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"Living Water" in the narrative of John 4:5-42 : Quenching thirst in unexpected spaces

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VIII. "Living Water" in the narrative of John 4:5-42:

Quenching thirst in unexpected spaces[1]

Nina Müller van Velden[2]

Summary

Amidst the worst ongoing drought that parts of South Africa have experienced in decades, the reality of dependence on clean, running water has come to the fore anew. In a country where the gap between rich and poor is exceptionally high, with unacceptably high levels of poverty and unemployment, and innumerable instances of gender-based violence, this situation has impacted most severely those already most vulnerable: poor, black women. In dialogue with this South African context of racialised and gendered poverty, further aggravated by the toxicity of gender-based violence as well as the suffering of Mother Earth, the narrative of John 4:5-42 will be read: a narrative in which Jesus, a Jewish man, meets a Samaritan woman at a well and reveals Himself in ecological terms - as the One who provides Living Water. Such reading takes as a point of departure the contours of ecotheology, ecofeminism and gender criticism, and attempts to recognise the multiple binary categories which are represented in this narrative. Measured against the patriarchal prescriptions and expectations of the ancient narrative context, I suggest that there are particular

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1 This chapter is devoted to Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the founding member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. It is through her courage in transgressing patriarchal protocol that the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians was founded in 1989, and that a profound legacy of 30 years of transformation in African theological scholarship could take place.

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instances of transgression which take place, and that it is these transgressive acts – by both the Samaritan woman and Jesus – which culminate in transformation of the life of this woman and an entire community. For contemporary readers, specifically those who find themselves in privileged settings, this narrative may provide a means by which to challenge and be challenged: moving from deeply rooted racist, sexist, classist and anthropocentric convictions and practices, toward transgressive and transformative alternatives, whereby all who thirst may have access to living water in its fullest sense.

The South African context: Drought and its unequal impact

It takes no starker reminder than a drought to make one all too aware of creation's dependence on water as a source of life. Over the past few months, severe water restrictions have at times been in place in the Western Cape province of South Africa – necessitated by one of the worst droughts in this particular region in decades. At its worst, residents in this province had to abide by Level 6B water restrictions – the highest possible restriction on water usage in South Africa. Level 6B restrictions limit water usage per person to 50 litres per day.[3] Many residents in the province have since started making use of grey water in their homes, e.g. for flushing toilets and watering gardens. Although restrictions have been lifted slightly after recent good rainfall and a rise in dam levels in the province, the scarcity of clean water and the impact of the drought continue to play a large role in the lives of its residents.

The limitation of fresh water, brought about by the ongoing drought, has highlighted anew the dire ecological crisis and the impact of human irresponsibility and excessive consumption on natural resources – particularly given the fact that this coastal region is typically known

[3] See for example, The South African's *Level 6B water restrictions have started: Here's what they mean for Cape Town* (*https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/level-6b-water-restrictions-cape-town/*), accessed on 30 June 2019.

as one where water was seldom a scarcity.[4] The impact of the drought has especially been felt in a significant rise in food prices over the last few months - particularly fresh goods – and affects the poor, black majority most, vis. those already struggling to make ends meet. Many farmers had to decrease their farming activities, or stopped farming completely. This resulted in lay-offs and unemployment, and numerous full-time employment opportunities on farms have had to be changed to seasonal work.[5] Given the large role of agricultural activity in the South African economy and the already high levels of unemployment and poverty, both the immediate and subsequent impact on the daily lives of vulnerable communities continues to be immense.

Alongside lower levels of rainfall, the Western Cape in particular continues to experience increased levels of water usage in its urban areas, due to the demands of heightened population density and ongoing urban development. Demand is not keeping up with supply, and even those who have been able to numb their conscience by bathing in excess for decades at the expense of the majority of poor, black people, have started to experience the impact of limitations to clean and running water. Things are evidently not as they should be – and Mother Earth and her children are groaning and weeping louder and louder as a result of exploitative power-abuse, and the disregard of life in all its configurations, especially at the hand of a wealthy minority.[6]

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4 Information boards on highways, local radio stations and newspapers continue to urge residents to keep up their efforts of using water sparingly and responsibly. Numerous public spaces (e.g. public toilets in shopping centres) have continued to supply customers with hand sanitiser, and/or limited taps with running water available for use.

5 See EWN's reports, for example: *30,000 jobs lost in WC agriculture sector due to drought* (*https://ewn.co.za/2018/12/21/drought-costs-30-000-their-jobs-in-agriculture-sector-in-wc*), accessed on 12 August 2019, and *How droughts will affect South Africa's broader economy* (*http://theconversation.com/how-droughts-will-affect-south-africas-broader-economy-111378*), accessed on 12 August 2019.

6 In his article titled, "Earth-Mission: The Third Mission of the Church," (2010) Norman Habel writes poignantly on the "cries of Earth" and the "cries for justice" in both ancient biblical writings, as well as contemporary settings. He emphasises the relation between poverty and the ecological disaster in which Earth finds herself as follows: "The poor of Earth are the most vulnerable in times of ecological

Forced to drink toxic water: The related injustices of poverty, drought, and gender abuse

In South Africa, women and girl children in particular are very familiar with groaning and weeping. The country's devastating statistics of gender-based, intimate partner and sexual violence continue to nauseate year after year.[7] The Christian faith tradition, which plays an important role in the South African society, is not exempt from such groaning and weeping; on the contrary, it is often within (so-called) Christian marriages, pastor-congregant relations, and adult-child relations where such forms of violence are condoned: women are told to return to their abusive husbands; pastors make advances on female congregants and children, threatening them to silence; fathers abuse and rape their daughters; and girls are taught that their bodies are the cause for boys and men "wanting sex" from them. Patriarchal and heteronormative teachings and perceptions continue to have a stronghold in many Christian faith communities in South Africa, which in turn shapes communities and entire societies.

In the context of drought, I contend, the "lack of water" as ecological crisis, and the "toxic water" of gender and sexual abuse – aggravated by unemployment and poverty - are closely related. These injustices are marked by the need for intersectionality[8] in order to recognise the

disaster, and the plight of the poor is likely to reach disastrous proportions in the near future" (2010:119).

7 Reliable statistics on the actual experiences of gender-based violence in South Africa is notoriously difficult to find. Many instances simply go unreported, or where they are reported, are subject to poor administration and insufficient documentation and reporting. The following provide an idea of what girls and women in South Africa experience: STATSSA's *Crime against women in South Africa Report 03-40-05* (*http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-40-05/Report-03-40-05June2018.pdf*), accessed August 12, 2019; and *Address by President Cyril Ramaphosa at the Presidential Summit on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide, 1 November 2018* (*https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-gender-based-violence-and-femicide-summit-1-nov-2018-0000*), accessed August 12, 2019.

8 Kimberlé Crenshaw is regarded as the leading scholar in intersectionality, a term which became especially popular during the end of the 1980's and beginning of the 1990's. Although some scholars have noted the complexity of even just describing what intersectionality is (cf. McCall 2005:1771-1800), intersectionality

interplay of factors such as race, class, socio-economic status, employment, gender, sexual identity, location, etc. Not all South Africans are affected to an equal degree by the drought: being a black, poor, unemployed woman who lives in an informal settlement in Langa, for example, places one in an entirely different position than a white, wealthy, businessman who lives in an affluent suburb such as Durbanville.

Ecotheology, ecofeminism and gender criticism as theoretical contours

Theologians who focus on eco-justice, often called ecotheologians, take up seriously the enormity of the ecological crisis of earth and all that is dependent on it. Scholars such as Rhoads & Rossing (2016:9-10) contend that the single largest contributing factor to this crisis is the human species. Pursuing development and a way of living that has little or no regard for the impact it has on the Earth and the ecology has caused damage to the extent that a major transformation is now required. Historically, the church has been unsuccessful in changing anthropocentric and exploitative attitudes towards the Earth; it appears to have rather contributed to the crisis in terms of its attitude and practices. Rhoads & Rossing (2016) suggest a "thoroughgoing reformation" for the church: a worldwide and ecumenical transformation of proclamation, preaching, worship, teaching, witnessing, communal formation, action, and advocacy "so as to make care for all creation foundational for missional vocation." This calls for a *metanoia* of the mind and of practice of the whole church (Rhoads & Rossing 2016:9-10).

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generally refers to the multiple dimensions of lived experiences of individuals and particular groups of people, which cannot be reduced to a single axis. Initially focused on the manner in which gender and race intersect (particularly in terms of Black women) (cf. Crenshaw 1989:139-167), it has since also come to include a range of other descriptors, including class, ethnicity, language, sexual identity, religion, politics, and geographical location.

The relation between gender justice and ecological justice has been noted, particularly, in the field of ecofeminist theology. Ecofeminist theologians make an effort to indicate the ways in which feminist and ecotheological concerns intersect, particularly regarding dominion of creation and the still-prevailing dualisms of human-nature, matter-spirit, body-mind, male-female and public-private – binaries that inherently represent inequality and distinction with the notion that one is "better" than the other. Within ecofeminist theological circles, emphasis is placed on the manner in which theological discourses should engage holistically with creation on the theme of justice – moving away from anthropocentric[9] and androcentric[10] worldviews, toward a Christian worldview that regards all forms of life as of equal importance.[11]

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[9] An understanding of reality in which humans fulfil the central and most important role, with all other forms of created life subordinated to the needs of humanity.

[10] An understanding of reality in which men fulfil the central and most important role, with all other forms of human experiences subordinated to the needs and desires of men. Heteronormativity highlights the prominence and preference for heterosexual (male) and hegemonic masculine experiences.

[11] For the sake of this paper, this very simplistic description of ecofeminist theology is offered. Of course, as noted by Eaton (2005), the field of ecofeminism and ecofeminist theology is much more complex. Furthermore, there is a large range of diversity within ecofeminism as a whole, but also within ecofeminist theology (Eaton 2005:11-36). Rosemary Radford Ruether is considered one of the first ecofeminist voices who explored the intersection of feminism, ecology and religion. In her 1975 publication "New Woman, New Earth" she says the following (1975:204): "Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socio-economic relations and the underlying values of this society." Lilian Siwila (2014) notes that ecofeminism is a conceptual framework, and "(a)lthough ecofeminism can be read as a universal concept, it is also interpreted differently according to context, just as the conceptual framework also seriously takes into account context such as race, gender and class" (2014:132).

In John 4:5-42, the reader encounters a narrative that speaks to the lived and very tangible experiences of groaning and weeping as a result of exploitative power-abuse. This narrative depicts the unlikely meeting between Jesus, a Jewish man, and an anonymous Samaritan woman at a well – a dialogue marked by transgression on the part of both Jesus and the woman. Moreover, it is a meeting in which the imagery of living water – an Earth image – is appropriated to convey life-giving truths which transform not only the life of the woman, but of an entire community; with the promise of "never drying up".

In an attempt to take seriously the experience of the character of the Samaritan woman and the Earth imagery of living water, I propose a gender-critical reading of this narrative, informed by the concerns and foci of ecofeminist theologians. As a hermeneutical framework, gender criticism refers to an approach that interrogates male/female and masculine/feminine binaries, and the type of power relations invested in such binaries (cf. Müller van Velden 2018:18). As it relates to engagement with biblical narratives and characters, Ken Stone (as quoted by Guest 2012:17) notes the following questions evoked by gender criticism as an approach:

> What norms or conventions of gender seem to be presupposed by this text? How might attention to the interdisciplinary study of gender allow readers of the Bible to tease out such presuppositions? How are assumptions about gender used in the structure of a particular plot, or manipulated for purposes of characterisation? How is gender symbolism related to other types of symbolism in the text? How does the manipulation of gender assumptions in a text relate to other textual dynamics, including not only literary but also theological and ideological dynamics?

In the subsequent reading of John 4:5-42, I pay particular attention to the manner in which Jesus, as a Jewish male, and the Samaritan woman, interact – specifically against the background of 1st century gender ideals and expectations. Moreover, I ask what potential the Earth imagery of living water in these narrative holds, and how it may speak to the complex South African contextual concerns detailed above. This requires a sensitivity for the multiple layers of power and binary pairs which are embedded in patriarchal narrative settings, such as the one of this Johannine narrative.

An unexpected meeting at a well: Jesus and the anonymous, Samaritan woman[12]

The narrative of John 4:5-42 can broadly be divided into three parts: the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (4:5-30); the conversation between Jesus and his disciples (4:31-38); and the residents of the town meeting up with Jesus (4:39-42). For the purpose of this chapter, I focus on part one (4:5-30), and part three (4:39-42).

Transgression of boundaries and binaries: John 4:5-30

Jesus and the Samaritan woman meet each other at Jacob's well in the Samaritan town, Sychar (4:5-6),[13] while his disciples went to town to buy food (4:8). Jesus, a Jewish man, meets a Samaritan woman, alone. As was to be expected from travelling, Jesus is tired from the journey. Notably, it is more or less the middle of the day (4:6).

According to the custom of the time, men and women were not to be alone in each other's presence in a public setting such as this one, unless they were married[14] or related.[15]

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12 Direct quotations of the narrative of John 4:5-42 have been taken from the New International Version (2011) translation.

13 This area contained numerous Jewish reminders. There was the piece of land bought by Jacob (Gen 33:18,19). Jacob promised the piece of land to his son, Joseph, on his deathbed (Gen 48:22). After Joseph passed away in Egypt, his body was returned to Palestine and buried there (Jos 24:32) (Barclay 1975:147).

14 Following in the footsteps of numerous scholars who interpret this scene as a betrothal scene, which reminds of similar Old Testament well scenes (particularly Genesis 29, where the same well is mentioned when Jacob meets his first wife Rachel, also at midday), feminist scholar Sandra Schneiders (2003) interprets this as a betrothal-type scene in which the woman represents the Samaritan element of the Johannine community, who believed they were the new Israel, bride of the true Bridegroom, Jesus (Schneiders 2003:144). In as much as the narrative could reflect such a socio-religious, I prefer not to interpret this scene as a betrothal scene, rather following the suggestion of Jo-Ann Brant (2011) who asserts that the

Jesus' reason for being alone is a practical one: his disciples have gone in search of food in the town, and he has stayed behind to rest. However, the fact that the woman finds herself alone at the well in the middle of the day, is unconventional. Typically, women would go to wells in groups to draw water (among other reasons for their safety, as wells were some way out of town); and when they do so, it will much rather be done in the morning and in the late afternoon, than during the middle of the day.[16]

Jesus initiates conversation and asks the woman for a drink (4:7), to which she replies by stating the obvious: he is a Jew and she is a Samaritan woman, and therefore He is acting completely out of order by asking her for a drink (cf. Brant 2011:83). Should there be any doubt about the religious and political conventions, the narrator provides an aside to the audience by explicitly stating that Jews do not associate with Samaritans (4:9).[17] The rules of religious, ethnic and

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woman's implicit denial of Jesus' request breaks from the convention and rather acts out a conflict narrative (2011:84).

15 Such gendered roles are embedded in the cultural script of honour and shame, which framed practically all behaviour within the first century Mediterranean context. Patriarchal frameworks shape such hierarchical understandings of persons based on their gender and is deeply embedded in the history of humanity. According to Denise Ackermann (1993:21-22) patriarchy can be described as a system with social, historical, religious and economic spheres which serves to uphold the domination of male over female – both on a literal and symbolical level. Its roots are in the legal, economic and social system of antiquity, which validates and enforces the supremacy of the male head of the (extended) household over its other members, i.e. wives, children, slaves and possessions.

16 In reference to the well and the use of the word πηγή which denotes specifically running water, Jo-Ann Brant notes that "water signifies life, but a well signifies water rights, over which men compete" (2011:82). In as much as women were typically the fetchers of water, they were not the owners of the source of water.

17 The background to this narrative is the long, painful history of conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans – at its heart a socio-political and religious divide that goes back all the way to the Assyrian exile. Therefore it is no surprise that the Samaritan woman herself expresses discomfort with the interaction between herself and Jesus, a Jewish man (4:9). She knows the Jewish purity laws all too well, and that the Samaritans are deemed unclean by Jewish believers. This categorisation goes as far as the Assyrian exile, when remaining persons from the ten exiled

gender interaction are clearly being transgressed. Besides the fact that a Jew is speaking here to an impure person (according to Jewish conviction) and does so by placing himself in a position of need and dependence, it is a *man* that is speaking to a *woman* in public (cf. Brant 2011:83).

Instead of directly answering her question on the cultural taboos on the table, Jesus responds metaphorically about his own identity (4:10-15), namely that He offers water that never runs dry and brings about eternal life. As is to be expected in a Johannine narrative where misunderstanding is a common theme, the woman at first does not understand what he is trying to tell her. Ironically enough it is precisely her awareness of boundaries, rules and restrictions set by religious beliefs, cultural convictions and ethnicity which lead her to transgress particular social and gendered conventions. She continues her bold engagement with Jesus, asking Him questions about the source of the living water He speaks of and his identity in comparison to their father, Jacob. Rather than taking offence or disregarding her, Jesus continues to engage with her by answering in image-laden language concentrated around water (4:11-14). Eventually the woman requests of Jesus the seemingly "magical" water that he is talking about (4:15).

Suddenly the direction of the conversation changes and the personal experiences of the woman become the focus (4:16-18), thereby intensifying the transgressive nature of this meeting at the well. Not only are Jesus and the woman talking to each other alone – they are talking about her former and present sexual relations and ultimately the most

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Israelite tribes married non-Israelites who were displaced to their area by the Assyrians. According to the Jewish law these so-called "mixed marriages" were a very serious transgression. After the Babylonian exile the rebuilding of the temple under the lead of Ezra and Nehemia took place. The Samaritans, however, were not allowed to participate in the building process, due to their so-called unholiness. In reaction, they did their best to deter the rebuilding of the temple (Esra 4:3; Neh 2:20). Seeing as they were not allowed at the temple in Jerusalem, they established their own temple and priesthood on Mount Gerazim (cf. Brown 1966:170; Beasley-Murray 1987:60; Barclay 1975:149-151; Koester 2003:187-188). Since then the divide has been unrepairable – so much so, that they even avoided each other's geographical locations during travels.

private sphere of her life.[18] According to the ancient understanding of honour and shame, whereby a woman's modesty and sexuality are to be protected and kept within the realm of the private sphere[19] of the home lest she be considered shameless, this conversation places both Jesus and the woman in extremely dishonourable positions, which would certainly bring her and especially Jesus' reputation in jeopardy.[20]

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18 When surveying traditional commentaries on this part of the narrative, it is obvious how many choose to portray this woman as having agency over her own body and sexuality, who chose to live a life of licentiousness – at times even being called a "prostitute". They interpret her reply to Jesus in 4:17 ("I have no husband") and his response in 4:18 ("The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true") as a classic confession of sin, followed by Jesus' pardon for her supposedly immoral behaviour. These include Brown (1966:171), Barclay (1975:156-157), and Beasley-Murray (1987:61). See Ridderbos (1997:158-161) for a short overview on some strands of interpretation on this part of the narrative, including references to the allegorical interpretations that have prevailed with regards to the "five husbands" of the "woman", allegedly with reference to 2 Kings 17:24. Musa Dube offers a refreshing alternative to these allegorical interpretations by offering a dramatic re-telling of the narrative, where the woman stands for both Africa and the women of Africa; "(t)he story is now retold as a comment on the various political regimes that have come through Southern Africa, converging in the present day Zimbabwe" (Dube 2001:41). Thereby, the tangible experiences of oppression, as experienced by most African woman (due to gender, racial/ethnic and religious tensions) as well as the economic and political crisis suffered by Africa as a continent, comes to the fore (Dube 2001:42).

19 That is, under the protection of her husband or father, or eldest brother or uncle where the former is not present.

20 Numerous feminist scholars question and disregard the "immoral woman" interpretation, as there is no deliberate indication or description of the woman as a prostitute or immoral person in the text. Gail O'Day (1998:384) notes, "Perhaps it is not surprising that commentators on this text have more readily accepted the offer of the gospel to the Samaritans, a despised people, than they have accepted the offer of the gospel to the woman, a despised sex. This resistance to Jesus' boundary breaking in his conversation with the woman takes two main forms. First, many commentators raise questions about the woman's moral character. Second, many commentators express doubts about the woman's ability to engage Jesus in serious conversation. Both strategies attempt to delegitimise the woman as a conversation partner for Jesus and hence as a recipient of the gospel."

Against the background of the socio-cultural context of the time, i.e. laws on marriage and divorce, women's dependency on men (and their physical, social and economic vulnerability without the patriarchal protection of a man), as well as their very limited input concerning the annulment of a marriage (only allowed in very particular circumstances), it would appear from their discussion that this woman has been on the receiving end of much pain, loss and abandonment: that she had been divorced or deserted by her husband, or that her husband had passed away, and/or that she found herself in a levirate marriage (cf. Habermann 2012:667). The audience is not provided with much detail, but one thing seems to be clear: she has experienced deep pain, and is well-versed with incidences of vulnerability.[21]

Read against this background, Jesus is starting not only an impermissible conversation at this point, but also an incredibly sensitive one. By posing his question about her husband, He is opening the door for this Samaritan woman to take her honesty towards him to an even deeper level. Her expectations were most likely that she would be rejected (yet again). But Jesus surprises her. He transgresses the conventions by recognising her as a person and thereby rejects not this woman, but rather the gendered and patriarchal constructions within which she has been cast by her community. Subsequently, she can recognise Him as a prophet (4:19). In this moment of unallowable intimacy and recognition, the woman understands that this man does not fit the norm of power abuse that she has become accustomed to. Her recognition is itself an act of transgression – of crossing the boundaries of who would be expected to recognise Jesus, and who would not.

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[21] Lilly Nortjé-Meyer offers a decolonising reading of the Samaritan woman (2018:145-154), which is particularly relevant for my own context of the Dutch Reformed Church – the largest Afrikaans reformed church denomination in South Africa, that was a convenient spouse of the nationalistic political agenda of the apartheid government until 1994. Nortjé-Meyer offers strong critique on the Afrikaans translation of Charles Erdman's commentary on the Gospel of John, authored by DR Snyman. She notes that "(t)he colonial ideology of the white Afrikaans male has clearly influenced his view of the person of the Samaritan woman and her conversation with Jesus. It serves as a cultural text that is central to the strategies of modern imperialism" (Nortjé-Meyer 2018:145).

This recognition opens the door for the woman to scrape together her courage and put the most obvious and divisive topic between them (besides gender!) on the table, namely their different places of worship. This is much more than a religious discussion: at its heart, it is a political discussion about ethnicity and nationalistic identity. For a woman to speak of such public matters, let alone to a man, whilst they are alone, was unimaginable. Religion, ethnicity, gender, marital status, sexuality: all structures and institutions of social power (or not), have now been put on the table. Yet again, Jesus participates fully in this episode of transgressive behaviour, engaging her beliefs and convictions. Finally, the intensive "us" and "them" rhetoric comes to a halt when Jesus reveals himself to her as the expected Messiah, the one speaking to her here and now (4:20-26).

The disciples return from town, but know better than to ask what is going on (4:27). One might assume that, at the very least, they would not approve of the interaction they are witnessing between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Whatever their body language may communicate appears to have no effect on the woman. She is overwhelmed with what has happened and returns to her town, leaving behind her water jar (4:28). The transgressive engagement between herself and Jesus leads her to transgress also in her own town. She boldly invites its Samaritan residents to transgress collectively by returning with her to the Jewish cohort at their well, to make up their own mind. They agree and make their way to Jesus - even if just to satisfy their own curiosity (4:29-30).

From transgression to transformation: John 4:39-42

It is the transgression of boundaries, of rules, of "proper places" for the "he" and "she" and the "them" and "us" of this narrative, which creates space in which this woman can experience life-giving transformation; moreover, it encourages the woman to transgress boldly in her own context: and it is her transgression, back in her town, which subsequently leads to complete transformation of the lives of many more. She is not only a transgressor, she is also a transformative agent in her own right.

Her testimony about her life-changing meeting with Jesus touches the lives of large numbers of Samaritans who come to faith (4:39), and some even plead with Jesus to stay on (4:40). Whereas this woman's story was previously cause for rejection, it has now become cause for invitation, inclusion, and radical new realities. Her contact with the provider of living water and her boldness in the context of multiple transgressions, has empowered her to become a channel of the living water for others. This marginalised woman becomes an agent of change, sharing her testimony and thereby fulfilling the role of a disciple – a role which is the last that would have ever been expected from her. From transgression in a public space at a well, she transgresses in the public space of her community – thereby fulfilling a typically male role, and destabilising a seemingly unmoveable system of socio-political order.

This is a narrative which also invites contemporary readers to participate. First, to revisit their own long-held perceptions of power over, patriarchy, heterosexualism, racism, privilege, and/or forceful exclusion based on social categories determined by a minority in power – a challenge already posed by the Samaritan woman to Jesus. Second, if contemporary readers – especially those in privileged contexts – are willing to face their own positions of power and their complicity in keeping specific binaries firmly in place for their own benefit, they may be invited to become participants in processes of transformational transgression: processes in which life-threatening beliefs and practices are exchanged for life-giving ones.

This is by no means a possibility which simply sustains a dichotomy between the spiritual and material or the heavenly and earthly. It is, after all, a very concrete, material, Mother Earth image of living water – of water which wells up as a spring, to eternal life – which invites such transformational transgression of power relations. Such radical transformation of life cannot simply remain within the sphere of human-human relations but must also extend to human-Earth relations.

Recognise, imagine, practise: Moving the discourse toward transformational transgression in local faith communities

The interrelated injustices represented by and amplified by the drought in South Africa – especially against the country's long history of colonial, racist, and sexist exploitation, require concrete action from local faith communities: first, to recognise the multiple and ongoing levels of injustices in their own contexts and their particular role in it; second, to imagine the transgression of particular life-threatening power relations which are built upon power-over, binary thought; and third, to pursue practical expressions of transformational trans-gression at a grassroots level.

Recognition

Recognising the particular forms of transgression and transformation which take place throughout the narrative of John 4 first implies an awareness of the first century Mediterranean context in which the narrative is set. In the contemporary context of my own location as an ordained minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, an awareness of not only the drought conditions, socio-economic injustices, and gender and sexual violence in South Africa is required, but also of the particular racialised socio-economic privileges afforded to the majority of white members of the Dutch Reformed Church and the manner in which all of these categories are interrelated. Such an explicit contextual awareness is required before members can meaningfully participate in imagining what transgression of the status quo could look like, and before they can commit themselves to particular expressions of transformational transgression toward healing and wholeness of Mother Earth and all who depend on her.[22]

[22] Up to this point in time, the Dutch Reformed Church's engagement with the drought has mainly been that of short-term crisis management (providing water, providing feed for cattle, providing funds for drought-relief). Although various synods have task teams for ecology who provide resources to congregants from

Drawing on the narrative of John 4:5-42, this would imply a deliberate attempt to recognise "Samaritan women" in present day situations – that is those persons who are cast as "the other" based on their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, income, address, employment status, etc. Moreover, it asks for an admittance and acknowledgement by those who are in positions of power and privilege, of the myriad of structural and systemic power-over relations and the exploitation they continue to feed on. In what ways are we distributors of toxic water, which impacts not only the Earth, but also the very concrete, lived experiences of people who struggle for survival? What is the cost of the ongoing pursuit of wealth, provision, financial gain, on members of society who are excluded from opportunities to take up their rightful place and space? Recognising power-over and exploitation in human relations – in narratives past and the tangible present – could help to expose the interest to exploit one's neighbour and the Earth, and the close relationship which exists between exploitation of vulnerable persons and the exploitation of the Earth.[23]

Imagining transgression

I suggest that it is Jesus' self-description – the image of the One who provides living water that will not dry up, versus water which will lead

time to time, the connection between gender injustice and ecological injustice is seldom mentioned or even seemingly recognised.

[23] Under the (tongue in the cheek?) heading "Jesus the proto-environmentalist," David Horrell (2010) remarks that ecotheological writers have turned to depictions of Jesus in the Gospels and find in Jesus support for a model of concern for the environment and care for God's creation (2010:63). He cautions, though, that presentations of Jesus – be it as liberator, proto-feminist, vegetarian or pro-environment – are shaped by the contemporary agenda and its pressing concerns. The type of questions interpreters ask, shape the kind of answers they will find (Horrell 2010:64). Fully aware of these remarks, I propose that faith communities should make a greater effort in creating interactive and dialogical spaces for reading biblical narratives; specifically also with co-believers whose contextual realities differ from their own.

one to thirst again (4:13-14) – that could be helpful in moving from recognition towards imagining transgression.

The voices of female African feminist scholars are particularly helpful in such a radical reimagining and reclaiming of justice for all creation. The mode of story-telling and the role of biblical narratives in envisioning the present and future of existence on this planet is a familiar way of engaging contextual realities. Furthermore, taking as conversation-partner the place from where one speaks marks the feminist theology of praxis[24] – an approach intuitively familiar within the circles of African feminist scholarship.[25]

The familiar and relatable image of water is appropriated in John 4 not merely to start a conversation, but also to convey profound life-changing truths (Koester 2003:1-18). Such narrative descriptions of an embodied God in the shape of a male person, who draws on Earth imagery to convey his identity, and does so within a framework of transgression of the status quo of patriarchal power-over expectations, could be useful for imagining ways of transgression, particularly anthropocentric, patriarchal and exclusionary theological discourses in faith communities. The transgression of the Samaritan woman is of equal importance. By recognising her agency in this narrative, her boldness, and her ability to actively participate in transgression, and step out in courage to not only receive transformation, but also ignite transformation on a communal level, we may receive cues on how to

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[24] As defined by Denise Ackermann (2006:227), feminist theology of praxis "begins with the critical analysis of given contexts and a particular focus on how gender roles are understood and lived out. It then seeks to engage contextual situations with liberating and transformative praxis in order to encourage human flourishing, undergirded by the belief that such theology is done in furthering God's reign on earth (*sic.*)."

[25] Three examples of African feminist publications which could be helpful for local faith communities, and that are characterised by these notions and include a specific focus on the ecology, are: Dube, MW & Nyambura, JN (eds.). 2001. *Talitha cum! Theologies of African Women*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications; Kanyoro, MRA & Njoroge, NJ. (eds.). 1996. *Groaning in Faith. African Women in the Household of God*. Nairobi: Acton Publishers; and Mante, JOY. 2004. *Africa: Theological and Philosophical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*. Accra: SonLife Press.

transgress the deep-treaded roads of exploitation, racism, gender injustice, and environmental exploitation. This requires of those in positions of privilege and power, to be unsettled, critiqued, questioned and challenged, to give up their stronghold in particular relations – irrespective of what the reaction from peers may be. This cannot be a superficial attempt at "reaching out" and then returning to enclaves of privilege behind high walls. It asks a radical shift of giving up and giving back land, resources, of space and wealth. What will living water mean in specific situations? And who are we acknowledging and listening to when attempting to imagine the answer to such a question? How uncomfortable are we willing to get? How can daily living, decision-making, policy implementation, economic involvement, political participation, access to housing, access to resources, safety, and transport be participatory, non-abusive and non-exploitative processes in relation to all and everything? How do we understand the relation between the various intersections of justice? How do we break down the divide between "human" and "non-human" concerns? What would an alternative look like?

Committing to transformational transgression

By engaging the use of an ecological image in conversation with a Samaritan woman in the narrative of John 4, a space may be created where members of faith communities can raise questions relating to their own narratives: what does Jesus' promise of living water to a Samaritan woman mean in practical terms for all of the Earth? Living water, after all, is metaphorically understood in Jewish tradition as representing God's life-giving power and wisdom (cf. Brant 2011:84). How do we identify with the Samaritan woman's witness and role as reformer and disciple in terms of our ecological realities? How may we confess with word and deed about living water that does not run dry, whilst finding ourselves in socio-economic and political systems where some have had to fight drought and lack of clean, running water for decades? What are the theological idols we consider as proverbial "true places of worship" that are in need of drastic critique? What are the limited understandings we need to be freed from, if we are to

see both the prophet Jesus in our midst as well as the prophetic Samaritan women? How do we resist the weeping and groaning of the Earth and all living creatures who depend on her, and how can we commit to systemic and structural justice in South Africa – one free of toxic water being forced upon particular groups of people?

Conclusion

By reading the narrative of John 4 through a gender-critical lens, framed by ecotheological and ecofeminist concerns, the transgression and transformation present in the dialogue and actions of both the Samaritan woman and of Jesus have been pointed out. These two categories of transgression and transformation could become a means through which members of local faith communities, particularly in my own privileged context of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, can be shifted toward new understandings and new beliefs about who we are in relation to Godself, to other humans, and to Mother Earth. By recognising the radical impact of the imagery of living water in the narrative of John 4 – also in very concrete terms for the life of the Samaritan woman - local faith communities may be invited to take up seriously the call to recognise and acknowledge injustice, transgress power-infused boundaries and binaries, and commit to practical expressions of transformational transgression on grassroot level; that is, to take seriously the groaning and weeping of their vulnerable neighbours – particularly those of women and Mother Earth.

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