

**RE-INTERPRETING THE ΥΔΩΡ ΖΑΩ (“LIVING WATER”)  
METAPHOR IN JOHN 4 & 7 IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SOUTH  
WESTERN YORUBA IN NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*Most interpretations of the “living water” passages in John 4 & 7 exclusively apply historical-critical, textual or rhetorical criticism to the texts. Those approaches leave out the contexts of the contemporary interpreters. Building on the commonality of the figure of “living water” to both the Gospel of John and the Yoruba in Nigeria, the present work interprets the texts (Jn 4 & 7) in their biblical and contemporary readers’ contexts to fully elucidate the importance of the concept to the community of faith.*

**Introduction**

The need for intercultural interpretation of the Christian Scriptures is based on the observation that the faith of the average African Christian is weak because of his/her shallow understanding of the Bible. It has

further been noted that many African Christians still patronize traditional priests in times of existential crises. Osadolor Imasogie<sup>1</sup> observes relapse in faith in such times as a result of “misfit” between the imported Christian theology and the people’s daily experiences.<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Kraft<sup>3</sup> notes that encounters necessitate developing appropriateness of genuinely Christian theology within non-Western cultural contexts. David Adamo<sup>4</sup> recently re-affirms the continuation of this ‘misfit’ between the Western interpretation of the Christian Scriptures and the experience of the African recipients of such interpretations.<sup>5</sup>

After criticizing Western hermeneutical methodology of interpreting the Bible that is largely irrelevant in Africa, U.C. Manus<sup>5</sup> recommends two methods: the Folkloristic and Intercultural approaches. The Folkloristic method enables the interpreter to retrieve the values in the traditions handed down to posterity through folktales, poems, hymns, proverbs, riddles, and art. Intercultural Interpretation involves a “conscious analysis of the context ... (in) an integral part of the hermeneutical process.”<sup>6</sup> For the African, it is the process whereby the academically-trained interpreter employs the resources of African social or religio-cultural contexts to examine the text of a given passage of the Bible and to derive meaning suitable to his/her contexts.<sup>7</sup>

Since there is no single valid methodology, Inculturation Biblical Hermeneutics is now challenging other methods of interpretation in Africa for a place of honour. Recent works on the theories of Inculturation Biblical Hermeneutics from Africa are from scholars like Works Gerald A. Arbuckle,<sup>8</sup> Vincente Carlos Kiaziku,<sup>9</sup> and Gerald West.<sup>10</sup> on the application of these theories to particular texts include U.C. Manus,<sup>11</sup> Justin Ukpong,<sup>12</sup> and Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole.<sup>13</sup> Ukpong<sup>14</sup> had earlier “propounded” a methodology called Inculturation Hermeneutics, but C.N.A. Cilumba<sup>15</sup> and Manus arguably evolved the methodology in 2001 and 2003 respectively into Intercultural Biblical exegesis/hermeneutic in their various publications.<sup>16</sup>

Works on Inculturation and Intercultural Hermeneutics which focus on the interpretation of particular texts often relate to liberation/deliverance, security, prosperity and, ethics. For example, George O. Folarin’s work<sup>17</sup> is on the ability of Jesus to meet human beings at their points of needs. Justin Ukpong’s work<sup>18</sup> is on liberation from economic oppression, while Manus’ work,<sup>19</sup> expresses the various attributes of Christ to meet the diverse needs of the African. Even the debate on “Christ, our ancestor” only explores the importance of divine-

human fellowship in a world full of fear.<sup>20</sup> There are other African models. They include “Christ the healer,” “Christ the witch doctor,” “Christ the caterpillar,” and “Christ the *Are Onakakanfo*” (“the War General”). Unfortunately, little work has been done on the intercultural study of New Testament (NT) Pneumatology, and this is the challenge that this study is taking up.

### **Inculturation Biblical Hermeneutics**

In Africa, Inculturation Hermeneutics makes the African context the subject of interpretation. In it, every dimension of the interpretive process is “consciously informed by the worldview of and the life experience” of the African culture.<sup>21</sup> Although Ukpong includes the historical, social, economic, political, and religious elements in Inculturation Hermeneutics, most African interpreters concentrate on the religious and the cultural study of the African interpreters.

Intercultural Hermeneutics requires that a particular biblical text to be interpreted within two or more cultures: the culture in which the text was first given/received and the contemporary context of the interpreter/reader of the document. Nearly all African Bible scholars concede to different degrees with the need to contextualize Bible interpretation.<sup>22</sup>

Many African interpreters characterize their hermeneutics as “bipolar,” because they allegedly hold to two hermeneutical poles of interpretation, “the text” and “the context”.<sup>23</sup> Jonathan A. Draper<sup>24</sup> has however rightly added “the interpreter” as third pole.

Manus recommends four steps to Intercultural interpretation. These are, the exposition of the African context; the exposition of the biblical context of the passage to be interpreted to show the closeness between the African context and the context of the text being interpreted; the exposition of the biblical text in the perspectives of literary criticism; and the hermeneutical deliverance of the text in the light of the contexts that are analyzed.<sup>25</sup> These steps are followed in the interpretation of the “Living Water” metaphor in John’s Gospel that is undertaken below, but not in the order suggested by Manus.

### **Significance of *Omi-Iye* (Living Water) among the Yoruba**

**a. Preamble:** According to C.L.C.E. Witcombe,<sup>26</sup> water of certain springs, like the spring at Lourdes<sup>27</sup> and rivers are regarded as sacred because of their connection with certain significant events. So since

running water is symbolic to the Yoruba and the symbolism of living water is significant to John’s Gospel, then the figure of flowing water in the two cultures can be employed to make interpretation clearer.<sup>28</sup> Again since religion remains an important referent point to major discussions, it is not surprising that many springs, rivers, lakes, and wells are regarded as sacred in Africa.

**b. In Traditional Religious Setting:** J.O. Awolalu<sup>29</sup> focuses on Ogun River, David O. Ogungbile<sup>30</sup> mainly on Osun River, Jacob Oluponna<sup>31</sup> on Oya (Niger), Okun (Ocean), Osa (Lagoon), and Osun River. Maria Abiola<sup>32</sup> comments on the mystical power of River Esinrinmi, and of overrun or flood water from rain, while Zakariyau Abdul Yakeen<sup>33</sup> addresses the power of water from early morning dew. The mentioned rivers are regarded as the most sacred in Western Nigeria.

A common Yoruba saying, “*Odo gbogbo l’agbo*” (Translation: “Every river/water is herbal/medicinal”),<sup>34</sup> implies that water from various sources is therapeutic. These include water collected from morning dew (Yakeen), certain rivers,<sup>35</sup> rain (Abiola), and flood/run-off water (Abiola). Such water is prayed on, and then bathed with to restore to good health.

Two allegedly powerful and popular rivers in the South Western Nigeria are Ogun, and Osun. Water from River Ogun heals the barren<sup>36</sup> while water from River Osun cures barrenness, eases pregnancy, protects from enemies, and negates the power of malevolent spiritual forces called *Ajogun*. Water from River Osun is also believed to be capable of preventing infant mortality.<sup>37</sup> In fact, Osun State’s motto, “The State of the living spring,” came from the river. The term “living spring” describes Osun as a river whose water improves quality of life in various aspects such as healing the sick, protecting the attacked, and making one fruitful, something similar no matter how poorly, to what John calls “abundant life.” But Osun and Ogun rivers are not the only rivers enhancing the quality of life (“living water”) in the South Western Nigeria. There are other rivers whose water allegedly does this.

Symbolism of the “living water” (“running water”) among the Yoruba is significant to this study. David Ogungbile<sup>38</sup> observes this symbolism in passing in regard to River Osun but it is Jacob Olupona (2006:276) who clearly re-interprets the water of *Okun* (Ocean) and *Osa* (Lagoon) as metaphors: the Ocean symbolizes imperial power and mercantilism, and the Lagoon is symbolic of fertility.

Again, the sometimes calmness and turbulence of rivers depict the creativeness and aggressiveness of the divinity and River Osun exemplifies this.<sup>39</sup> An example of the aggressive power flowing water is seen in Osun's alleged destruction of Osanyin's herbal power in defence of Osogbo people when Osanyin was fighting them.<sup>40</sup> The use of water in rites of passage: ritually prepares the new born for life, the wife for a happy marriage, and the corpse for acceptance in the land of the dead.<sup>41</sup> Since the people of the South Western Nigeria are not so gullible to think that ordinary water can remove evil and sin, these symbolic uses of water point to things beyond themselves.

**c. In Indigenous (Aladura) Christian Setting:** An indigenous manifestation of Christianity in Nigeria is the *Aladura*<sup>42</sup> and it is characterized with the use of "*Omi Iye*." African Indigenous Churches also use water for healing and restoration of blessing. When they bless it, they claim that it becomes "*Omi Iye*" (Translation: "Water of Life"). Such is used in Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), the Cherubim & Seraphim (C&S) Church, the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC), and other Aladura churches. Only the use of water in the CAC and C&S is discussed below to highlight the point at stake. J.A. Ademakinwa<sup>43</sup> points out that the vision that Sophia Odunlami had in 1918 on the use of rain water for curing a ravaging epidemic, and on the use made of blessed water by Joseph Ayodele Babalola in Omu-Aran for delivering a woman with a four-year delayed pregnancy led to its adoption for use to heal in the CAC. Today some CAC assemblies like the Oke Itura, Akure have wells for their members. Only in rare cases do the CAC perpetually set apart particular rivers as holy.<sup>44</sup> Today, worshippers in the CAC drink, bath, and sprinkle blessed water on their properties for healing and some other miracles.

Abiodun Emmanuel (nee Akinsowon) of the C&S Church also used blessed water to heal smallpox in and around Ilesa in 1926. Even today, water is used in the C&S Church to heal barrenness, difficult pregnancy and chronic diseases, sterility, infertility, lack of peace, ill-luck, lack of good job, inability to find spouse, problem in the place, liquidation of business, and poverty.<sup>45</sup> "Women with overdue, prolonged, or difficult pregnancies are sometimes told to undergo ritual baths in rivers."<sup>46</sup> J.A. Omoyajowo<sup>47</sup> makes the following salient points on C&S Church's use of consecrated water. One, its use coincides with the way living water from springs and rivers is used in AIR for healing and

deliverance. Two, all C&S Church members believe in the efficacy of blessed water and attend prayer meetings and special services with buckets, bottles, and even pots of water for consecration before taking them home for use. Three, the blessed water is used for bathing, drinking and/or sprinkling; and four, many testify to healing after using the holy water. The use of blessed water permeates the whole C&S Church. But unlike in the C&S Church, the CAC does not approve bath in rivers even though some renegade “prophets” practice it in the denomination. Nevertheless, all the AIC view “blessed water” as “water of life” because it enhances the quality of human life by its ability to heal, deliver, and quicken deadness. Another observation is that all the AIC hold that “water of life” is only a bearer of divine power.

### **The Figurative Use of מים חיים (Living Water) in the Old Testament**

“Living water” is a rich figure in the Old Testament (OT). B.W. Anderson<sup>48</sup> points out that its “characteristics” provide the basis for its metaphorical uses. Even in cultic contexts (Lev.14:5-6, 50-52; Num. 19:13, 20-21), the Prophets held that the use of water remained symbolic because ritual cleansing cannot effectively remove sin (Isa. 1:16; Cf. Ps. 51: 7; Ezek. 36: 25).

Figure of the “living water(s)” (LXX: ὑδωρ ζῶν; BHS: מים חיים) appears among others, in Gen. 21:19; 26:19; Num. 19:17; Song 4:15; Jer. 2:13; and Zech. 14:8. Leland Ryken et.al.<sup>49</sup> describe concept from the Jewish perspective as the water that is moving. From here come other derivatives of the term for “life” such as active, fresh, and dynamic. C.K. Barrett<sup>50</sup> and Craig S. Keener<sup>51</sup> point out that the commonest understanding of the phrase is “fresh” and/or “flowing water.” But apart from this description of living water as symbolic of freshness is that by its quickening activity, it also improves the quality of life. This is the additional contention of Barrett.<sup>52</sup> In Gen. 26:19, the phrase takes on the meanings, “living/flowing/fresh water.”<sup>53</sup>

The term מים חיים in Num. 19:17 is translated “running/flowing/spring/fresh water,” depending on the version used. The use of “living water” with “the ashes of burnt heifer” for purification is applied to cleanse from defilement. “The resultant still is ordinary in its components but holy in its designation and divine in its application.” Since water and ashes cannot remove defilement, then the two ritual elements in the text are better taken as symbolic. The “living water” is not only “fresh” or “flowing” in the context it is the “life-giving” water.<sup>54</sup>

The bridegroom compares his spouse with among other things, “a well of *fresh water*” (Song 4:15). This is a metaphor. While the “flowing water” may be a picture of purity (Lev. 14:5-6, 50-52; 15:13) and/or freshness (Gen 26:19),<sup>55</sup> the comparison in Song 4:15 is not directly to the “living water” but to the *spring/well* of the water.

YHWH accused his people of forsaking him (Jer. 2:13), “the *fountain* (מקור) of living waters” and dug out a dry “pit” (באר) for themselves. The metaphor underlying the contrast is between YHWH as the source of life, health, and vitality, and other gods that cannot help.<sup>56</sup> Unlike C.F. Keil<sup>57</sup> contends, God is not the living water here, but *the source* of the living water.

While the precise meaning of Zech 14:6-8 is uncertain, its general picture is clear.<sup>58</sup> It addresses the Day of the Lord that would be characterized by cataclysmic phenomena. Included in the coming signs attending the day is the flow of “living water” that is emblematic of God’s blessings. The blessing (“water”) will persevere (or will not dry up).

The study of the concept of the “living water” in the OT above reveals that its use varies. Apart from just indicating the flow of water, it conveys dynamism, restoration, and fullness of life. The dying Ishmael got his life back when he found the “living water.” The ritually defiled was to be symbolically made whole through the sacrificial wash with ashes and “living water.” The bath of Naaman in River Jordan brought him recovery. YHWH as the source of the living water (Cf. Jer. 17:13) was in the OT by metonym also the source of all the good things that enhanced the quality of life. But the same “living water” like the Red Sea that brought salvation to God’s true worshippers (like Moses and other Israelites) also brought judgment on the stubborn (like the Egyptians) and the wayward. But scholars like C.K. Barrett observe that rabbinic literature interprets water metaphor rarely as the Holy Spirit, only as the Torah and Wisdom.<sup>59</sup> The idea of the Holy Spirit as a separate entity began to develop in the inter-testamental period, interpreting him in the OT as *fully perceived by Christians* may therefore be anachronistic. Comparing the “living water” with the Torah and Divine Wisdom was therefore known to the contemporaries of Jesus’ time.

## **Exegesis of the Living Water Metaphor in John 4 & 7**

### **a. The Living Water in John 4**

According to D.A. Carson,<sup>60</sup> John 4 can be divided into “narration (vv. 1-26), exposition (vv. 31-38) and demonstration (vv. 28-30, 39-40).” The advantage of this outline is that it holds the pericope well together. The present work only focuses on verses 1-15 and is captioned “The Gift of the Living Water.” Verses outside John 4:15 are referred to sparingly and only when absolutely necessary to the work.

**i. The Story in Brief (4:1-26):** John 4 is renowned for its “Living water” saying expressed in the story of the Samaritan woman. Briefly restated, with the growing popularity of Jesus’ ministry over John’s, and the resultant hatred from the Pharisees, Jesus left Judea passing through Samaria on his way to Galilee. It was here in Sychar, a city of Samaria that he came across a woman at the well with whom he engaged in discussion on the “living water.” The discursion led to the following observations: the woman was a Samaritan while Jesus was a Jew; the woman wanted the water to quench temporal thirst but Jesus talked to her of the water that has eternal value; the woman misunderstood the water that Jesus talked to her about and Jesus had to correct her; and finally, Jesus revealed himself to the woman unambiguously with the implied conclusion that she experienced the salvation brought by the Messiah (Cf. 4:39).

The first three verses of John 4 gave the reason why Jesus left Judea: his increasing popularity and the effect that had on the Pharisees. He decided to return Galilee. John 4: 4 states, “He had to go through Samaria.” The compulsion for Jesus to pass through Samaria in 4:4 was not for being the shortest route from Judea to Galilee but for the divine engagement awaiting him in Shechem.<sup>61</sup>

**ii. Dialogue on “the Living Water” (4:7-15):** Two dialogues are found in this section and the first is in vv. 7-10 with a parenthetical comment that his disciples went to the city to buy food in vs. 8.

**The First Dialogue (4:7-10):** The value of water to life cannot be overestimated. This woman and her neighbours needed it to survive. Of course, it was odd for her to go to the well alone, and at a strange time. Most women in that area came out to draw water in group and either early in the morning or when the sun had gone down. But her timing perfectly fit the plot. Jesus’ partner to the discussion was the “Samaritan woman”



(4:7). The word “Samaritan(s)” is only used in vs. 9, 7, 39, and 40. References in vs. 39 and 40 are outside this work. The translation of Σαμαρειται as “Samaritan” in vs. 5 & 7 is explanatory but inadequate. The contention here is that not all the inhabitants of Samaria in Jesus’ time were of mixed blood especially if T.H. Gaster<sup>62</sup> is right that remnant native Israelites and foreign colonists co-existed in Samaria, but for “tendentious reasons ... the Jewish version ignores the former; the Samaritan version, the latter.”

The phrase, “Jews have no association with Samaritans” (Greek: ου γαρ συγχρωνται ιουδαιοι σαμαριταις) in 4:9 implies a lot. Wayne Brindle notes that the problem between the two groups began with the division of the kingdom of Israel, and continued through successive incidents which promoted antagonism, including the importation of foreign colonists into Samaria by Assyria, the rejection of the new Samaritan community by the Jews, the building of a rival temple on Mt. Gerizim, the political and religious opportunism of the Samaritans, and the destruction of both the Samaritan temple and their capital of Shechem by John Hyrcanus during the second century B.C.<sup>63</sup>

The Samaritans accepted only the Pentateuch as Scripture, claimed to be descendants of Ephraim and Manasseh, and that their priests came from the tribe of Levi. “They prefer to call themselves ‘Shamerim’ - in Hebrew, guardians - for they contend that they have guarded the original Law of Moses, keeping it pure and unadulterated.”<sup>64</sup> They reject that the Assyrian deportation polluted everyone claiming that only an insignificant number of their people were deported. It can even be argued that after the deportation, the Samaritans who intermarried and those that did not kept on living side by side.<sup>65</sup>

The woman that featured in Jn. 4:1-26 was a Samaritan. The Jews alleged that the Samaritans (ται σαμαριται) were products of mixed marriages between Jews who initially settled in Samaria and the colonists deported to the area by the Assyrians. These foreigners allegedly brought their various gods to Samaria, and so polluted not only the blood of the people but also their land (Cf. 2 Kings 17:29). This probably explains the initial hostility of the woman at the well to Jesus (4:8), so the compulsion for Jesus to pass through Samaria was to attend to a divine assignment (4:4).

Stories of three individual Samaritans come readily to mind in the Gospels: The Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37); the Samaritan leper (Lk. 17:11-17); and the Samaritan Woman at the Well (Jn. 4:1-42). The first is

simply a parable of good neighborliness, the second a receiver of and testifier to the miracle of healing and the third, a recipient of the promise of “the living water.” The first two are male characters and are found in Luke, the last is a female.<sup>66</sup> Common to the three characters is anonymity and this suggests that the interest of the stories is not in the persons but the teachings conveyed.

The encounter at the well with Jesus calls for particular attention. Roberta Hestenes<sup>67</sup> notes the three liabilities against her to be membership of a minority race, guilt of immorality, and membership of inferior gender. In that case, Jesus broke many norms of his contemporary to commune with her. The cultural relationship between the Jews and Samaritans of Jesus’ time is described as ου ... συγγρωνται in Jn. 4:9. Συγγρωνται is 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural, present of συγγραομαι. Συγγρωνται means to have social intercourse with, have dealings with, or associate on friendly terms with someone.<sup>68</sup> The ου before it is negative particle, and when it combines with συγγραομαι as does here, it means that there is no cordial relationship. This is the sense of the NIV rendering, “For Jews do not associate with Samaritans” (4:9).

By asking the woman for “water ... to drink” Jesus broke certain social norms. Some of the customs of his day that he broke were that as a Jew he discussed with a Samaritan and that as a gentleman he discussed with a woman of questionable character. Again, contrary to the practice of the Jews of Southern Israel, he asked for favour from a Samaritan, and he strangely requested to share water utensil with a Samaritan. Edwin Blum comments on this thus, “A Jewish Rabbi would rather go thirsty than violate these proprieties.”<sup>69</sup> Jesus’ actions were provocative and they reveal how far he went to incorporate the oppressed, the forgotten, and the socially prejudiced into God’s programme.<sup>70</sup> The other two positive stories of Samaritans in Luke 10: 25-37; and 17: 11-17 could also be interpreted in this light.

This first round of dialogue centres on Jesus’ request for “water to drink” (Greek: Υδωρ ... πειν, Jn. 4:7). The Samaritan woman repeated the request out of curiosity (4:9). John 4:10 links the first (4:7-10) on the temporal water with the second dialogue on the “Living water” (4:11-26). Some scholars point out that the purpose of the first round of dialogue was to attract the woman’s attention to listen to the discussion to follow. John 4:10 links the discussion on the request for drinking water to the promise of the living water made by Jesus to the woman.

**The Second Dialogue (4:11-15):** While the second dialogue covers John 4:11-26, the study here is on the living water which extends only to v.15. One of the three commonest metaphors in John's Gospel is "water," and "living water" is a particularly significant metaphor because the term only appears in John's Gospel. J. Joubert<sup>71</sup> observes that a metaphor "works through a system of associated implications known from the secondary subject." It is therefore the responsibility of the reader or hearer of a metaphoric statement to select the characteristics of the secondary subject of a metaphor to apply to the primary subject of the metaphor.

The term, "living water," appears in v.10 without article ( $\upsilon\delta\omega\rho\ \zeta\omega\nu$ ), and in v.11 with article ( $\tau\omicron\ \upsilon\delta\omega\rho\ \tau\omicron\ \zeta\omega\nu$ ). In both verses  $\upsilon\delta\omega\rho\ \zeta\omega\nu$  are both in accusative singular and the two expressions with or without article basically mean the same thing. It was in the OT a sign of God's special blessing for a pilgrim people (Isa. 41:18), a renewal of inner strength (Isa. 23:2-3), or an eschatological blessing (Zech. 14:8-9). Comparing Proverbs 13:14 with the use of "living water" for Torah in rabbinic Judaism, Kevin Vanhoozer<sup>72</sup> concludes that living water in John 4 most likely represents the revelation or truth which Jesus gives, and that the woman in the story received it and found life.

To Merrill C. Tenney,<sup>73</sup> the living water in John 4 refers to Jesus. But Tenney may not be right here because in 4:10, Jesus speaks of "giving" and not "being" the living water. C. Koester<sup>74</sup> and Joubert<sup>75</sup> are most likely right therefore that the living water to be given to the believer here stands for the Holy Spirit. Of course, one cannot easily arrive at that conclusion in John 4 without the help of John 7.

It has long been recognized by scholars that the Fourth Gospel contains tensions. One of such is the eschatological tension, between what has come and what is yet to come. For example M.B. Turner,<sup>76</sup> in working out the implication of the tension highlighted in Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan's woman in John 4:23, on the hour "is coming," and "now is" ( $\alpha\lambda\lambda\alpha\ \epsilon\rho\chi\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota\ \omega\rho\alpha\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \nu\upsilon\nu\ \epsilon\sigma\tau\iota\nu$ ), rejects whatever interpretation restricts Jesus' promise of the living water to the future. Turner's conclusion is that since the promise appeared in the context of realized eschatology, the woman tasted the living water at the time, and one may add that she might not have had the filling of the water till after the resurrection.

While metaphors are to aid understanding, sometimes they do not do that.<sup>77</sup> This was the initial problem of the Samaritan woman (Cf. 4:11-12). Could the woman's initial misunderstanding of the metaphor be

excused? One expected a Jew with the knowledge of the OT and the rabbinical Tradition to understand this, but not the poor Samaritan woman whose people subscribed only to the Pentateuch as the word of God. There are other instances where Jesus’ audiences also misunderstood his metaphors.

**b. The Living Water in John 7:**

**i. The Background to and the Story (7:37-39):** The background to Jesus’ reference to the rivers of living water in this text was the Jews’ Feast of Tabernacles. For seven days, a Priest drew water from the Pool of Siloam and brought it in procession to the Temple with the joyful sounds of trumpets. The water was then poured into a bowl beside the altar. It was probably on the eighth day that Jesus unfolded the significance of the symbolism of the water libation. According to Morris<sup>78</sup> and Joel Marcus,<sup>79</sup> Jesus used the water libation at the Feast to symbolize the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Cf. 7:39) which is to be received by faith in Jesus (7:38; Cf. 4:10; 17:37). This bestowal of the Holy Spirit was dependent on the resurrection of Jesus.

**ii. The Problem and Interpretation of the Text:** The utterance of Jesus, εαν τις διψα ερχεσθω προς με και πινετω ο πιστευων εις εμε καθως ειπεν η γραφη ποταμοι εκ της κοιλιας αυτου ρευσουσιν υδατος ζωντος in 7:37b-38 is perplexing to exegetes. Glenn Balfour,<sup>80</sup> among other NT scholars identifies the problem areas to be the grammar, the quotation source, and the application of the text. The grammatical problem centres on the punctuation of the verses. This is allegedly significant to determining the referent of αυτου in the phrase εκ της κοιλιας αυτου (“out of *his* belly”). UBS places a period after πινετω (“let him drink”) and a comma after εις εμε (“in me”) to read, εαν τις διψα ερχεσθω προς με και πινετω. Ο πιστευων εις εμε, καθως ειπεν η γραφη ποταμοι εκ της κοιλιας αυτου ρευσουσιν υδατος ζωντος (“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. The one who believes in me, just as the scripture says, from within him will flow rivers of living water”). In this traditional or Eastern interpretation, αυτου refers to the believer from whom the living water flows out. It is a common Semitic Greek and is common in John.<sup>81</sup> Another is to place a comma after προς με (“to me”) and a period after εις εμε (“in me”) to read, εαν τις διψα ερχεσθω προς με και πινετω ο πιστευων εις εμε. Καθως ειπεν η γραφη, ποταμοι εκ της κοιλιας αυτου ρευσουσιν υδατος ζωντος. This translates, “If anyone thirsts let him come to me and let him drink who believes in me. Just as the scripture said,

rivers of living water will flow from his belly.” The suggestion that this second punctuation gives rise a type of Hebraic parallelism<sup>82</sup> has been rejected by Zane Hodges on the ground that the parallelism is not so exact.<sup>83</sup> Gary Burge however appears more convincing “that Semitic parallelism does not require verbal exactitude but thematic precision.”<sup>84</sup> The implications of the different readings resulting from the placements of the punctuations will be examined later.

The second problem is the source of the quotation introduced with the phrase *καθως ειπεν η γραφη* (7:38), “just as the scripture said.” Much scholarly discussions appear lead to the following opinions: that 7:38 is not a direct quote from any particular OT text;<sup>85</sup> that the ideas in the verse are paralleled in various OT texts; and that Zechariah 14:8 is significant to the discussion.<sup>86</sup> Some of the OT references suggested as the sources for the quotation in 7:38 are Exodus 17:5–6; Numbers 20:7–11; Psalm 78:15–16; Proverbs 5:15; 18:4; Isaiah 12:3; 58:11; Zechariah 13:1; and Ezekiel 47:1-11.<sup>87</sup> While one may not agree with all the suggestions it is fair to conclude that for John, “the scripture” he refers to is a conflation of a whole range of texts and passages, or could even be John’s personal comment on OT texts.

The third problem is whether the belly from where the rivers of the living water flow is that of Jesus or the Christian believer. The traditional punctuation of 7:38 allows only for the latter meaning while the Western punctuation allows only for the former meaning. Building extensively on Isaiah 12:3, Marcus<sup>88</sup> argues that the source of the rivers of the living water in this text is the belly of Jesus. This is the Christological interpretation. To Constable, the Christian believer is the source of the living water that flows out in the text.<sup>89</sup> Balfour<sup>90</sup> exploits the concept of the presence of “double entendre” in John to conclude that neither of the two ideas is mutually exclusive to this text. Theology sometimes plays a vital role in resolving this issue. If the “rivers of the living water figure” in 7:38 refers to the Holy Spirit, then nowhere else in John will the Spirit be said to be flowing from the believer to others. Rather, Jesus is the source of bestowing the Spirit to others (7:37b). If the radical but well argued view of Gundry is correct that the living water flowing out from the belly in 7:38 is urine then the believer is the source.<sup>91</sup> Hodges proffers two supports for the view that the source of the rivers in 7:38 is the believer’s belly: the traditional reading does not make the believer the source of the living water; it is improbable that Jesus will

refer to himself in 7:37b in the first person, and in vs. 38 in the third.<sup>92</sup> The position of the present study is that Jesus is the bestowal of the living water, the Holy Spirit on the believer (7:37b), and that the gushing out of water from the belly (urine) of the believer is simply a figure of superabundant life for the believer him/herself and not for others.<sup>93</sup>

### **Re-Interpretation from an African Perspective**

For African theology, "living" connotes dynamism or power. "Living water" therefore refers to "the water that is flowing," "the water that gives life" and "the water that improves the quality life." From these come the belief among the Yoruba that certain types of water are divinely empowered to heal, make fruitful, prosper, and protect from the evil ones. The request in John 4 and the invitation in 7 are therefore significant, to the African Christian.

Unlike in the "bread of life" (6:27) and the "light of the world" (8:12) sayings, Jesus did not call himself the given water but the giver of the water (4:10; cf. 7:37-39). The concept of the "living water" among the Yoruba and the AIC in particular is both creative and aggressive: water bears the divine power to destroy the wicked and to redeem bad situations. This of course does not replace the salvific work of the Holy Spirit, it presupposes it.

This may be what Jesus meant by the promise of abundant life. Particular context determines the use of "abundance" (περισσος) in the NT. While it means "extraordinary" in Matthew 5:47 and "more than" in Matthew 5:37, it means "abundantly" in John 10:10. The phrase, ζῶνι ἐχῶσιν καὶ περισσὸν ἐχῶσιν therefore means, "Having life and having (it) abundantly" (John 10:10).<sup>94</sup> To the Yoruba, abundant life is holistic: a healthy life both spiritual and material. The "water of life" is therefore not only the bestowal of eternal life, but also other blessings of life.

While many exegetes agree with the editor of 7:39 that the water given by Jesus is the Holy Spirit, not all agree that the water flowing out from the believer's belly is urine. If that interpretation is however accepted it could symbolize good health,<sup>95</sup> and so indicates that the Holy Spirit is holistic in its blessings.

## **Conclusion**

“Living water” metaphor was a common figure to the initial recipients of the Bible and the contemporary Yoruba of Nigeria. Comparing the use of the figure in the two cultures can therefore help in explaining its message. This work therefore attempted to interpret the figure in John 4 and 7 in its biblical cultural contexts, and its Yoruba recipients’ cultural context to draw-out its meaning for readers of the texts.

The OT rarely interprets water as Holy Spirit, Proverbs as Wisdom, and rabbinic literature as Torah. But apart from these, the idea is widespread in the OT that “Living water” could be a reference to a flowing water, it did convey healing and deliverance, and is a symbol of divine blessing.

To the Yoruba, divine water is regarded as a conveyor of all sorts of blessing, spiritual and material. In all these cases, water is only symbolic. John 7 states that the given water is the Holy Spirit, and both 4 and 7 hold that the giver of the Living water is Jesus. While the living water that flows into the believer is the Holy Spirit, the waste product flowing out of the belly is indicative of good health. The contribution of this work is that it not only shows that the gift of Jesus to the believer is the Holy Spirit but that with this Holy Spirit come other blessings of God.

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