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What Do Prophets Have to Say about Poisoned Water?

A Latina Reflection on Racial Ecojustice in the Flint Water Crisis

Ahida Calderón Pilarski

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Introduction

A general reference to ecojustice leads many to think of the environmental and ecological crisis at a global level: one thinks of global warming, climate change, and water and food security. This immediate response or thought connection at a macro-level is understandable. However, ecojustice's relation to realities at a micro-level is also of the essence of ecojustice and is necessary to include if we are to understand the direct impact that ecological crises are having on people and on all living beings in this planet. The Flint Water Crisis (FWC)¹ is a case in point, as it presents a concrete reality related to racial eco(in)justice in which Black and Brown communities, especially women, have been affected for almost a century, and will continue to be affected for the next three generations.

A study by Russell Butkus and Steven Kolmes, looking at the FWC from an ethical perspective, shows some of the complexity in the interconnection between micro- and macro-

¹ Flint Water Crisis, capitalized, and abridged as FWC, is the technical term used by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission to refer to this particular crisis. See “The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic Racism Through the Lens of Flint,” report of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission (February 17, 2017), available online at https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mdcr/VFlintCrisisRep-F-Edited3-13-17_554317_7.pdf. I follow this usage and capitalize Flint Water Crisis in my text.

levels.² To address this complexity, they refer to integral ecology, a concept developed by Pope Francis in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*.³ This concept understands the environmental and social crises not as two isolated crises, but as one single complex crisis. The crisis's complexity calls for "an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature."⁴ In other words, through the concept of integral ecology, Pope Francis is connecting three dots (or areas): ecology (the environment), economics, and society. These interconnected areas are "three essential aspects of what many in the environmental community and elsewhere see as indispensable for humanity to achieve a sustainable relationship with the Earth."⁵

The concept of integral ecology also provides a platform for integral dialogues between and among diverse faith communities and societies. The FWC illustrates a case where the three areas—the environment, economics, and society—intersected and generated a concrete case of ecological and intergenerational racial injustice. This complex understanding of ecojustice, or integral ecology, was addressed in the 2018 colloquium of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians in the United States (ACHTUS), entitled "A Community of Creation: Latinxs,

² Russell A. Butkus and Steven A. Kolmes, "Integral Ecology, Epigenetics and the Common Good: Reflections on *Laudato Si* and Flint, Michigan," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, 14 (2017): 291-320.

³ Francis, *Laudato Si'* (henceforth *LS*) is available online at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

⁴ *LS*, 139.

⁵ Butkus and Kolmes, "Integral Ecology, Epigenetics and the Common Good," 291.

Environmental Racism, and the Struggle for Ecological Justice.”⁶ The basis for this essay, which offers a biblical perspective on the issue, was prepared as a contribution to that colloquium.

Methodological Preamble:

Ecology, Biblical Studies, and Latina Biblical Hermeneutics

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, two major projects related to ecological hermeneutics have dominated the field of biblical studies: the Earth Bible Project⁷ and the Exeter Project.⁸ Both of these projects consider ecological hermeneutics as a sub-branch of environmental hermeneutics.⁹ The first project, the Earth Bible Project, developed six guiding ecojustice principles and recommended three necessary components for an ecological hermeneutical approach: suspicion, identification, and retrieval. The six ecojustice principles are: (1) intrinsic worth of the universe and its components; (2) interconnectedness of all living beings; (3) voice of the Earth as a subject; (4) purpose of the universe and all its components in a dynamic cosmic design; (5) mutual custodianship: acting as partners with Earth; and (6) active resistance of Earth and its components in the struggle for justice.¹⁰ Although these principles and

⁶ A link to this colloquium can be found at <http://www.achtus.us/2018-colloquium/>.

⁷ The most representative scholar in this project is Norman C. Habel. See, for example, “Introducing the Earth Bible,” in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, Earth Bible 1, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic and Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2000) and Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger, eds., *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008).

⁸ A leading scholar for this project has been David G. Horrell. See *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology*, Biblical Challenges in the Contemporary World (London: Equinox, 2010); and David G. Horrell et al., eds., *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

⁹ This is a necessary clarification because it identifies the scope of these projects—that is, they provide a specific theoretical framework rather than a more overarching, interdisciplinary one.

¹⁰ Norman Habel, “Guiding Ecojustice Principles,” *Spiritual Horizons* 11 (2016): 92-109.

recommendations for a more integral hermeneutical approach represent an advance in bringing attention to ecological issues in the field of biblical studies, this approach has encountered both approval and criticism because the initial step of reflection centers on a theological lens.

In the second project, the Exeter Project, Tina D. Nilsen and Anna R. Solevag argue that David Horrell, a leading scholar of the Exeter Project, offers a more nuanced approach than that of the Earth Bible Project introduced above. Horrell divides the process of analysis into a tripartite hermeneutics: “first, a historical study and informed exegesis (i.e., the text in its ancient context); second, interpretation informed by theological tradition but also reshaping it; and third, engagement with contemporary science, ethics, and other fields of knowledge to illuminate the ecological issues.”¹¹ The Exeter Project offers a more nuanced approach because it includes the traditional historical-critical method (HCM) as the first step and involves an interdisciplinary dimension in its third stage of reflection. A disadvantage of this approach, however, is that it narrows the (epistemological) scope of analysis for those ecologically engaged biblical scholars by limiting the initial step of analysis to the traditional and dominant HCM.¹²

Considering the shortcomings of both projects, Nilsen and Solevag observe that any work on ecological hermeneutics should have “an interdisciplinary theoretical framework rather than a strictly theological one.”¹³ They propose the Earth Charter¹⁴ as a source for the guiding

¹¹ Tina Dykesteen Nilsen and Anna Rebecca Solevag, “Expanding Ecological Hermeneutics: The Case for Ecolonialism,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 135 (2017): 668.

¹² I should clarify here that I am not against the HCM per se. In fact, it is a helpful tool of critical analysis to approach the biblical text(s), but not necessarily as the first step. This is a major epistemological difference.

¹³ Nilsen and Solevag, “Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics,” 671.

¹⁴ See <http://earthcharter.org/>.

principles of ecological biblical interpretation. The Earth Charter includes four principles: (1) respect and care for the community of life; (2) ecological integrity; (3) social and economic justice; and (4) democracy, nonviolence, and peace. Nilsen and Solevag argue that ecological hermeneutics should be redefined as the “interpretation of texts or study of the interpretation of texts that focuses on ecology, that is, on interrelationships among and between plants, animals, and human beings and/or between them and the places in which they live.”¹⁵ Scholars who want to apply this perspective can include “any method or approach of textual interpretation or the study thereof as long as ecological concerns are to the fore.”¹⁶ In other words, the ecological hermeneutics perspective has a twofold aim. On the one hand, it shifts the lens toward the ecological concern as the starting point, and on the other, it expands the methodological platform beyond the HCM to include a diversity of methods and approaches to address the ecological concern. Nilsen and Solevag also introduce the term *ecolonialism* to refer to any reading of the Bible that combines postcolonial and ecological lenses.¹⁷ As an example of this way of reading, they analyze the 2008 film “The Kautokeino Rebellion” about the uprising of the Sami population, an Indigenous community in northern Norway, in the 1850s against the Norwegian colonizing efforts, and present this reality as the starting point of their reflection.¹⁸

While ecological hermeneutics and ecolonialism contribute to advancing a more inclusive and multifaceted space or locus of reflection and may assist in addressing the complexities

¹⁵ Nilsen and Solevag, “Expanding Ecological Hermeneutics,” 672.

¹⁶ Nilsen and Solevag, “Expanding Ecological Hermeneutics,” 672.

¹⁷ Nilsen and Solevag, “Expanding Ecological Hermeneutics,” 675.

¹⁸ Nilsen and Solevag, “Expanding Ecological Hermeneutics,” 676-682.

involved in a reflection oriented toward integral ecology, I believe that a reading from a Latina¹⁹ biblical hermeneutics (LBH) perspective goes a step further epistemologically.²⁰ Latina biblical hermeneutics is a twofold critical analysis. First, it looks at the contemporary realities (i.e., life conditions) of injustice affecting Latinas in the United States by focusing on key “indicators” for people’s quality of life (such as access to goods, access to knowledge, and access to social inclusion)²¹ to see if there are potential systemic or structural root causes to specific incidents: in this case, the FWC is an incident of racial eco[in]justice. Second, LBH critically explores the biblical text(s) to bring light (or counter-light) to the reflection on these realities. Two steps –in that order.

This essay offers a Latina or LBH reading that tackles the complex crises in the background of the concrete communities affected by poisoned water during the Flint Water Crisis and the context of ancient Israelite communities where references to poisoned water appear, especially in the book of the prophet Jeremiah. There are only a few passages in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible (OT/HB) that refer to poisoned water, and a brief overview may bring

¹⁹ This term “Latina” within LBH is influenced by the work of María Pilar Aquino’s “Latina Feminist Theology” which is rooted in a vision, “a new model of society and civilization free of systemic injustice and violence... [and] seeks to affirm new paradigms of social relationships that are capable to fully sustain human dignity and the integrity of creation” María Pilar Aquino, “Latina Feminist Theology: Central Features,” in *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology: Religion and Justice*, ed. María Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodriguez (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 137.

²⁰ Ahida Calderón Pilarski, the author of this article, is a Latina Old Testament scholar who has been developing this approach. See Ahida Calderón Pilarski, “A Latina Biblical Critic and Intellectual: At the Intersection of Ethnicity, Gender, Hermeneutics, and Faith,” in *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies*, ed. Francisco Lozada and Fernando F. Segovia (Semeia Studies; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 231-248, and Ahida Calderón Pilarski “Gendering (Im)migration in the Pentateuch’s Legal Codes: A Reading from a Latina Perspective,” in *Latinxs, the Bible, and Migration*, ed. Efraín Agosto and Jacqueline M. Hidalgo (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 43-66.

²¹ Aquino, “Latina Feminist Theology,” 140.

some light (or counter-light) into a theological reflection about the terrible incident that occurred in Flint, Michigan. It is worth pointing out that in the Bible the etymology for the compound term *ecojustice* already provides an insight into the topic at stake. *Eco-*, in both *eco*-logy and *eco*-justice, comes from the Greek term *oikos*, meaning “household,” and the word “justice,” when considered within the OT/HB background, opens a space for a more complex theological reflection. The Hebrew term *mišpāt* (generally translated as “justice”) is a prominent noun,²² and its meaning is connected to the understanding of the covenantal principles (i.e., the theological structure of the Ten Commandments –love of God and love of neighbor) at the basis of this community’s (or household’s) identity.

This paper contains three parts. First, it offers an overview of the major impacts that the Flint Water Crisis had, has, and will have in Brown and Black communities, especially among women. Second, it provides some background on the use of water in the Bible. It then focuses on the only three specific references to “poisoned water” in the OT/HB, all found in the book of Jeremiah. As a conclusion, it offers some points of interconnectedness between the understandings of ecojustice in the Bible and in the Earth Charter. Both challenge injustices at diverse levels and create a platform that facilitates theological reflections and may help faith communities to join the efforts for concrete changes to improve the life and dignity for Black and Brown communities in Flint, Michigan. This is a step forward toward integral ecology.

²² Used 422 times in the OT/HB; see Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, eds., *Diccionario Teológico Manual del Antiguo Testamento* (hereafter *DTAT*) (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1985), 2:1253.

The Flint Water Crisis (FWC):

A Multi-Generational Crisis of a Racialized and Gendered Community

The Flint Water Crisis is the starting point of this reflection because it is a complex contemporary reality where a community of mostly racial minorities²³ and women in particular are still suffering the effects of having drunk “poisoned water.” Identifying this crisis as a locus of reflection is one the most important characteristics of reading from a Latinaox perspective. We begin with the reality of *lo cotidiano*²⁴ in the life of the community; this is the starting and ending point of empowerment, restoration, and hope.

A Racialized Community

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that the population in the city of Flint, Michigan has decreased since 2010 (from 102,399 in 2010 to 97,386 in 2016). Given the chronology of events related to the Flint Water Crisis (from the first “boil water” advisories in August 2014 to the Flint emergency declaration in December 2015—sixteen months!),²⁵ I will focus on some statistical data from the 2010 census. Is Flint a racialized community? Yes, with more than 60 percent minorities, mostly African American. The race/ethnicity composition of the Flint community in 2010 included 54.3 percent Black, 40.4 percent White alone, 4 percent two or more races, and 3.9 percent Hispanic/Latina. Information about other social and economic

²³ It is worth pointing out that a Latino/a/x reading includes reading with other marginalized communities. See Efraín Agosto, “Revelation,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 96.

²⁴ This term was coined by Ada María Isasi-Díaz. For a thorough description of its meaning, see Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Mujerista Discourse: A Platform for Latinas’ Subjugated Knowledge,” in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 48-51.

²⁵ This chronology follows the executive summary of the Report of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, “The Flint Water Crisis,” 1-2.

categories is also relevant to understanding the reality of this community: gender (51.8 percent female); age (26 percent under 18 years old ,7.6 percent of whom were under 5 years old.); and education (83.2 percent high school graduates); finally, the 2010 median income per household was \$25,650.²⁶ The median household income in the United States in 2011 was \$50,054.²⁷

Butkus and Kolmes trace the beginnings of the fiasco in Flint back to the appointment of an emergency manager in November of 2011. This manager was “supposed to help the financially struggling, primarily African-American community, maintain basic services in the face of insufficient local revenues.”²⁸ In my effort to understand the chronology of events that led to the crisis, I include a few of the key moments as described by Butkus and Kolmes: Flint originally relied on water from the city of Detroit’s water system, which draws its water from Lake Huron; the emergency manager made a cost-saving move, switching the water supply from Detroit’s water system to the Karegnondi Water Authority because this entity had a plan to build a new pipeline to Lake Huron that would supply less expensive water to Flint. Here is the problem: In April of 2014, “the emergency manager decided to draw Flint’s drinking water from the highly polluted Flint River until the new pipeline could be eventually constructed.”²⁹ Not only is the Flint River’s water unsafe (because it is contaminated with fecal bacteria), but the old lead pipeline of the Flint water system intensified the environmental and public health tragedy.

²⁶ The Federal Poverty Guidelines for 2017 name \$24,600 as the poverty line for a household of four members. I was unable to find the household poverty line for 2010.

²⁷ See https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/income_wealth/cb12-172.html.

²⁸ Butkus and Kolmes, “Integral Ecology, Epigenetics and the Common Good,” 293.

²⁹ Butkus and Kolmes, “Integral Ecology,” 294.

While the focus of many analyses has been on the Flint community's exposure to lead, one cannot help but also question the larger issue of human-caused pollution of the Flint River.

Lead and Gender

Butkus and Kolmes explain that lead exposure “is known to cause miscarriages, stillbirths, infertility, kidney damage, and developmental problems including eventual negative impacts on behavior and intelligence.”³⁰ Their article focuses on recent studies in epigenetics that have advanced the understanding of DNA sequences of genes and show that “gene activity can be altered in heritable ways by interactions with the environment.”³¹ This information is extremely relevant here because it reveals that the FWC has not only short-term consequence but long-term effects. As a Latina scholar (a hermeneutical stance that calls me to—when appropriate—give a preferential option for Latinas or other women in minoritized conditions, I noticed a striking fact about the gendered impact of the FWC mentioned briefly in Butkus and Kolmes’ article. It is now known that at “the very least the grandchildren of the Flint *women* who were pregnant with *female* children, who were exposed during pregnancy to lead in their drinking water, will be impacted by DNA methylation.”³² Methylation refers to the attachment of a methyl group to another molecule; this can affect genetic activity in specific DNA locations. “Environmental toxins” Butkus and Kolmes write, “can produce levels of DNA-methylation that are either atypically high or atypically low, therefore leading to lowered or raised levels of gene activity, both of which can produce a variety of human diseases, depending on the gene(s)

³⁰ Butkus and Kolmes, “Integral Ecology,” 295.

³¹ Butkus and Kolmes, “Integral Ecology,” 296.

³² Butkus and Kolmes, “Integral Ecology,” 319. Emphasis mine.

involved.”³³ So we are now talking about a current incident that has already affected three future generations.

Systemic Racism through the Lens of Flint:

A Chain of Injustices

The first part of this subsection’s title is the official subtitle of the report of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission on the Flint Water Crisis. While a general chronology of events leading to the FWC, like the one provided in Butkus and Kolmes’ article, goes back to November of 2011 when the emergency manager was appointed to help this financially struggling community, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission believes that “the underlying issue is historical and systemic, dates back nearly a century [1920s], and has as its foundation race and segregation of the Flint community.”³⁴ Thus, the community in Flint will not only suffer the effects of the water pollution for the next three generations, but has been a suffering community for the past three generations.

In 1920, the report says, “Flint was almost exclusively white.”³⁵ The city of Flint was the birthplace and home of General Motors (GM). At the beginning of the last century, the population of Flint was slightly above 13,000, and three decades later, the 1930 census shows that it had increased by 80 percent to 156,492 residents, with less than 5 percent minorities. The report notes that “the absence of people of color can in no small part be attributed to General Motors as both an employer and developer. Before World War II, the only GM jobs available to

³³ Butkus and Kolmes, “Integral Ecology,” 298.

³⁴ Michigan Civil Rights Commission, “The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic Racism Through the Lens of Flint,” 2.

³⁵ Michigan Civil Rights Commission, “The Flint Water Crisis,” 24.

blacks were either janitorial or in the foundry, the latter widely considered to be among the worst jobs possible.”³⁶ The dramatic change in population led to an increased demand for housing, which was accompanied by legally enforceable restrictions against people of color. By the 1940s, “virtually all new constructions included restricted deed covenants ... The National Association of Real State Boards (NAREB) ... had a code of ‘ethics’ that prohibited the selling of property in segregated white neighborhoods to non-whites.”³⁷

World War II caused a shortage of employees, which allowed for an increase of job opportunities for African Americans in Flint: the African American population grew from 7,000 in 1940 to 35,000 in 1960. However, because racially exclusive land restrictions were still in place, most African Americans were segregated into two neighborhoods, St. John and Floral Park, areas that became known for the largest concentration of both poverty and African Americans. Moreover, the creation of Residential Security Maps augmented the segregation and discrimination happening in these two neighborhoods. These maps were meant to determine the areas with the most financial security to support a mortgage; they rated neighborhoods from A (the most secure—in blue) to D (the least desirables—in red—because of “severe housing decay and widespread influx of nonwhites”).³⁸ Thus, racialization and what has become known as redlining further determined the wretched lot of the residents of D-neighborhoods in Flint:

Racism previously been practiced by individuals was now incorporated in government policy through carefully crafted language. While still rooted in the identification of some as “undesirables,” it was officially no longer about animosity; it was now about

³⁶ Michigan Civil Rights Commission, “The Flint Water Crisis,” 26.

³⁷ Michigan Civil Rights Commission, “The Flint Water Crisis,” 27.

³⁸ Michigan Civil Rights Commission, “The Flint Water Crisis,” 35.

protecting investments. Racial separation no longer required racist actors because the *system* had been racialized to do it automatically.³⁹

In other words, Flint is an example (at a micro-level) of the effects of systemic racism.

Already in the 1950s, with the rapid increase in population, Flint began to experience problems with water supply as water from wells was drying up. Despite this water shortage, the city government continued to offer disproportional benefits to GM and to other new companies that came to Flint: “Industrial customers used over half the water Flint pumped but paid only a third of the revenue Flint received. For residential customers the numbers were the opposite: they used about a third of the water but paid half the revenue.”⁴⁰ Needless to say, these disproportional charges were detrimental to the most socio-economically challenged communities. In 1962, the city of Flint made plans to build a new pumping station and to build a pipeline to bring water from Lake Huron, but because of political corruption, this project failed. On June 6, 1964 “Flint signed a contract to purchase its water from the city of Detroit.”⁴¹ Eventually many GM plants and other industries closed and left Flint, leaving behind “its dwindling population to pay for an oversized water infrastructure.”⁴² The industrial flight was followed by white flight, and public policy rewarded financially those who were “able” to flee. The result was that those who did not have even the opportunity to leave (because they had no other place to go) were left in the most vulnerable situation. The Michigan Civil Rights Commission firmly believes that “the Flint Water Crisis is a symptom of a deeper disease.

³⁹ Michigan Civil Rights Commission, “The Flint Water Crisis,” 39.

⁴⁰ Michigan Civil Rights Commission, “The Flint Water Crisis,” 53.

⁴¹ Michigan Civil Rights Commission, “The Flint Water Crisis,” 53.

⁴² Michigan Civil Rights Commission, “The Flint Water Crisis,” 54.

Simply fixing the water system, like removing a tumor, is a critical step, but it won't help the people of Flint if the cancer remains."⁴³ The commission's report continues: "The Flint Water Crisis is a story of government failure, intransigence, unpreparedness, delay, inaction and environmental injustice."⁴⁴ Structural and systemic racism is at the root of the FWC. The crisis shows a chain of multigenerational injustices. To address the FWC integrally will require a commitment to intergenerational justice at all levels. Most Americans "agree that racial and ethnic discrimination is wrong but yet this consensus has not translated into decision-making that reflects those values."⁴⁵ Perhaps in this speaking word to truth, the prophets still have something to teach us today.

Water in the Bible, Poisoned Water, and the Prophet Jeremiah.

How is this situation in Flint connected to the prophets? The only three references to "poisoned water" (*mê-rō's*) in the OT/HB appear in the book of Jeremiah (8:14; 9:14; and 23:15). These references, interestingly, bring a counter-light to this reflection as they reveal that the drinking of poisoned water was meant as a symbolic lethal punishment for the unjust actions of those who challenged the integrity of God's household, God's creation. This is the opposite of what happened in Flint, where those who gave the poisoned water (not as a symbolic act) are the ones who committed the injustices.

Water in the Bible

Before focusing on the specific references to poisoned water in the book of Jeremiah, an overview of the general meaning of water in the biblical mindscape of ancient Israel is a

⁴³ Michigan Civil Rights Commission, "The Flint Water Crisis," 83.

⁴⁴ Michigan Civil Rights Commission, "The Flint Water Crisis," 84.

⁴⁵ Michigan Civil Rights Commission, "The Flint Water Crisis," 14.

necessary step to set an adequate background. Christoph Levin observes that references to water in the Bible have served “as a central semantic playground that allowed the community to explore, formulate, reformulate and communicate in intelligible ways, concepts that would have been difficult for them to express or even explore in other manners.”⁴⁶ When water is used as a metaphor, moreover, Ehud Ben Zvi explains that this needs to be understood as a categorical, class-inclusion assertion, where “the ‘vehicle’ (here, ‘water’) is meant to exemplify a *cognitive*, readily available conceptual category and serves to frame a blended conceptual space that includes both the ‘topic’ and the ‘vehicle’ of the metaphor.”⁴⁷ Given the space constraints of this essay, I would like to refer to three central theological conceptual-spaces: water and creation; water as a liminal space during the Exodus event; and the identification of YHWH with water.

One of the creation accounts, Genesis 1:1-2:3 (generally attributed to the Priestly tradition), includes in its narrative a reference to the primordial waters which are identified with chaos. Ben Zvi observes that this identification of chaotic waters that have “to be defeated by the ordering deity so as to create order [is] well attested in the ancient Near East.” He notes that the “post-creation ‘water’ is thus properly subdued, ordered ‘water,’ and as such attests to the power of the creator.”⁴⁸ In thinking of water from this very first biblical scenario, that of creation, this faith community reveals its understanding of its *locus* before God.

⁴⁶ Christoph Levin, “Introduction,” in *Thinking of Water in the Early Second Temple Period*, ed. Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin, *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* [BZAW] 461 (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 3.

⁴⁷ Ehud Ben Zvi, “Thinking of Water in Late Persian/Early Hellenistic Judah,” in *Thinking of Water in the Early Second Temple Period*, ed. Ben Zvi and Levin, 12-13. (Emphasis mine.)

⁴⁸ Ben Zvi, “Thinking of Water in Late Persian/Early Hellenistic Judah,” 23.

This first moment of creation is expanded to also incorporate this community's understanding of its own origins as God's people. Ben Zvi observes that "Israel's birth was associated with separating the waters at the Reed Sea and later at the Jordan."⁴⁹ Both of these are articulated through the stories about the Exodus event in the Pentateuch and then in those narrating the entrance into the Promised Land in the Deuteronomistic history. Furthermore, in consistency with the centrality of respecting the divine order from the very beginning of creation, the stories of Exodus 1-15 bring another element to this ordering: divine law. Kare Berge explains that in Exodus 1-15,

out of splitting the Sea, Israel is given social visibility ... Water is used for Israelite genocide (Exodus 1-2) by Pharaoh, and water as the center of chaos, death, and impurity, is now changed into a symbol of divine power and cosmic and divine law, which is at the basis of Israelite morality. This sets the limit for the monster. Thus, the new life of Israel is one of an ordered universe, which also includes the morality.⁵⁰

A third social and religious mindscape to consider is that YHWH was also (metaphorically) understood as water. For instance, in Isaiah 58:11 ("The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail"),⁵¹ Ben Zvi observes that YHWH is not only identified as water, but also "the readers are asked to imagine that the community that drinks such 'water' imitates the deity and becomes itself a reliable spring of

⁴⁹ Ben Zvi, "Thinking of Water in Late Persian/Early Hellenistic Judah," 24.

⁵⁰ Kare Berge, "Polluted, Bitter, and Sweet Water as a Matter of Ethnic Identity-Formation in Persian Yehud," in *Thinking of Water in the Early Second Temple Period*, ed. Ben Zvi and Levin, 119.

⁵¹ Biblical citations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

water. In this case, water is used to think of and express (partial) imitatio Dei and thus, partial deification of the community whose ‘water’ is divine.”⁵² The prophet Jeremiah refers to YHWH as “the fountain of living water” in three occasions (Jer 2:13; 15:18; and 17:13). Strikingly, at the beginning of the book of Jeremiah, in 2:13, YHWH is already accusing Judah of forsaking the fountain of living water. The verse reads,

for my people (*‘ammî*) have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

Else K. Holt explains that God’s accusation of God’s people (“my people”), together with the pool of water references in the Book of Jeremiah, shows “a glimpse of the conjunction of two themes in Old Testament religion, (1) the theme of YHWH as fertility god, and (2) that of YHWH as the god of history or salvation.”⁵³ With this general background regarding the powerful imagery of water in the Bible, we can proceed to look at the references to poisoned water.

Poisoned Water

Scholars associate the drinking of poisoned water with other events narrated in the Bible. For instance, “the ordeal set forth in Numbers 5 which a woman accused of adultery must

⁵² Ben Zvi, “Thinking of Water in Late Persian/Early Hellenistic Judah,” 15. Completing this imagery, one can see other passages where people are thirsting for YHWH (Ps 42:3; 63:2) or thirsting for YHWH’s words (Am 8:11).

⁵³ Else K. Holt, “The Fountain of Living Water and the Deceitful Brook: The Pool of Water Metaphors in the Book of Jeremiah (MT),” in *Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. P. van Hecke (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), 104.

undergo,”⁵⁴ “the cup of wine of Yahweh’s wrath ([Jer] 25:15) may also be behind this reference,”⁵⁵ or “the experience of the wilderness where Moses made the people drink powdered water from the pulverized golden calf (Ex 32:20).”⁵⁶ Others find allusions to this type of action in the ancient Near East; for example, Boadt alludes to how “Ashurbanipal boasts of a campaign into Kedad at which time he cut off the only available drinking water, forcing people to slit open their camels and drink blood and filthy water (ANET 299 ix 24-33),”⁵⁷ or a reference to a curse in one of Essarhaddon’s Vassal Treaties which reads “May Ea, King of the *apsu*, lord of the springs, give you deadly water to drink, and fill you with dropsy (ANET 539 #60).”⁵⁸

While these associations or allusions may be pointing to similar backgrounds, the terminology used in the three only references to “poisoned water” (*mê-rōš*) in the book of Jeremiah is different. W. McKane distinguishes the occurrences of *rōš* with the sense of poison used in trial ordeals within four divisions: as a “plant or herb” (Dt 29:17; Hos 10:4; Am 6:12); as “poison” (Dt 32:32; Ps 69:22); as a “poisonous drink” (Jer 8:14; 9:14; and 23:15); and as the “venom of a snake” (Dt 32:33; Jb 20:16).⁵⁹ In all of these passages, he argues, “the poison which is consumed is associated with a condition of guilt ... The drinking of poison is not indicative of

⁵⁴ William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1-25* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 1:291.

⁵⁵ Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 233; see also Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 525.

⁵⁶ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation*, 525.

⁵⁷ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation*, 524.

⁵⁸ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation*, 525.

⁵⁹ W. McKane, “Trial by Ordeal and the Cup of Wrath,” *Vetus Testamentum* 30 (1980): 479.

ineluctable fate: it is both a legal verdict and the exaction of a penalty.”⁶⁰ Along these same lines, Pedro Jaramillo Rivas, distinguishes in the use of *rōʿš* three particular uses: to describe punishment (Jer 8:14; 9:14; and 23:15); to describe the evil-doers themselves (Dt 29: 17-18; 32:32-33; Is 5:7; Ps 69:22); and to describe an existential situation (Lam 3:1-19; Ps 107:41).⁶¹ In both of these categorizations, the three references in the Book of Jeremiah stand on their own, still, these are within the context of trial ordeals for a known guilt.

People Acknowledged their Sin

Jeremiah 8:14

Why do we sit still? Gather together, let us go into the fortified cities and perish there;
for the LORD our God has doomed us to perish,
and has given us poisoned water to drink, because we have sinned against the LORD.

This passage belongs to an oracle of judgment (vv. 13-17) marked by “the messenger formulas at the beginning of v. 13 and the end of v. 17 [which] are confirmed by the *setumahs* prior to 13 and after 17.”⁶² Most scholars agree on a timeframe between 605 BCE (after Egypt is defeated by Babylon in Carchemish) and 597 BCE (before the first Babylonian deportation [Jer 29:1-23]) as the potential historical scenario.⁶³ This oracle in Jeremiah 8 shows Judah’s acknowledgment of their guilt, apostasy,⁶⁴ and Yahweh’s final judgment. In the previous

⁶⁰ McKane, “Trial by Ordeal and the Cup of Wrath,” 486-487.

⁶¹ Pedro Jaramillo Rivas, *La injusticia y la opresión en el lenguaje figurado de los profetas* (Estella, Navarra: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1992), 215-218.

⁶² Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation*, 520.

⁶³ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 1:291; Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation*, 527.

⁶⁴ Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 233.

chapters, Jeremiah 2-6, one finds an extended lawsuit of Yahweh against his Covenant partner;⁶⁵ chapter 7 contains the well-known Temple Sermon which is the final call to repentance; then, Jeremiah 8 announces the final destruction with the coming of the foe from the north (Babylon).⁶⁶ As Leslie Allen describes it, “the truth of the wages of sin eventually dawns, too late ... The oracle is uttered in a mood of resigned despair, in anticipation of inevitable disaster at Yahweh’s hands.”⁶⁷

The message from this particular passage in Jer 8:14 (as well as the next two [9:14 and 23:15]) encloses the two central aspects of the trial ordeal’s framework; in other words, the trial at this point is *pro forma*. On the one side are the people who already know about the gravity of their sin (apostasy, that is, abandoning God, the source of life), and on the other side is the expected/corresponding penalty, one that will fit the crime (the absence of their fountain of living water).

People Abandoned Their Principles

Jeremiah 9:14 (English v.15)

Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel:

I am feeding this people with wormwood,
and giving them poisonous water to drink.

⁶⁵ Robert M. Paterson, “Repentance or Judgment: The Construction and Purpose of Jeremiah 2-6,” *Expository Times* 96 (1985): 199.

⁶⁶ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation*, 519.

⁶⁷ Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 111.

This passage belongs to a judgment speech beginning in verse 11 and ending in verse 15 (English vv. 12-16).⁶⁸ Most scholars agree that its setting is that of the exilic or post-exilic period⁶⁹ given the references to the scattering among nations and its similarities with the third reference to poisoned water in Jer 23:15, which is paired with the reference to “wormwood.” Allen points out that even though the metaphor of poison echoes the reference in Jer 8:14, what triggers the punishment in this passage, the drinking of poisoned water, is “the failure to acknowledge or know Yahweh and Yahweh’s justice (8:7; 9:3, 6 [2, 5]).”⁷⁰ The selected passages at the end of Allen’s reference are worth citing for context: “Even the stork in the heavens knows its times; and the turtledove, swallow, and crane observe the time of their coming; but my people do not know the ordinance (*mišpāṭ*) of the LORD” (Jer 8:7); “They bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, says the LORD “ (Jer 9:3); and “They all deceive their neighbors, and no one speaks the truth; they have taught their tongues to speak lies; they commit iniquity and are too weary to repent” (Jer 9:5). Worth noticing is that “righteousness (and justice), are both YHWH-related concepts, and both are associated elsewhere with ‘water’ (e.g., Amos 5:24).”⁷¹

The climax of this judgment speech is found in verse 12 (English 13) where the reason for the punishment is given: “And the LORD says: Because they have forsaken *my law* (*tórāṭ*)

⁶⁸ See Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation*, 552 and Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary* 1:306.

⁶⁹ See Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation*, 556 and Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary* 1:306.

⁷⁰ Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 117.

⁷¹ Ben Zvi, “Thinking of Water in Late Persian/Early Hellenistic Judah,” 20.

that I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice, or walked in accordance with it” [emphasis mine]. Lundbom points out that the NRSV translation, “I set before them,” in Hebrew literally reads, “I put before their face” (*nāṭattî lîp̄nêhem*), and it appears also in Deuteronomy 4:8 and 4:32 in reference to the Law (*torah*) and Covenant “which was given at Sinai. The answer then [to all the questions raised in verse 11(12)] is not a grand revelation: Destruction came about because the nation broke the covenant.”⁷²

The first of those questions in v. 11(12), “Who is wise enough to understand this?”—given the proposed historical setting (exilic/postexilic) for this passage in Jeremiah—may be pointing to a precursor of a later association between water and YHWH’s *torah*. Ben Zvi explains that eventually Jerusalem will be

conceptualized as the fountain of “water” for the nations... As comparisons with the ancient Near East show, this “water,” of course, is wisdom; a wisdom that is necessary for the maintenance of the proper world in the cosmos. In Jerusalem this “water” was directly associated with YHWH and this deity’s wisdom, which was in turn, by the late Persian/early Hellenistic Yehud/Judah, associated with YHWH’s *torah*.⁷³

To the last question in v. 11(12) of “Why is the *land* ruined and devastated like the *wilderness*?”⁷⁴ Allen notices that “the question ‘Why?’ that is so often the bewildered, rhetorical cry of the lament psalms is fittingly attached to this terrible event [the exile].”⁷⁵ Interestingly, what precedes this judgment speech (in the previous chapter) is a divine lament (Jer 8:18-9:1

⁷² Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation*, 555.

⁷³ Ben Zvi, “Thinking of Water in Late Persian/Early Hellenistic Judah,” 18-19.

⁷⁴ Translation mine.

⁷⁵ Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 116.

[8:23]).⁷⁶ The message of this lament “is that the breakdown of social cohesiveness can only [be] issue[d] in the dissolution of the land... People and land were inextricably linked, and Yahweh was to preside over a collapse that would drag down people and land in a common fate.”⁷⁷ Worth noticing also, continuing the connection to the water metaphor, is that the land is described as a wilderness (i.e., a dry land, a lifeless land).

The Leadership Polluted the Land/Earth

Jeremiah 23:15

Therefore (*lākēn*) thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets:

“I am going to make them eat wormwood, and give them poisoned water to drink; for from the prophets of Jerusalem *ungodliness* (*ḥānuppāh*) has spread throughout the *land*.”⁷⁸

This passage belongs to a judgment speech beginning in verse 13 and ending in verse 15 where the *lākēn* (“therefore”) announces the final judgment. Holladay dates this speech to the winter of 600 BCE.⁷⁹ Thiel attributes it to the Deuteronomistic redaction.⁸⁰ In verses 13 and 14, the judgment speech compares the prophets of the two capitals, Samaria and Jerusalem, and “the

⁷⁶ See Ahida Calderón Pilarski, “A Study of the References to *Bat-`ammî* in Jer 8:18-9:2(3): A Gendered Lamentation,” in *Why?... How Long? Studies on Voice(s) of Lamentation Rooted in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, ed. LeAnn Snow Flesher, Carol J. Dempsey, and Mark J. Boda (New York and London: T & T Clark, 2013), 20-35, where the author argues that this is a divine lament.

⁷⁷ Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 116.

⁷⁸ Emphasis mine.

⁷⁹ Holladay, *Jeremiah I: A Commentary* 1:625.

⁸⁰ Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 457.

implication is that Jerusalem is worse than Samaria.”⁸¹ Allen adds that their “respective delinquencies lie in different spheres, religious in the north (cf. Hos 13:1) and ethical in the south.”⁸² The references to Sodom and Gomorrah in v. 14 has led many to assume that the prophets are being accused of immorality; however, Holladay clarifies that Jeremiah’s references to “those cities has their destruction in mind (20:16).”⁸³

In this passage, Jeremiah is addressing one of the groups in leadership—the prophets (from Jerusalem). In Jeremiah 18:18, the function of prophets is identified: “for instruction shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, *nor the word from the prophet*” (emphasis mine). The prophets are God’s spokespeople. Looking back at verse 14 again, it says that the prophets “walk in lies (*šéqer*).” This term deserves attention in the book of Jeremiah. Thomas Overholt has pointed out to the high concentration of this noun (generally translated as “falsehood”) in Jeremiah, which makes it “one of the most important terms in his theological vocabulary.”⁸⁴ Overholt explains that in Jeremiah we find “the notion of ‘falsehood’ in connection with three main objects of the prophet’s concern: the false sense of security which was preventing the people from responding to Yahweh’s call to repentance, the prophetic opponents of Jeremiah (‘false prophets’), and the falsehood of idolatry.”⁸⁵ The message that the prophets of Jerusalem are proclaiming is false. “They proclaim peace, but the mere proclamation

⁸¹ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary*, 1:630.

⁸² Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 625.

⁸³ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary*, 1:632.

⁸⁴ Thomas W. Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood: A Study in the Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (Naperville, IL: SCM, 1979), 1.

⁸⁵ Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood*, 1.

does not make it so and in so far as their proclamation serves to blunt the sensitivities and cloud the vision of the people regarding the seriousness of their situation, their falsehood takes on an absolute destructive quality.”⁸⁶ In doing so, the “ungodliness” (*ḥānuppāh*) of these prophets “has spread throughout the land” (v.15). Carroll translates *ḥānuppāh* as “profaneness, pollution.”⁸⁷ Holladay adds that this term is connected to the verb *hnp* which is used in verse 11 also, and it “refers to the realm of that which resists what is sacred, so that the translation here should go beyond the usual ‘are godless.’”⁸⁸ Prophets have to speak word to truth, and also, truth to power. For Jeremiah, it is a difficult word to deliver to those in leadership who are polluting the land with a false sense of security of just being in the land without respecting it. These leaders are not truthful/faithful/integral to their function, which is to proclaim God’s word. Holladay says it “is altogether appropriate that the punishment of prophets, who live by what comes out of their mouths, should be accomplished through what goes into their mouths”⁸⁹... wormwood and *mê-rōšš*.

Conclusion:

The Earth Charter, Integral Ecology, the Flint Water Crisis, and Jeremiah

Water, a precious element of nature, has allowed for the exploration of two times and two places, Flint and ancient Israel. The Flint Water Crisis opened the door to learning more about the tragedy of one single community at a micro-level, one that brought environmental injustice and destruction to a community that had been already suffering the impact, at a macro-level, of

⁸⁶ Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood*, 75-76.

⁸⁷ Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 453.

⁸⁸ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary* 1:628.

⁸⁹ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary* 1:632.

structural and systemic racism for more than a century. The Michigan Human Rights Commission made it clear that just addressing the one incident of “poisoned-water” will not solved the human rights violations that are still happening in Flint. Similarly, the historical and theological scenarios from ancient Israel presented a complex crisis at both the macro- and micro-levels. A transition of power in the ancient Near East from one major empire to the next—Assyrian (10th century BCE - 612 BCE) to Babylonian (612 BCE – 538 BCE)—brought destruction to a local community. This was the background for the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah, who used the water symbolism to address at a micro-level the major impact of that complex historical macro-change and reminded people of the importance of keeping the principles of the community’s identity in their quotidian life despite the challenges at the macro-level. Righteousness and justice must be upheld, and so must human dignity and human rights.

I would like to end by mentioning a few areas of interconnectedness that came to light during this reflection:

- The reference to integral ecology in *Laudato Si’* reveals an interconnection with the Earth Charter; both consider the environmental crisis as a single “complex” crisis.
- The understandings of ecojustice in the Bible and the Earth Charter share the same operational framework. They both have principles as their foundations and both require (or depend on) the commitment of their members to sustain their identity and vision.
- A Latina integral reflection (i.e., one that begins with the life of a community and seeks to bring empowerment, restoration, and hope) seems to share the dynamics behind the approach of the Michigan Human Rights Commission (MHRC). This commission conducted a series of inclusive gatherings where all voices were represented; these meetings included members of the community as well as authorities. The MHRC report

analyzed the poisoned-water incident in Flint within a much larger historical framework; in other words, the committee used a longitudinal lens to do a root-cause analysis of this crisis in the history of this community. The MHRC report ends with a comprehensive list of recommendations, and here I include some crucial points:

- (1) From the beginning, the report establishes the centrality of the human rights indebted to each and every member of this community, creating at the same time new venues to include diverse voices at all levels;
- (2) It provides information on how to address structural and systemic racism through education and policies;
- (3) It provides language and mechanisms to safeguard environmental justice in the future; and
- (4) It promotes the rebuilding of trust and credibility to restore the community's hope in the future.

One thing is clear: the lethality of poisoned water (or of a poisoned Earth, symbolic or real), then and now, reveals a multi-generational chain of unjust actions, and these realities necessitate, as a counter-response, an integral commitment to intergenerational justice in the household—or God's creation, if one is to address it from a theological and biblical perspective.