Reflections on the global water crisis in dialogue with Revelation 17—harlot, hegemony and H₂O

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Introduction

This essay is born out of reflection on three recent publications that address the global water crisis currently facing humanity, a scarcity arising from overuse and pollution that threaten the ecosystems, health and livelihoods of billions, particularly of the world’s poor and vulnerable. Climate change is an additional factor, with unpredictable and more extreme weather patterns threatening an already dire situation, affecting the amount of water that will be available in future.

The first publication is the United Nations’ Human Development Report, *Beyond scarcity: power, poverty, and the global water crisis* (2006). The report highlights how the beginnings and growth of human civilisation have been dependent on access to clean water and on the ability to harness the potential of water as a productive resource—water for households and water for production. Yet, today large sections of humanity no longer have access to clean water or sanitation. This lack, argues the report, is not due to absolute shortages of physical supply; instead, the roots of the crisis can be traced to poverty, inequality and unequal power relationships, as well as flawed water management policies that exacerbate scarcity.

The second is a recent volume of the journal *Interface: a forum for theology in the world* (2011), published under the title, *Water: a matter of life and death*. This issue of *Interface* presents a series of essays by biblical scholars, scientists and theologians who seriously engage with understandings of water ‘as a spiritual well and also as a physical resource for all of life on [Earth]’ (2011: 5); essays that call for “an ecological conversion” in Western Christianity: to change the dominant attitude toward nature’ (4).

The third is the much anticipated revised draft of the Murray-Darling Basin¹ Authority, *Proposed Basin Plan* (May 2012), in which the Authority has effectively condemned the entire river system to death. Arguments over minimum flows down the Murray-Darling

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¹ The Murray-Darling Basin is defined by the catchment areas of the Murray and Darling rivers and their many tributaries. Comprising 23 main river valleys, the Basin extends over 1 million km² of south-eastern Australia, covering three-quarters of New South Wales, more than half of Victoria, significant portions of Queensland and South Australia, and all of the Australian Capital Territory. The Basin includes more than 77,000 km of rivers, creeks and watercourses, and an estimated 30,000 wetlands (Crabb: 1997).
river—from its headwaters in Queensland to the Murray mouth in South Australia—have persisted for more than a century, since the time of Australian Federation in 1901. Yet, while human claims on basin resources have grown since then until present-day levels, the science used to calculate the volume of water needed to sustain a healthy river has remained the same. Even assuming higher-end margins of error, scientists agree that the declared headline water-flow figure of 2,750 GL is too little to keep the river healthy. At best, the revised plan represents a compromise between competing user interests: it is a political solution that inevitably favours the strongest voices.

Reflections arising from my reading have involved a dialogue with certain water references in the book of Revelation; especially chapter 17, a text that not only reveals the fate of Rome due to its conquest and subjugation of water but anticipates God’s vision of a renewed Earth—New Jerusalem—characterised ultimately in Revelation 22 as a place and time of ecological balance with universal access to a river of life that runs through it.

It is my aim to evaluate Revelation 17 in light of ecojustice principles basic to the approach of writers in the Earth Bible Project (Habel, 2000). In this essay, the principle of interconnectedness—’Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival’ (principle 2)—informs the readings and reflections that follow. In addition, the Earth Bible affirmations of the intrinsic worth of ‘the universe, Earth and all its components’ (principle 1) and the principle of purpose of ‘the universe, Earth and all its components’ (principle 4) are considered basic for my analysis and interpretations. It is intended that an examination of this text from the perspective of eco-justice principles should not only dispel the notion that ‘the death of Earth [and its components may be] considered inevitable in a book such as Revelation’ (Habel 2000: 49), but give further insight to what it means to do theology at a time in human history when our rivers are becoming something they are not: waters of death.

The nature of water

What is water? To the ancient mind water was a living entity, mysteriously both a source of life and a vital organ within the Earth’s biosphere. The legends and myths of many peoples, including civilisations of the Ancient Near East, relate the appearance of water in the course of events that formed the universe. Perhaps the elusiveness and fluidity of water provided an effective image for the pre-scientific mind to convey ideas of formlessness and confusion from which the world was said to have emerged.

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4 In Greek mythology Oceanos was considered the origin of all things (Homer, Il. 14.200, 246) and springs and rivers were thought to be the habitat of river-gods and nymphs (Il. 21.131; 23.147). Compare the revered nature of the Nile, as holy and a source of healing (Clement of Alexandria, Strom. 4.4.37.1; Apuleius, Metam. 11.10–11).
Twenty-five centuries ago, the lyric poet Pindar referred to water as the chief of all elements (*ariston men hydōr*). This was the era when the pre-Socratic philosophers engaged with questions about the origin of life and the universe, attempting to identify the originating substance(s). Thales of Miletus, one of the seven sages of ancient Greece—arguably the first philosopher of the Greek tradition, and father of science—taught that ‘all things are water.’ Anaximenes claimed that air was the primary substance of all matter; Heraclitus said it was fire; Anaximander proposed as his primary element an unlimited primordial mass; Empedocles concluded that all matter arises from four elements: water, earth, air, and fire. Legend tells that the Daoist philosopher Lao-tzu and his disciple Chuang-tzu, contemporaries of the Greek theorists, referred to water as the blood of the earth that flows through its muscles and veins. The rhythm and properties of water were taught as a model for human behaviour.

Extensive information about the place of water in ancient society, culture, religion, and philosophy is widely available in encyclopaedias and other reference works. There is no need to rehearse here what is available elsewhere. However, the existence of such a body of materials serves as a reminder that modern interpreters cannot fully explain the image of water in ancient texts and rituals without considering the totality of the thought-world and social context in which references to water appear.

For example, to the Jews of ancient Palestine water was considered important and precious. Both Pliny the Elder and Josephus comment that, apart from the Jordan River, reliable and constant sources of water were rare. The establishment of human settlements beyond the Jordan valley was dependant on natural springs, or wells that tapped subterranean aquifers. A guaranteed supply of flowing water is often used by biblical writers as a symbol for God’s goodness, and muddied waters as a symbol of wickedness (Prov 25:26; Ezek 32:2,13). Lack of water or the refusal to share water often resulted in conflict. The significance of water was further reflected in social and religious rituals. Water was provided to wash the feet of guests and to refresh strangers and

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5 Pindar, Ol. 1.1.
6 Aristotle, Metaph, 1.983b.
9 See, for example, the pioneering six volume series edited by Terje Tvedt and Terje Oestigaard, entitled, A History of Water. Each volume presents articles from leading international scholars exploring the social, cultural, political, religious, historical, economic and technological aspects of water—from ancient times until the present day.
10 Pliny, Nat. 5.70–71; 31.24; Josephus, BJ 1.395; 3.506–21; 4.458, 608, 661.
11 Gen 26:18–19; Num 24:7; Deut 8:7; 11:11; 1 Sam 9:11.
12 Ps 104:10; Isa 41:8; John 4:14.
passers-by (Gen 17:4; 24:32,43). It was used to purify the body and household utensils,\textsuperscript{14} to signify repentance (Lam 2:19) and cleansing from sin,\textsuperscript{15} and in sacrificial libations.\textsuperscript{16}

In the New Testament, water is a basic human item. References to water are both literal and metaphorical; a symbolic reading being most common in John, 1 John, and Revelation. Literal references concern the vital need for water and the pain and death where there is none (Mk 9:41; 14:13; Lk 16:24; 22:10; Jas 3:12; Rev 8:10; 11:6; 14:7; 16:4–5, 12; 21:6; 22:1,17), as well as the threat of unrestrained Earth (Matt 8:32; 14:28–29; Mk 5:13; Lk 8:24–25; 1 Pet 3:20; 2 Pet 3:5–6) and the use of water for cleansing (Matt 27:24; Lk 7:44; Jn 2:7; 5:4; 13:5).

However, to the modern mind water is a colourless, odourless substance that can be reduced to a simple formula: $\text{H}_2\text{O}$, or described merely in terms of its physical properties—its specific heat and surface tension. How is it that we have come to think of water in this way?

In Western history the so-called ‘scientific revolution’ that began in the late Renaissance era and continued through the late eighteenth century, and the Age of Reason or the Enlightenment that followed, produced a paradigm shift that cannot be overestimated. The repudiation of ‘primitive’ and ‘superstitious’ perceptions, including the de-emphasising of notions of the sacred, resulted in an eventual ‘commodification’ of water. Modern scientific method with its dominant conceptual worldview, the modern state, technology, and politics communicate an idea of water that has helped permit its manipulation and control on a vast scale, with corresponding effects on human society.

Within Australia, historical patterns of water use and regulation since white settlement reflect broader social values. Water usage has been closely linked to land-use settlement patterns. As Godden (2008: 169) summarises:

\begin{quote}
The patterns of production introduced under colonial rule supplied food and fibre to a rapidly industrialising Europe were premised upon the ‘colonial earth’ and its resources largely being treated as ‘free goods’. This was accompanied by economies of scale in the infrastructure development under the increasingly sophisticated regime of land and resource administration and utilisation…Integral to such an emerging administration system and resource-exploitation program that produced the ‘classic’ nineteenth-century colonial model of centre-periphery governance focused upon the colonial capital cities was the necessity to dispense with the riparian doctrine of water rights…[and replace it with] an appropriation model that adopted a very simplistic instigation of individual rights and associated allocation principles over a common resource.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} Num 19:9–18; Ezek 36:25; cf. Heb 10:22.
\textsuperscript{16} 1 Sam 7:6; Zech 14:7; cf. John 7:37–38.
That the Murray-Darling river basin, like much of the world today, faces what many describe as a ‘water crisis’ indicates the need to rethink the nature and use of water. Some suggest, by reinvesting water with social content—by considering water’s social nature—will enable a fresh approach to a fundamental problem. After all, humans live in worlds of water: more than sixty-percent of the human body is water. Water is used to define human life-worlds, and these worlds are sustained through water.

**Water and Roman imperial power**

The annals of human history show how the control of water has always been a strategic factor in the establishment of civilisations, both ancient and modern. The fluctuations of the hydrological cycle—the amount of precipitation in geographical regions, whether in the form of rain or snow, when it occurs, the length of time it remains in rivers, lakes and subterranean aquifers—has profoundly influenced the world of human history and habitation. The extent to which humankind has exploited and controlled the Earth water cycle through the building of cisterns, aqueducts, dams, and hydraulic systems has been no mere demonstration of technological sophistication, but a performative symbol of power.

[T]he control of water has been at the very heart of state building and imperial legitimacy since time immemorial…by such demonstrations of power [over nature] humans have also been subjugated to those who conquered nature. This relation between water and power is best exemplified in the great irrigation civilisations of the world. The control of [water] had not only been symbols of power, but how particular ideas about water have established social systems and structures creating hierarchies and distributing wealth. (Tvedt & Oestigaard: 11)

The material reality of Rome was unavoidable for first-century peoples (Zanker 1988; Brunt 1990; Horsley 1997). ‘From Spain to Syria, everybody knew about Rome, what it stood for, what it did, and who was in charge of it’ (Wright: 64). Roman roads, public works, aqueducts, civic monuments, statues, coinage, games and theatre all contributed to an imperial propaganda machine that communicated a single and powerful message—the inevitability and rightness of the imperial regime.

The Romans were not the only ancient civilization to control water by means of aqueducts (Latin: *aqua=*water and *ducere*=to lead), but the extensive reach of the Roman Empire has left ruins throughout Europe and the Middle East, making the Roman aqueduct system the most famous of its time. From completion of the earliest known aqueduct in 321 bce the Romans continued building aqueducts until 226 ce. Eventually, 200 cities throughout the Roman Empire received water through the aqueduct system, and the city of Rome had 11 aqueducts to supply its citizens, including the *Aqua Novus*, which extended for 95 kilometres from the city centre. The system consisted of 575 kilometres of ducts, which

17 Together with the *Aqua Claudia*, the *Aqua Novus* was begun by Emperor Caligula in 38 ce and completed in 52 ce by Claudius.
included 48 kilometres of above-ground arches that carried 190 million litres of water per day. In addition to building aqueducts for Rome, the Romans also built aqueducts for regions throughout the empire, including France, Spain, and Northern Africa.

A significant document on Roman aqueducts has survived from the first-century CE. This unique source, *De aquaeductu urbis Romae* (‘On the water supply of the city of Rome’), dates from 97 CE and was written by Sextus Julius Frontinus, Water Commissioner of Rome. Beyond providing a historical overview and technical descriptions of the water distribution system, *De aquaeductu* gives a unique insight into the politics of water administration. Modern scholarship assumes that as an imperial administrator and politician Frontinus wrote with several purposes and audiences in mind (Bruun: 10–17, 174–89, 381–4; Evans: 1–12). Yet, while scholarship may question certain details in his reports, it cannot ignore them.

Frontinus details the laws and penalties that governed the use and maintenance of the aqueducts. He even highlights a law he introduced to require water users to obtain licences. Water licences could not be inherited. Heavy fines were levied for making any breaks in channels, conduits, arches, pipes, tubs, reservoirs or basins. In addition, laws also dealt with water claims and obligations of ‘rivals’. In Roman law this very word denoted those who shared the water of a rivus, or irrigation channel. It implies jealously guarded rights and frequent disputes.

The question of competing rights frequently arose between private land ownership and planned development corridors for public works such as aqueducts. ‘[A]cquisition of private land for public roads and aqueducts was a matter of persuasion and influence, but never of legally sanctioned compulsion’ (Taylor: 53–127). Livy (*History of Rome* 40.51.7) reports an instance when a landowner halted an aqueduct project in advanced stages of construction by denying egress through his lands. Faced with no agreed resolution the project was abandoned.

Historians have generally assumed that the primary purpose of Roman aqueducts was to supply fresh drinking water for growing urban populations (Ferenczy: 36–37; Cornell: 373). Yet, there are some scholars (Evans: 65–74; Hodge: 5–7) who doubt that ensuring a guaranteed supply of drinking water was the primary motivation for the first aqueduct, and arguably for later aqueducts as well. Faletti (150) concludes that the private sponsorship of Rome’s first aqueduct by Appius Claudius Caecus had multiple overall motives, including efforts to empower [his] voting base, to revive his family name for posterity, to strengthen Rome’s economy, and to quicken a Roman drive toward territorial expansion. An analysis of the location, size and prominence of monumental architecture and public works over time—including the expanding water distribution system—reveals a political culture that valued the control of water and land and proclaimed its dominion over nature and humanity alike.

Frontinus writes four centuries after construction of the first Roman aqueduct, the *Aqua Appia* (312 BCE); an eponymous public works project sponsored by Appius Claudius Caecus (c.340-273 BCE) who was a politician from a wealthy patrician family.
In ancient Greek cities such as Athens, Corinth, and Megara, the provision and guarantee of water supply was associated with the power and benevolence of political rulers. Cisterns and fountains were promoted as gifts to a city: symbols that political leaders were caring for the polis, and symbols that the city was not only wealthy enough to afford them but talented enough to construct them. Pausanias, the second century CE Greek traveller and geographer, once declared that no city had the right to call itself a city unless it had at its centre a fountain (*Description of Greece* 1.40). Yet such a claim pales in comparison to the cultural elitism of Sextus Julius Frontinus, Water Commissioner of Rome:

> I ask you! Just compare with the vast monuments of this vital aqueduct network those useless Pyramids, or the good-for-nothing tourist attractions of the Greeks! (*De aquaeductu*, I.16 (97 CE), trans Trevor Hodge (2002: 1))

Roman imperial control and domestication of basic natural resources, such as water, eventually made the human population throughout the Empire dependent upon the distribution system and state institutions that created it; rather than on nature and the gods. Aqueducts created among citizens of the Empire an illusion of total dependency on the state for even the most basic of human needs. Delaine (2002: 205) maintains that imperial architecture eventually became a replacement for natural and divine providence. While aqueducts were extremely expensive to build and maintain, the symbolic message they helped deliver was considered by wealthy elites and the Julio-Claudian Emperors as well worth their cost. Aqueducts proved an effective form of propaganda tailored to the masses.

As the Empire expanded, visual statements in monumental architectural terms were exported into the colonies to signify Rome’s extended wealth, supremacy, and permanence. This message was also communicated among the urban poor and people living on the land, by means of coins. Most Roman coins make reference to historical events, many to military conquests, but all were produced to disseminate imperial propaganda. Coins were the newspapers of the day. Emperors minted coins to publicise what they had achieved, wanted to achieve, or simply to make themselves and their image made known to the furthest reaches of the empire.

In his book *Monumental coins*, Marvin Tameanko describes four coins minted in the city of Rome which feature depictions of aqueducts (Tameanko: 90–93). These examples do not provide compelling or extensive evidence, but the metal content and value of these coins:

19 Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.14.1; Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.15.3-5
20 Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 2.3.3
21 Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.40.1
22 A Republican *As* minted by Gaius Marcius Censorinus in 88 BCE, which shows two *arcurationes* converted into a triumphal arch; an *As* of Trajan, struck between 104–111 CE, which depicts his own aqueduct, the Aqua Traiana; an *As* of Severus Alexander circa 226 CE which shows an aqueduct and a *Nymphaeum*; and a *Denarius* of Marcus Philippus from 56 BCE commemorating the construction of the Aqua Marcia by his ancestor Marcus Rex.
coins lend support to an interpretation that they were designed for the lower classes. Except for the Phillipus coin they are all bronze Ases, the lowest coin denomination used in Roman currency. The urban poor and people living on the land appear to be the social groups most likely to handle and use Ases, since the coin had far too little value to ever be used by wealthy elites. This numismatic evidence supports the idea that the Roman state attempted to reach everyday citizens with their message of dependence on every level. Since aqueducts were a primary medium for the dissemination of this message, it makes sense that aqueducts would appear on those coins which the propaganda’s target audience would be most likely to handle and use—the bronze As.

A territorial understanding of Empire secured through military occupation will always be essential to make sense of the Roman Empire, but the largest part of the Empire was maintained through hegemony that was dependent upon a complex, interwoven paradigm of socio-political power to achieve and maintain its command and control.

More than only direct military action the Romans sustained and wielded the imperium through a combination of recourse to force, social structures, and systems as well as through ideological, imperial propaganda. Like other (earlier and later) empires, it propounded a sense of moral virtue and beneficence, claiming to exist and function with a vision of reordering the world’s power relations for the sake and betterment of all. (Punt: 1)

It was claimed that without the benevolent leadership of the Emperor no part of the world could prosper. Just as the body depends on the governance of the mind, ‘Rome possessed justice and had the obligation to share it with the rest of the world’ (Wright: 63). Ancient historical texts provide evidence that citizens in the provinces were encouraged to honour the Emperors, and express thankfulness and allegiance to Rome. Pliny declares in his Natural History (II 3.39) that the Roman Empire was the ‘nurse and mother of all the lands…and joined together scattered empires,’ implying that Rome had established a common homeland (communis patria) for all citizens. This suggests that the numerous political and economic improvements, at least based on Roman standards, put in place after the conquest of the East by the Roman Empire, brought prosperity and peace to these impoverished or ‘barbaric’ regions.

**A vision of water emancipation**

> Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk.’ (Rev 17:1–2, nrsV)

A majority of scholars read the Babylon vision in Revelation as a political critique against Roman imperial exploitation.  

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23 For extensive bibliographic detail, see Rossing, 1999.
political reading is the 'angelic' invitation in 17:1, ‘Come, I will show you the judgement of the great whore’; a clear reprise of those mighty voices of heaven that sound following the seventh trumpet, ‘the time has come ... for destroying the destroyers of the Earth’ (11:18). Rome claims sovereignty over the entire earth—the people, land and sea—yet, Revelation gives voice to the cries of all Earth creatures. Their cry is anticipated in the celebratory anthem of the heavenly choir in 16:17 (gegonen—‘it is done’), but finally it is heard as the voice of a great multitude, as the voice of many waters: hos phōnēn hydatōn pollōn (19:1,6).

The mention of an angel in the opening verses of Revelation 17 serves to connect this chapter thematically with the seven bowl judgements of God poured out on Earth (Rev 16); and, also, to connect the entire chapter with a larger section of Revelation dealing with the demise and destruction of Babylon-Rome (17:1 – 19:10). The thematic link made with the bowl visions of Revelation 16 characterises Revelation 17 as being ‘related to them as an enlargement photograph is to the whole’ (Rollof: 193). Indeed, there is much to commend the view that Revelation 17 is an example of a particular kind of visual description known as ekphrasis. The goal of this literary form, created by the Greeks, was to make the reader envision the thing described as if it were physically present. Often, an ekphrasis appeared as an excursus within a literary narrative. In many cases, however, the subject never actually existed, making the ekphrastic description a demonstration of both the creative imagination and the skill of the writer.

In the Roman period ekphrasis became a relatively popular literary form. By the second century ad descriptions of paintings were frequently used to introduce entire compositions or large sections of compositions ... [For example] the Tabula of Cebes (first century ad) consists of a lengthy discussion of the contents and significance of a picture on a votive tablet in a temple; the work is essentially a discussion of popular morality. (Aune: 923-24)

In Revelation 17, the writer of the Apocalypse employs the literary conventions of ekphrasis as a framework for his vision and interpretation, presenting an allegorical comment on the mistreatment and subjugation of Earth by the hegemonic power of Rome. Rather than arguing as some do that the writer provides a visual description of an actual object of art, sculpture or monument, I suggest a more immediate object was foremost in the writer’s mind: a bronze coin.

Several scholars (Castagnoli: 1953; Beauvery: 1983; Bergmeier: 1988; Aune: 1998) suggest a Roman coin minted around the year 71ce in the province of Asia, during the reign of

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24 Interpreting angels are standard figures in Jewish apocalyptic writings, but make rare appearances in Revelation (1:1; 17:1; 21:9); and, even then, only here is the angel said to provide detailed interpretation of a vision.

25 See Ruth Webb, ‘Ekphrasis’. Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield in Book 18 of The Iliad stands at the beginning of the ekphrastic tradition. Many writers in subsequent centuries have followed Homer’s lead. A famous 19th-century example of ekphrastic poetry is John Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, written in 1819.

26 Theon, Progymnasmata 11. Theon classifies ekphrasis as ‘a descriptive account bringing what is illustrated vividly before one’s sight’.

27 Aune (920), Beauvery (260), and Vermeule (24) each provide a description and depiction of this sestertius.
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Vespasian, provides an interpretative key to the description of the ‘great whore’ in Revelation 17:1,9. The obverse portrays an image of the emperor with the inscription IMP CAESAR VESPASIANVS AVG PM TP PP COS III [Emperor Caesar Vespasian Augustus, Supreme Priest, Tribunal Power, Father of the Fatherland, Consul for the third time]. The reverse depicts the goddess Roma in military clothing sitting on the seven hills of Rome, a small sword held in her left hand and balanced on her left knee—a symbol of the military supremacy of Rome. She is bordered on each flank by the engraved initials S and C [senatus consultum]. Two minor figures, representing Romulus and Remus suckling on a she-wolf, appear below her at the lower left, while the god Tiber is depicted in human form reclining at her feet. The right foot of the goddess Roma appears to be extended and touching the waters.

The central subject of the vision in Revelation 17 is a woman described as ‘the great whore’ seated on many waters. Her description as ‘the whore’ (17:5,15,16) reflects not only familiar Old Testament imagery applied both to godless cities (Isa 1:21; 23:16–17; Nah 3:4) and disobedient Israel (Jer 3:6–10; Ezek 16:15–23; Hos 4:12–13), but also needs to be read in connection with the allegorical charges made in verse two—kings of the earth have ‘fornicated’ with her, and the inhabitants of the earth have become ‘intoxicated’ from her ‘wine’. Considered in this context, the charge of sexual immorality laid against Babylon-Rome is most likely a metaphor ‘for the political alliances between Babylon-Rome and her client kingdoms and allies, and intoxication suggests the victimisation of the peoples of the world by Rome’ (Aune: 960). ‘Rome was a world trade centre whose unjust cargoes from Earth and Sea enrich[ed] the elites while exploiting the rest of the world.’ (Rossing 2002: 185)

The woman is described as ‘sitting’ on the waters, a clear reference to her enthronement. Yet, reading on a little further, the writer unexpectedly replaces any reference to a throne by noting the woman is seated on a scarlet ‘beast’, ‘dressed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold ornaments’. The familiar pose of Dea Roma on Roman coins is one of her seated, dressed in military uniform. Coins minted at the time portrayed the Emperor on one side and Dea Roma on the other. If a Dea Roma coin was the object of reflection for John’s vision and interpretation in Revelation 17, then the beast (Caesar) and the harlot (Roma) are one and the same.

While nothing in the detail of the Vespasian sestertius enables the writer to explicitly link the seated woman in 17:1 with prostitution, her dress communicates conquest and power, and the reference here to scarlet and purple clothing symbolises status and wealth. Aune (935) suggests the description of the woman ‘is drawn at least from the ancient courtesan topos’. Courtesans were the personification of vices in the view of ancient moralist writers, including libertinism, extravagance and materialism. Yet, Beauvery (257) notes that the Latin word for the ‘she-wolf’ is lupa, a term that also meant ‘prostitute’, and perhaps this was a subversive joke enjoyed through the double meaning included in the term.

28 Various forms of sexual immorality are used metaphorically in the Old Testament for Israel’s lapses into idolatry, and her illicit trade with commercial centres such as Tyre and Nineveh; exchanges that inevitably resulted in the importation of new cultural and religious practices.
Reflections on the global water crisis in dialogue with Revelation 17—harlot, hegemony and $\text{H}_2\text{O}$

The woman is seated on ‘many waters’, a phrase that is widely interpreted in light of the angelic identification given in verse 15: ‘The waters ... are peoples and crowds and nations and languages.’ While there is sufficient Old Testament basis for such a conclusion (Isa 8:7; Jer 46:7–8; 47:2–3), it reflects an enduring anthropocentric reading of the text. It also overlooks an ironic textual reference to the stability and substance of Rome’s power, its claim of sovereignty over the entire earth. In the seven bowls of judgement of Revelation 16, the sixth angel’s bowl was emptied ‘on the great river Euphrates and its water was dried up in order to prepare the way for the kings from the east’$^{29}$ (16:12). Completion of that divine action provides background to the angel’s invitation to come and see the judgement of Babylon-Rome (17:1).

The drying up of the river Euphrates is sometimes taken as an allusion to the ingenious actions of Cyrus of Persia in conquering Babylon. Cyrus instructed his field engineers to construct a machine that would reduce the water level of the Euphrates River, which passed through the great city. The waters were deflected into another river, thus lowering the water level and giving passage to Cyrus’ army through a breach in the seemingly impenetrable walls of the city. However, references to dried up rivers and seas in Revelation also allow ancient and modern readers to re-read the experience of Israel in Egypt into their own contexts (Richard: 77): the conquered lands and cities of Rome as well as contemporary situations of oppression and ecological degradation. So, here, the drying up of the waters should not be interpreted as a vindictive punishment, but as an ‘ecological sign’ of God’s liberating action (Fretheim: 387).

The dried-up river finds its literary reversal and apocalyptic transformation in God’s vision of a renewed Earth—New Jerusalem—characterised as ‘a river of living water, sparkling like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb, down the centre of the main street of the city’ (22:1–2a). This is a political image. Unlike the governance and economy of Babylon-Rome, with its insatiable rulers, fat merchants and frenetic markets of buying and selling, the New Jerusalem offers ‘a gift economy’ (Rossing: 152). The Roman waters of death that made people dependent upon a distribution system and the state that created it—rather than on nature and God—is replaced by an inexhaustible source of fresh water, fruit, and medicine (the tree’s ‘healing leaves’, Rev 22:2) made available without cost to all inhabitants of the city.

These brief reflections on Revelation 17—principally on the harlot of Babylon, the great mother of whores and abominations who sits on many waters—has encouraged a political reading of John’s apocalyptic vision, for a renewed Earth, and it invites further critical reading to understand how Revelation’s ecological cry is to be heard in our own global situation.

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29 Wilfred J Harrington, 1969. Understanding the Apocalypse. Corpus Books, Washington DC, 203. ‘Kings of the East’ refers to the enemies of the Romans, the Parthians, a feared people throughout the Roman Empire because of their mythical status as soldiers who could not be conquered or destroyed.’
Theology in a time of water scarcity

What does it mean to do theology at a time in human history when our rivers are becoming something they are not—waters of death? How realistic and credible will this theology be in the minds of those who consider that Western Christianity still bears ‘a huge burden of guilt’ for the current ecological crisis?\(^{30}\) Given that historically Christian theology has maintained a sharp dichotomy between humankind and its environment, and that some traditional ‘image of God’ theology has endorsed human domination of creation (Anderson: 134) and shaped an instrumentalist view of nature—that the natural world exists solely to meet human needs—I am not sure that I can answer these questions adequately. But I shall attempt to list some points arising from my reflections, which I believe need to be taken seriously by Christians.

(1) There needs to be an admission that we read the Bible from ‘where we are’, not only as people who are shaped by the times in which we live and the history we share, but also as fellow creatures of Earth. Hence, our hearing of words of Scripture, originally spoken or written in a different context, may at times result in a criticism of where we stand, or a limitation to our use of them, or a challenge arising from their theological horizon. Rossing listens from this perspective when she notes, ‘The author of Revelation is no ecologist, but he offers a critique of imperialism’ (2002: 191).

So, I approach the text of Revelation as an Australian living in the driest continent on Earth, and as Dorothea MacKellar says, subject to harsh environmental extremes, including droughts, flooding rains and fire. I also anticipate in the further uncertainty of climate change, environmental disasters will become more frequent, more extreme and affect more people. As a fellow creature of Earth, I listen to the cry of Earth and look for the vision of God for a renewed Earth of ecological balance. How dare I speak of God and life, unless I engage equally with the realities of ecology, economic power and public good?

(2) There needs to be an Earth reading of the Apostles Creed and a renewed appreciation of what is meant by confessing God as Creator. Luther says this means that ‘I believe that God has created me and everything that exists … and still takes care of them’ (SC Apostles Creed, part 1). Scripture introduces this relational God in the opening chapters of Genesis, who celebrates the essential worth and diversity of Earth and her creatures—including humankind—affirming them as good. God rejoices in the Murray, Darling and Murrumbidgee rivers and tributaries: their bird life, fish and water creatures, trees, land, and grasses, as well as wild and domestic animals of every kind. God also celebrates humankind as co-creators in this unique part of creation, the Murray-Darling Basin. God rejoices as humankind protects the gift of biodiversity, and God sustains

\(^{30}\) Perhaps the best known of these accusations came from Ludwig Feuerbach, who claimed that ‘Nature, the world, has no value, no interest for Christians. The Christian only thinks of himself and the salvation of his soul’ (Quoted in, John Reumann, 1973. Creation and New Creation: The Past, Present, and Future of God’s Creative Activity. Augsburg, Minneapolis MN, 8); and, a paper published by Lynn White Jr. (Lynn White, 1967. ‘The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,’ in Science 155, 1203–1207).
Earth by the loving act of ongoing creation. As participants in that divine ecosystem, the works of creation (Ps 104:24) give witness to the glory of God; they express and represent the Trinity.

[The works of creation] can communicate something of God to us. We are to care for them, as fellow creatures before God [as insiders and not outsiders] and as loving and wise stewards of God’s creation …They are not simply there for human use [to be exploited and subjugated], but have their own dignity, value, and integrity. Such a view challenges the destruction of species and their habitats in the modern era. (Catholic Earthcare, 2004: 8)

Those who confess Jesus as incarnate Son of God and truly human should remember he came through the waters of birth and the baptismal waters of the Jordan. Much of his life and ministry was lived around the Sea of Galilee, in a land of deserts and drought and among a people who understood running water as a blessing of God (Ps 46:4; Prov 13:14; Isa 55:1; Rev 22:1–2). The gospel of John witnesses to Jesus as the source and provider of living water (Jn 4:13–14; 7:38). Now as the Risen One, the first fruits of a [re] new[ed] creation, Jesus cries: ‘See, I am making all things new!’ (Rev 21:5). As Jesus once sat beside a woman at a well in Samaria, he sits among people along the banks of the Murray. Do we listen and imagine what he says about the water in our river system, and about the people who depend on it for their daily living? As science tells us that our lives and those of all Earth creatures are totally dependent on fresh clean water, we need a renewed vision of God’s gift of living/running water—the Spirit of God in us.

To confess the Spirit as Lord and giver of life means we should not give priority to birth by water and the Spirit (Jn 3:4–5) over becoming a living, breathing human (Gen 2:7) through waters. Our lives are not apart from earth and water. To separate spirit from water in the way that we think of life, or new life, is to perpetuate the age-old dichotomy between heaven and earth, spirit and matter. As Alan Cadwalladar notes:

[T]o sever living water from the viscous substance on which Earth depends for life is not only ecologically unethical, it is an abuse of writing. The text that inscribes ‘living water’ can only have spiritual power if it takes seriously the material reality on which it depends. That, at least, has been the insistence of the connection between water and spirit, an unbroken connection in the practice of Christian baptism. (2011: 110)
(3) To think about water and life from within the Christian tradition is to engage in a re-evaluation of water through a theological lens. This challenges underlying secular ideas we share of water and life. Recovering the significance of water in text and tradition offers new models of determining the value and care of water. So the Ecumenical Water Network31 declared in its Entebbe Statement (May 2007):

As churches and faith based organisations we affirm water as the cradle and source of life, an expression of God’s grace in perpetuity for the whole creation. We are called to exercise responsible stewardship for this unique trust, and to preserve and share it for the benefit of humanity and all creation. Further, we share the following convictions: that access to water is a fundamental human right, that the protection and control of water resources is a central public responsibility, and that water must not be treated as a commodity but as an essential social good for the present and future generations. We recognise water as a sacred gift of God.

(4) To uncover the theological meaning of water is to be faced with the challenge of ecological conversion—the vision of another set of values for engaging Earth, our neighbour, and all living things. Living with respect for rivers and the water we use will mean change for most of us. Responding to the call for ecological conversion in the church will challenge our private behaviours and the public ways in which our church and schools use water. Pope John Paul II characterised this as living out our ‘ecological vocation’.32 In contrast, the most potent forces determining the character of Western societies, including Australia, are ‘consumerism, economic globalisation, and violence’ (Hallman: 18). These are the values of global capitalism, the new social religion rampant in the Western world. The book of Revelation, however, offers an alternative to exploitation, degradation and overuse of Earth resources, God’s vision of a renewed Earth of ecological balance with universal access to water.

31 The Ecumenical Water Network is an initiative of the World Council of Churches, Lutheran World Federation, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, All Africa Conference of Churches, Latin American Council of Churches, Church of Sweden, Bread for the World (Germany), Norwegian Church Aid, Church World Service (USA), Kairos Canada and others. See, http://www.wateroikoumene.org
32 This is an expression of Pope John Paul II used in his General Audience Address, 17 January 2001. It was taken up by the Australian Catholic Bishops’ 2002 Social Justice Statement, A New Earth: The Environmental Challenge. Ben Hilder/ Jesuit Publications, Melbourne VIC.
Reflections on the global water crisis in dialogue with Revelation 17—harlot, hegemony and H₂O

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