance” (Ferris 2014:211). An imaginative reading of John 4, with attentiveness to how the theological rhetoric of water performs in a time of drought, represents such a methodological exercise in critical engagement with the rhetorically significant conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

Moreover, how the good news of salvation is portrayed in a time of drought, when water is scarce and the most vulnerable of living beings suffer this lack, brings rhetoric and ethics, as well as doctrine and life into a dynamic communicative process. The water of life encompasses, in other words, *many* meanings of living water, including Jesus' water of life and the Samaritan woman's water from the well. The church, as the community marked by the water of baptism, continues the rhetorical negotiation between thirst, water, and life amidst such death-dealing realities as cholera and drought.²⁷

5. CONCLUSION

The rhetoric of thirst, drought, and life – much like #rainmustfall – is perhaps intentionally ambiguous, and thus open to a variety of interpretations and reinterpretations. The rhetorical interplay between the notions of “thirst”, “water”, and “life” is, however, particularly evident in the conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman besides the well. In this instance, the water “takes on a new, metaphorical sense”, which is suggested by the ambiguous term “living water” (Haenchen 1984:230). This is one small example of the rhetorical ambiguity of water talk in a biblical text, where the same term “water of life” may be understood as “spring water” (by the Samaritan woman) or “eternal life” (by Jesus) (Haenchen 1984:230), and where water talk becomes a site of contestation and reinterpretation. It is the fruitful *misunderstanding* of the Samaritan woman – “spiritual thirst that the woman takes to mean literal thirst” (Guðmarsdóttir 2014:111) – that makes the rhetorical interplay between thirst, water, and life possible.

Moreover, in this instance, the theological rhetoric of water is embedded in soteriological imagination, which not only shapes the way in which complicated notions such as thirst and drought are understood, but also provides an intended effect on its readers. The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, on which modern readers “listen in”, is meant not to confuse or discourage, but to comfort and persuade those who participate in the rhetorical dynamics of the story. In short, the good news of the gospel is that the water of life is freely given by God, with nothing less than abundant life – or ecological and human flourishing – as its apparent intended focus. A theological rhetoric of water is perhaps

27 De Gruchy and Chirongoma argue that, of the many struggles that the church still faces (see De Gruchy 2005) “[t]he Christian struggle for human flourishing” (De Gruchy & Chirongoma 2008:300) must be included. This implies “[witnessing] to the gospel of life in the midst of the politics of death” (De Gruchy & Chirongoma 2008:300).

exactly what is needed in a time of drought, as an exercise in remembering – through the sacrament of baptism – the significance of the giving God who wills human and ecological flourishing.

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