

# Water in the Bible in the Context of the Ecological Debate in the Nigerian Delta

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## Abstract

*One very significant element in the life of the Ancient Israel was water. A keen study of this element in the Christian Scriptures reveals that water was central to the life and activities of the people. For instance, water had economic and physical importance. It was also employed by God to illustrate vital spiritual truths. So important was this element that its sources were jealously guarded and was, in some instances, a source of conflicts.*

*The centrality of water to the life and economy of the Nigerian Delta may be likened to the Biblical situations or even more perhaps because of the geographical location of the people. Thus in contemporary Nigerian Delta, a dominant concern in the socio-economic discussion of the people and their environment is the ecological problems that the oil and gas industry has left on water and the entire aquatic ecosystem. This situation has engaged lots of interests and has also resulted in several agitations and conflicts.*

*Therefore, this paper investigates the importance of water in the Bible viz-a-viz the people of the Nigerian Delta. It concludes by calling for actions that would ameliorate the effects of the oil and gas industry on the Nigerian Delta.*

## Introduction

One of the very essential substances to human and non-human lives is water. It is recognized that of all the nutrients necessary for the chemistry and functioning of living forms, water is significant.<sup>1</sup> Its absence is disastrous. For instance, it is estimated that about 3 to 5 million children under the age of five die from water associated diseases.<sup>2</sup> In Third World nations the availability of potable water is affected by many factors ranging from poor water supply and storage technology and environmental challenges such as poor sanitation<sup>3</sup> and industrial activities. Perhaps, in response to this development, the United Nations in 1992 at its Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, adopted March 22 each year as World Water day. In line with its yearly global awareness, this year's theme, "Coping with Water Scarcity" is devoted to highlighting:

The increasing significance of water scarcity worldwide

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<sup>1</sup> Melvin H. Williams, *Nutrient for Health, Fitness and Support*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 332.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Barkey cited in John F. Davies, *Evangelical Ethics*, (New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2004), 269.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

and the need for increasing integration and cooperation to ensure sustainable, efficient and equitable management of scarce water resources, both at International and local levels.<sup>4</sup>

The recognition of the importance of water to human life is not modern. At least the significance of water was not lost to Biblical times. The numerous references to it indicate that life in ancient Palestine significantly depended on the availability of fresh water. Water in the life of the ancient Israelites was highly valued and sought intensely (Ex 17:6; Num 20:11), sometimes, fought over (Gen 26:15-22) and its denial was a military strategy (2 Kg: 3: 19-25; 2Chro 32:3-4 cf. 1Kg 22:27; 2Chro 18:26). A rainfall was a sign of God's goodness to the people (Deut 11:14; Job 5:10; Matt 5:43; Joel 2: 28ff). In the New Testament, those who offer water to persons in need are promised eternal life (Matt 25:34-40). Thus the life in ancient Palestine revolved around water.

Like the ancient Israelites, water is life to the Niger Deltans. But the increasing scarcity of fresh and potable water has become a source of grave concern to the people; since all that water was to ancient Israel, it seems it is to the Niger Delta. This paper therefore seeks to investigate the significance of water in the Bible in the context of the Niger Delta. In addressing this topic, this paper will be divided into the following sections:

i) sources of water in the Bible; ii) functions of water; iii) Water Scarcity and Pollution in the Bible, iv) water and its sources in the Niger Delta; v) importance of water to the people of the region, and vi) environmental challenges in the Niger Delta in relation to water. In the light of the responses to water scarcity in the bible, the paper proceeds to recommend roles Christian faith communities in ameliorating water/ecological problems in the Niger Delta.

## **SOURCES OF WATER IN ANCIENT PALESTINE**

The three principal sources of water in Ancient Palestine were the well, the cisterns and the tunnel and channels to access distant water like springs and rivers.

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<sup>4</sup> "World Water Day 2007" <http://www.Unwater.org/wwd07/flashindex.html>. Accessed March 22, 2007.

## **The Cistern**

A cistern in biblical times refers to a small water reservoir constructed in the ground to collect and store rain water or sometimes spring water channeled from a distant spring. Cisterns were very important for water storage in Palestine because of scarcity of natural springs, a long dry summer and a very insignificant annual rainfall.<sup>5</sup> Dickie and Harvey observe:

towards the end of summer, springs and wells, where they have not actually dried up, diminish greatly, and cistern and open reservoirs become at times the only sources of water supply.... In this climate cisterns and collecting pools, or reservoirs, are a necessity.<sup>6</sup>

The practice of storing water to ensure an all-season availability of water might have begun about 3000 BC since archeologists have established the existence of underground cisterns in Palestine about this time. These cisterns were waterproofed with plaster and some had a capacity of 20 cubic metre (706 cubic feet).<sup>7</sup> Water is usually channeled into the cisterns by drains from house roofs, courtyards, and streets and even in some places open areas of land devoted for that purpose.<sup>8</sup> Most homes and individuals might have had their own water cisterns (2 Kg 18:31). This possibly was the basis for the metaphor made of it for fidelity by Solomon (Prov 5:15). There were also community cisterns such that when they were empty or abandoned served as places of confinement as in the experience of Joseph and Jeremiah (Gen 37:20, 22, 29; Jer 38:6ff) of or refuge or resort in the instance of Saul (1 Sam 19:22).

Three types of cisterns existed in Palestine. These were those excavated entirely in a rock. They were the most ancient and common in Jerusalem. They were familiar sight in vineyards and waysides. The most momentous example is the

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<sup>5</sup> C. W. Wilson "Cistern" in James Hastings (ed.) *A Dictionary of the Bible*, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1988), 1:444.

<sup>6</sup> A. C. Dickie and D. W. Harvey, "Cistern" in Geoffrey W. Bromiley and others (eds) *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 1:702.

<sup>7</sup> J. A. Thompson, *Handbook of Life in Bible Times*, (New York: Guideposts, 1986), 115.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

'Great Sea' in the hiram esh-Sherif which has numerous rock pillars and its holding capacity was estimated at 3, 000,000 gallons. Its sources of water were Solomon's pools near Bethlehem and surface drainage.<sup>9</sup>

The second type of cistern was rock-hewn tanks with vaulted roofs. These were common in many localities.<sup>10</sup> The third type of cisterns was cisterns of masonry constructed on the soil. Some were of large size and had vaulted roofs supported by pillars arranged in parallel lines. Most cisterns had more than one opening to allow for water collection and steps were provided to the base to enable periodic cleaning since invariably, water collection come with dirt.

## **Wells**

In contemporary ordinary usage, a well refers to a hole dug into the ground to reach a subterranean water source. This is not akin to a cistern, which is dug to collect and hold water supply from rain or stream. Although the English Bible in translating the Hebrew *'ayin* sometimes uses the term well (Heb *be'er*) and spring interchangeably, Wells, as defined above, were also a very important sources of water in the Bible. As a source of water, a family who had access to well, had a more ready supply of water, which was also likely to be less polluted compared to the cisterns. Water in a well was sourced by a jar attached to a rope long enough to reach the level of water in the well.

The origin of Well in the Bible is unknown but it had an early mentioning in the life of the patriarchs. The first clear reference is the dispute between Abimelech and Abraham over a well dug by the former (Gen 21:21-31). Another dispute over a well arose between Isaac and the Philistines when some Philistines proceeded to seal up wells Abraham had also dug (Gen 26:12-22). Jacob's well was also a very valued heritage, judging from the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:5ff). Wells were central to the life of a community. It served as a rendezvous for the community. Jacob met Rachel at a well site where sheep were watered (Gen 29:9). Moses also had contact with Jethro's household at a

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<sup>9</sup> Wilson, 444.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

well site (Ex 2:15). The central role of wells as sources of water might have accounted for many ancient cities taking their names from wells. Some of these cities are Beer-elim, Beerroth, Beer-sheba.

### **Tunnels and Channels**

A third and significant water sources for ancient Israel were the tunnels and channels to bring in a constant flow of water from a distant water source. These were common for cities or settlements on a hill that had no natural water source and face insufficient rainfall. Some of these were found in Gebeon and Jerusalem (2 Sam 2:13-17; 5:6-8; 2Kgs 20:20; Isa 8:6). The colonnaded pool of Bethesda where Jesus healed the invalid for thirty-eight years might also be a reference to such water sources (Jn 5:2). On the significance of these sources of water, Thompson observes:

Some remarkable engineering projects, involving tunnels  
And shafts cut through the rock beneath towns, enabled  
Some places to enjoy a good supply of fresh water usually  
Undetected by invading or encircling attackers who force  
Their inhabitants into premature submission through  
Hunger and thirst.<sup>11</sup>

The ingenuity of ancient Israel in the construction of some of these water sources have been confirmed with the discovery of sites in Megiddo, Hazor, Gibeon, Beer-sheba and many more. All through the biblical period ancient Israel's extraordinary resourcefulness enabled them to utilize and preserve the sources of water available to them for the various uses possible.

### **FUNCTIONS OF WATER IN THE BIBLE**

Water is one of the most significant substances for life. It is true of water in biblical times. Commenting on the significance of water in the Bible, Gordon Wenham opines:

Within the Bible water is often a symbol for the life-giving

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<sup>11</sup>. Thompson, 117.

power of God, but in the hot climate of the Middle East it also inescapably reflects reality. Without water everything quickly dies.<sup>12</sup>

A survey of water reveals that its importance can be categorized into four, namely, i) agricultural; ii) human and animal health; iii) ceremonial; and iv) metaphorical importance. This section would briefly discuss each of these significances.

### **Water and Agriculture**

It is a common knowledge that vegetation is refreshed by water from rainfall and dew. Scripture captures this when it compares the righteousness as:

Trees planted by the rivers or water, that brings forth its  
Fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither (Ps 1:3).

Numerous passages (Num 24:6; Job 14:9; 29:12; Is 44:4; Jer 17:8; 24:6; Ez 17:5; 31:4; Sir 40:16; 50:8) further confirm the biblical importance of water to vegetation. Seeds were sown beside the waters (Is 32:20). The key importance of the value of water to vegetation in the Bible is also heightened by the harsh weather condition that the Palestinian farmer faced yearly. There was a yearly drought from about June to August and sometimes from May to September. While the rains prepare the soil for the seeds to grow, the scorching heat that accompanies the drought easily choked them. In overcoming this weather challenges the ancient Near East resort to irrigation to fertilize the soil and keep their crops alive. Water from the well, cisterns, the tunnels and channels and the nearby natural water sources-where such exists, became very useful to the Palestinian farmer. In fact Ezekiel 31:4 seem to suggest an irrigation system developed to counter the effects of droughts on the farming culture of Israel.

### **Human and Animal Health**

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<sup>12</sup> Gordon Wenham, "The Old Testament and the Environment: A Response to Chris Wright," in *Achistian Approach to the Environment*, The John-Ray Initiative, 2005, 53.

Water in the Bible is also important to Human and animal health. Isaiah mentions it as one of the indispensable items of life (33:19). Water is essential for the maintenance of the fluid balance of humans and animals and the sustenance of their lives. The contentions over water sources (Gen 26:15-22), the reaction of Israel to the various water crisis during the Exodus ( Ex 15:22-25; 27; 17:1-3; Num 2-5) and the blockage of its source to a city in war times as a military strategy(2 Kg: 3: 19-25; 2Chro 32:3-4 cf. 1Kg 22:27; 2Chro 18:26) all speak volume on the importance of water to human and animal health.

Further, the Psalmist pertinently describes the importance of water to humans and animals thus:

He (God) makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains. They give water to all the beasts of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. The birds of the air nest by the waters; they sing among the branches.... he makes grass grow for the cattle and plants for man to cultivate – bringing food from the earth.... There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number -- living things both large and small. These all look up to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give to them, they gather it up; they are satisfied with good things (104:10-12,14,25,27,28).

The above poetic description of the dependence of the ecosystem on water arises out of the deep awareness of the importance of water to all lives for humans and animal to drink (Ex 17:5,6; Num 20:11), for domestic purpose ( Gen 24:13; Deut 29:11; Ex 2:16; 24:3 Jn 4:7) for washing of clothes (Jer 13:1), of the hands, the feet and the whole person and possible as a medication (Job 9:30; Gen 43:24; Lk 7:44; Jn 13:5; Jth 10:3; 12:7; Jn 5:3,4 cf. 9:7).

The biblical awareness of the importance of water to human health is confirmed by modern science's recognition of that about 70% of body weight is water and

the lean muscle tissue contains about 73% water.<sup>13</sup> Water is key to the regulation of the body temperature<sup>14</sup>, provides essential building materials for cell protoplasm, the main constituent of blood, which is the major transportation mechanism in body for conveying oxygen, nutrients, hormones and other cells for their use. It is also essential for the proper functioning of our senses and servers as the body's cleansing and lubricating agent.<sup>15</sup> While the biblical mind may not have the deep insights that modern science has on the importance of water on human health, it is pertinent to note that the deep desire for water in biblical times and the various languages employed illustrate the importance attached to water for therapeutic and other human survival needs.

## **Ceremonial**

Water was also very important to the religious life of Israel. Various aspects of the religious rituals required the usage of water. These were associated with the sanctuary services and the ceremonial uncleanness that were attached to certain practices or human misdemeanor. References to a few of them will suffice for our purpose.

### **a) Sanctuary Ceremonies**

In the ceremonial system of the sanctuary services washing was an outstanding feature for purifying defilements or preparing for the services. Priests were required to wash when they are consecrated (Ex 29:4), and the Levites were also sprinkled with water at the point of their being set apart for service (Num 8:7). The priests and the Levites were to wash their hands in the water in the laver before performing their religious duties (Ex 30:18-21; 40:7, 30-32). On the day of atonement, special ablutions were necessary on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:4, 24, 28; Num 19:1-10; ) and the sacrificial flesh was also washed before it was offered (Lev 1:9,13; 8:21).

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<sup>13</sup> Gordon M. Wardlaw, *Contemporary Nutrition, Issues and Insight*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 291.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 336

<sup>15</sup> Frances Sizer and Eleanor Whitney, *Nutrition, Concepts and Controversies*, (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomas Learning, 2000), 265-336.

## **b) Ceremonial Uncleanness**

Water was also needed for washing in the event of ceremonial pollution such as recovery from leprosy (Lev 14:8,9), the healing of a discharge (Lev 15:1-13), or contact with a dead body by a priest (Num 19:11-22). Sometimes, running water is prescribed to realize the purification or cleansing (Lev 14:5,6,50,; 15:13; Num 19:17). All these were to impress on the people the holiness of God.

## **iv) Water as a Metaphor**

The last grouping of the importance of water in the Bible and significant for this study is the metaphorical usage of water. No doubt, water was so central to the life of the people that it found a place as worthy spiritual symbol. The usages of water in this aspect are several but a few of such would be mentioned.

First, water is used as a motif for spiritual want. This motif is found in Psalm 42:1 and 63:1. The Psalmist likens his thirst for spirituality to one who thirsts for water.

Second, the Psalmist also employs water language to tell the of the spiritual refreshment and blessing he enjoys from a walk with God (Ps 23:2). This idea is also taken further by Isaiah (30: 25; 32:2; 44:3; 55:1:58:11), and John (7:37,38; Rev. 7:16; 21:6; 22:1,17).

Next, Amos likens the flow of justice and righteousness arising from a walk with God to regular and available water sources (5:24) while Jeremiah laments the apostasy of Judah as one rejecting “the fountain of living waters” for broken cisterns that cannot hold water (Jer 2:13; 17:13). Water is also liken to goodness ( Prov 25:25). The future of promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Christian Church was likened to rain (Joel 2:28-32 cf. Acts 2:17-21) Moral cleansing was compared to the flow of water ( Eph 5:26; Heb 10:22). The potency of water as a cleansing fluid, perhaps, also made it to be used for baptism, a Christian rite that symbolizes birth into God’s community.

Water, however, is also used to illustrate some negative characteristics such as instability of character (Gen 49:4), weakness and discouragement (Ps 22:14; 58:7; 109:18), sin and wickedness (Prov 9:17; Jer 6:7), strife (Prov 17:14), inconsistent Christian life ( Jas 3:10-12) and an instrument of judgment (Gen

7:17-24; Ex 14:21-30; Ps 18:16; 32:6 etc). The import of the numerous figurative usages of water to illustrate the relationship between God and man and daily human activities definitely was not lost to a people who daily had to face the realities of the numerous needs of water and the task of getting sufficient to meet these needs.

### **WATER SCARCITY AND POLLUTION IN THE BIBLE**

Israel had an experience of bitter water at Marah (Ex 15:23). The city of Jericho had its water sources polluted in the days of Elisha (2 Kg 2:19-22). Isaiah also mentions “water of affliction” which possibly is a supply from a polluted source or due to scarcity (Isa 30:20 cf. 1Kg 22:27; 2 Chro 18:26). During Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry, the prophet implies the water sources of Judah because of her disobedience, had been polluted by God (8:14; 9:15; 34:18). A “water of gall” was all that she had to drink. Drinking water could be polluted by the feet of animals or human activity (Ez 32:2,13; 34:18). In the face of polluted water sources, with limited options, the agricultural life is hindered, poverty may set in, the people’s corporate existence is threatened, and the reactions could be distressful.

### **Reactions to Water Scarcity and Pollution**

At least two reactions that follow water scarcity and pollution can be seen from two incidents above. These reactions led to rescue of unpleasant water situations and succor for the life of the people.

First, Israel in the wilderness fearing its corporate existence and that of its agricultural life because of the absence of water protested the situation to Moses (Ex 17:3cf. 15:22-25). The reaction of the people awakened the consciences of their leader to the predicament; thus motivating him to act appropriately.

Secondly, conscious of the adverse effect of the source of water on its land and the health of the people, despite its desirable location, the inhabitants of Jericho made a community effort to manage this situation. In this instance, the effort was directed at an appeal to Prophet Elisha to intervene. This he did by purifying the water source miraculously by putting salt in a new bowl and subsequently throwing it into the water source. (2 Kg 2;19-22).

## **WATER AND ITS SOURCES IN THE NIGER DELTA CONTEXT**

The theme of the 2007 World Water Day and its fears captures the fears of the indigenes of the Niger Delta on the water situations in the region. But before we proceed towards discussing the situation in this area, it might be necessary, for the benefit of those who may not have enough knowledge of the area, to situate this region.

### **Niger Delta**

The Geography of the Niger Delta solicits no less than two responses and these are determined by the interest fundamental to each of them. First, the Niger Delta in ecological features refers to the Nigerian region, which records an annual rainfall averaging 4.0mm. This region, regarded by some as the core Niger Delta,<sup>16</sup> includes present day Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers States. Next the Niger Delta is expanded to include all the geographical expanse of land between the Benue River and the Cross River, covering an area of about 70,000 square kilometers that cuts across nine states of Nigeria's thirty-six. These states are Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers. This identification was adopted to include all the states that have oil and gas deposits and thus has been described as the "political Niger Delta."<sup>17</sup> This region as identified has over forty (40) ethnic groups speaking 250 different dialects across about 3000 communities.<sup>18</sup> Some of which are the Anangs, Edo, Delta, Efik, Ekpeye, Engene Etche, Ibibio, Ijaw, Igbo, Ikwerre, Itsekiri, Ogbia, Ogoni, Urhobo. However, it is well-known that environmental hazards are more pronounced in Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers States because of the large deposit of oil and gas in them and their peculiar terrain.

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<sup>16</sup> H. B. Oku, *The Niger Delta Environment: Its Local Geography*, (Port Harcourt: Prelyn Publishers, 2003), 5

<sup>17</sup> T. T. Isoun, *Environmental Challenges of the Niger Delta*, in Ozo-Eson, P. I. and Ukiwo, U. (eds.), *Challenges of the Niger Delta*, (Port Harcourt: Centre for Advanced Social Science CASS, 2001). 7 – 9. See also B. A. Fubara, "The Politics of the Niger Delta," Ozo-Eson, P. I. And Ukiwo, U. (eds.) *The Niger Delta Development Commission: Towards a Development Blueprint*, (Port Harcourt: Centre for Advanced Social Science CASS, 2002.), pp. 19 – 36.

<sup>18</sup> Niger Delta Development Commission (undated). "The Niger Delta: A Brief History."

## **SOURCES OF WATER IN THE NIGER DELTA**

The principal sources of water in the Niger Delta could be classified into two- i) traditional water sources such as cistern, lakes, pools, rivers, streams and wells, and ii) modern water sources and supply such as monopumps and multi-outlet boreholes.

### **Traditional Water Sources**

#### **Lakes, Rivers and Steams**

Being a littoral region, the Niger Delta has several natural water sources that are boosted by the dense rainfall most part of the year. These natural water sources- lakes, pools, and rivers, streams- abound in the region. Most of these sources are close to the villages and towns in the area and are central to the region's socio-economic and religious lives.

#### **Cisterns**

In addition to these, cisterns are also constructed in some part of states in the region that are distant from natural water sources. One State where cisterns are constructed is Edo. Each home constructs the size of cistern believed to store enough water adequate for its need. These cisterns, similar to the Biblical types, are waterproofed with plaster and some had a capacity of 20 cubic metre (706 cubic feet). Water is usually channeled into the cisterns by drains from house roofs, but unlike in the Bible times where water is also channeled from courtyards, streets and even in some places open areas of land devoted for that purpose. Such water collected and stored in the cisterns is normally preserved for the dry season, between October and March.

#### **Wells**

The Nigerian Delta's dependence on wells as a source of water could be identified with its importance in the Bible. A family, who has access to well, has a more ready supply of water. Wells were central to the life of a community. It served as a rendezvous for the community. Water in a well is sourced by a plastic jar or

bucket attached to a rope long enough to reach the level of water in the well in each season.

### **Modern Water Sources**

There are some modern water sources in the Niger Delta. These sources are mono pumps and boreholes. A mono pump is a single-drilled water borehole that supplies water by the user swinging the handle up and down. Only one person can access water from the borehole at a time. This is cheaper and more in number compared to the more modern boreholes that have multi outlets. Since the mono pump does not require electric energy to pump water it is constructed in few communities to complement water supply from the natural water sources, cisterns and wells. The multi out-let boreholes, which require electric power supply, are drilled for private use by the affluent and sometimes by the government in communities where public servants think they have political support. But the public or community ones hardly work because of irregular power supply and the cost of maintaining power-generating plants by the impoverished communities. The multi-outlet boreholes are also sunk by private initiatives for commercial purposes. But the costs of getting this potable water are most times beyond the reach of the majority of the populace, especially the rural dwellers. This situation leaves the communities in the Niger Delta to still depend on the natural water sources, cisterns and wells for their daily water needs.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF WATER IN THE NIGER DELTA**

The functions of water in the Niger Delta do not vary widely from those seen in the Bible and other human cultures. Water is necessary for agriculture, human and animal health and for domestic use such as drinking, washing of clothes and the body, and even medication.

Water also has ceremonial cleansing importance in the Niger Delta. The African Initiated Churches (AIC) have a key ceremony attached to water. This ceremony is the “purification bath” done in streams, lakes and rivers for persons believed to be possessed by some demonic powers that have hindered their progress or responsible for some ailments. Sometimes, such individuals are required to bring

water in bottles or jerry cans for prayers. Such practices, which must be done in and with unpolluted and potable water, are believed to be efficacious.

The African Religions (Afrels) also have some ceremonial practices that use water. These practices are the libations made to the gods at shrines, use of water with incantations at shrines for oaths and washing of the face for favour.<sup>19</sup> Certain cultural festivals in the Niger Delta also make elaborate use of water to give meanings to various aspects of it. Some of these are the cleansing of the land and the scaring of evil powers. Among the Etche in Rivers State, a yearly water ceremony is performed to cleanse the community of misfortunes that are believed to have befallen the community in the past year.<sup>20</sup> In the same community, a newly married lady is ceremonially bathed with water to usher her from “sisterhood into motherhood.”<sup>21</sup> This might be a means of purifying her from “impurities.” of her youth before marriage. Because of the importance of fresh water source for the various physical, socio-economic and religious lives of the people, families go to court on disputes over original owners of streams.<sup>22</sup>

### **ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES TO WATER SOURCES AND SUPPLY IN THE NIGER DELTA**

The majority of the Niger Deltans does not have access to potable. This predicament is mainly the consequence of current environmental situations in the Niger Delta that pose a big threat to the traditional water sources of the people. This dilemma has generated contentions, dialogues and of course violence in the Niger Delta.

First, it is a common sight that in the process of oil exploration and production materials such as drill cuttings, drill mud and other fluids that are used to stimulate production are discharged into the environment and most end up in the streams and rivers. These chemicals are not easily degradable and the skimming of oil on the water surface hardly solve the problem since most of the oil might have sunk to the bottom of the water surface leaving grave consequences such as:

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<sup>19</sup> Personal Interview with Okechukwu J. Igwe, High School Teacher, April 5, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Personal Interview with Anelewachi Nnukwe, Religious Leader, April 5, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Personal Interview with Loveday Ejukwu, Public Servant, April 5, 2007.

(a) surface and ground water quality deterioration in terms of potability, aesthetic and recreation, (b) destruction and reduction of fish life and fisheries production of the waters, (c) destruction by acute and sublethal toxicity of aquatic flora and fauna of spills on water and benthic macro.<sup>23</sup>

Another water pollution source in the Nigerian Delta is the gas flares from oil production in numerous flow stations in the Niger Delta. The pollutions released and the noises from the vibration are injurious to human health. The continuous heat emitting from the flares pollute nearby streams that sometimes are the only source of potable water for communities. It is also argued that the chemical emissions from the flaring contribute to acid rain.<sup>24</sup>

A third oil-related water pollution source is oil spillage. It is estimated that about “2.300m<sup>3</sup> of oil is spilled in 300 separate incidents annually in the Niger Delta.”<sup>25</sup> These spillages are caused by a combination of factors ranging from the age of the pipes, construction faults and of course, vandalization. Since by law oil and gas companies are not obliged to pay compensations for spills from ‘deliberate, destructive acts’ most companies are quick to point to sabotage as the cause for every spillage reported. But whatever might be cause of the spills; the crude oil or refined petroleum products wasted find their way to the streams, rivers, lakes and pools. Sometimes, the spilled crude or petroleum products find their way to the private wells dug at homes and pollute the water sources.

The final and relevant environmental challenge, as it concerns this essay, is the effect of the dredging of the Rivers Benue and Niger is also threatening water sources in the Nigerian Delta. Peter Ekeh argues: “numerous lakes, rivers, and streams in the Niger Delta have already dried up completely or else are on their way of becoming miserably rivulets.”<sup>26</sup> This position of Ekeh can be attested to by

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<sup>23</sup> B. O. Okaba, *Petroleum Industry and the Paradox or Rural Poverty in the Niger Delta*, (Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 2005), 19-20.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, 120

<sup>26</sup> Peter Ekeh, “Issues in the Dredging of the Niger and Benue Rivers” accessed from: [http://www.waado.org/Environment/RiverDredging/ChallengeToDredging/PhoneNews\\_Ekeh.htm](http://www.waado.org/Environment/RiverDredging/ChallengeToDredging/PhoneNews_Ekeh.htm), March 20, 2007.

a visit to the Nigerian Delta. The older generation can point to sights were there once existed lakes and streams. Related to this is the sand filling of lakes and streams for housing and industrial sites constructions without a corresponding effort to ameliorate the effect of the lose of water from such sources to the communities.

### **THE ROLES OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH COMMUNITIES**

From our study of the importance of water in the Bible, it was observed that water is essential to the life of any society. It is important to the entire ecosystem- humans, animals, sea life and plants- and imparts greatly on the health, economy and the spirituality of a people. The necessity of fresh and available water for the Niger Deltan could be equated with the biblical experience as has been shown earlier in this essay. We also observed that reactions to water scarcity and pollution in biblical experiences. Such reactions, which capture the fear of the people, are helpful in our attempt to understand the roles the Christian faith communities could play towards ameliorating the unpleasant water situation in the region.

Also speaking on the urgent need to save the unpleasant water situation that plague many third World countries today, United Nations on the importance of water during this year's World Water Day (WWD) and the need to cope with water scarcity observes:

Equity and rights, cultural and ethical issues are essential to be addressed when dealing with limited water resources. imbalance between availability and demand, the degradation of ground water and surface water quality, intersectoral competition, interregional and international disputes, all center around the question of how to cope with scare water resources.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>. World Water Day 2007, accessed from: <http://www.unwater.org/wwd07/flashindex.html>, March 22, 2007.

Therefore, in relating to the concerns of the biblical and the United Nations on water resources in the context of the Niger Delta, this essay proposes that the Christian faith communities can play very vital roles in ameliorating the unpleasant water situation in the Niger Delta. towards this role, the following recommendations are made:

### **i) Organize and Create Awareness**

The Christian faith communities in Niger Delta can organize and create awareness on the importance of fresh water supply to the people. The motivation for these campaigns is the Christian ethics of environmental stewardship rather than of dominion as popularized by the work of Lyn White. White had argued that man has the mandate to “rule and subdue the earth ...it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper end.”<sup>28</sup> However, Davies commenting on Psalm 104, one of the biblical passages that illustrate the importance of water to the ecosystem, rejects this man-centered view of creation. He opines “the animals, plants, and their habitats have intrinsic value in God’s sight and are objects of divine care.”<sup>29</sup> Water, as we already observed, also has great value in God’s sight. Thus the Christian faith communities’ awareness campaigns can serve to enlighten the people on their demand for fresh water supply and also hold the government and other agencies responsible for the pollution of water.

### **ii) Awaken and Sustain Government’s Attention**

The Christian faith communities can also call the government’s attention to its social responsibility of protecting the natural water sources, in the pursuit of national economic agenda. Ensuring the provision of potable water for the people must be a conscious government activity. This change must transcend beyond the white elephant and selective water projects that are carried out in some sections of the region. The cost of the neglect of this urgent need of the people might the poor health, poverty; lose of valued religious and cultural practices, and even escalating violence.

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<sup>28</sup> Lyn White, cited in R. A. Smikins, “The Environment, Ecology, and the Bible.” Accessed from <http://puffin.Creighton.edu/human/csrs/news/S93-1.html>, March 22, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> John F. Davies, 271.

### iii) **Galvanize Community Effort**

The Christian faith communities can also play a fundamental role in galvanizing community efforts at providing alternative water supply in form of sinking boreholes and/or coordinating community efforts to maintain what the government and the oil industries have made available to the communities.

### iv) **Initiate Boycott**

A less desirable role the Christian faith communities can play in the water/ecological crisis in the Niger Delta is to organize a periodic non-violent mass protest against the oil and gas industries that are most environmental-unfriendly. This social action can also be complemented by a periodic boycott of their products. Our position is that while the Christian faith eschews violence, Christians, however, have a responsibility of serving as the conscience of communities and leadership when the welfare of the populace is sacrificed for minority interest.

## **CONCLUSION**

Water is a very significant substance in nature. It is pictured in the Bible as very important to human life and activities. It affects human's physical, socio-economic and spiritual life. Its scarcity is a threat to the existence of a people. The water situation in the Niger Deltan occasioned by the environmental challenges the region faces because of the oil and gas industry and other human activities portends danger. Efforts must therefore be made, both the Christian faith communities and the other interests to arrest the situation.

### **Biographical Statement**

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