



## Investigating John 4:13-14 on the Symbolic Importance of Water in African Cultural Setting

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**Abstract.** This Paper investigates the intersection of biblical theology and African cultural anthropology by analyzing the symbolic significance of water in John 4:13-14 and its resonance with African indigenous worldviews. Jesus' metaphor of "living water" (ὕδωρ ζῶν) in the Johannine narrative is juxtaposed with water's multifaceted roles in African rituals, myths, and daily life. Through a qualitative comparative analysis of biblical exegesis and ethnographic case studies among the Yoruba and Akan traditions, the study identifies combinations of water as source of life and spiritual renewal and differences between communal and individualized symbolism. The findings advocate for culturally contextualized hermeneutics that enrich both African Christian practices and intercultural theological discourse. The study concludes that the inquiry of John 4:13-14 through the lens of African cultural setting on water highlights a rich tapestry of meanings that supercede ordinary symbolism. It, therefore, recommends the need to develop worship and liturgical practices that will demonstrate the importance of water to life in African christianity.

**Keywords:** Investigating, Symbolic, Water, African, Cultural and Setting.

### 1. Introduction

Across all religious and cultural traditions, water is a universal symbol of life, purification, and transcendence. Since most living things have their homes in water, people have long viewed water as a sign and symbol of life itself (Ariarajah, 1982: 271). But according to Culpepper (1983:192), water can also

pose a threat to life, as in the cases of floods and thunderstorms. According to the biblical story, creation arises from the waters of chaos (Genesis 1:2), and during the Exodus, water acts as a force for both destruction and deliverance. The covenant that resulted from the Noahic flood was meant to be a sign of life for everyone, even though it was a destructive event. Conflict arose over water in the wilderness wanderings. While the Flood story, the Egyptians' drowning in the Red Sea, and the general apprehension about The sea and deep waters expressed in Psalms 18:16, 32:6, 46:3, and 69:1–ff suggest that water could be used as a tool of judgment by Yahweh, it can also be viewed as a means of salvation through danger for God's faithful people in Isaiah 43:2 and 59:19 (Taylor, 2007:1232).

Compared to all of John's symbols, the image of water appears most frequently and with the widest range of associations in the Fourth Gospel. Rivers, wells, springs, the sea, pools, basins, thirst, drink, and water pots are all topics of discussion. — "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty" (NRSV)—invites theological reflection on "living water" (ὕδωρ ζῶν) as a metaphor for eternal life. In the meantime, water is similarly given sacred status in indigenous African cosmologies through ecological practices, myths, and rituals. This article investigates how African cultural perspectives on water deepen the interpretation of John 4:13-14, fostering a decolonized and contextually rooted theology. By examining the symbolic interplay between Johannine "living water" and African cultural frameworks, this study demonstrates how contextual

hermeneutics bridge biblical theology and indigenous spirituality, offering transformative insights for African Christianity.

## 2. The General Significance of Water

Religious texts are now regarded as addressing a variety of disciplines rather than being a separate field of study (Gottlieb, 2006; Park, 2005). While Park (2005) addresses the relationship between religion studies and geography, Gottlieb (2006) outlines the connection between religion studies and ecology. McCool et al. (2008:1; cited in Zheng & Budiraharjo, 2024:244) review the historical, social, and religious meanings of water and argue that it has long represented two distinct roles: as a symbol of power and purpose that goes beyond human survival and as a necessary component for maintaining life.

Water is a basic element of the environment and one of the most important elements for life on Earth. Ancient Chinese philosophy and cosmology held that the five basic elements of fire, wood, metal, water, and earth made up the universe. Approximately 71% of the earth's surface is covered by water, according to modern geography. But only 2.5 percent of this is fresh water, which is essential for life. Rivers and freshwater lakes have been the sites of civilizations throughout human history. For example, the ancient Egyptian civilization flourished along the Nile River, the Mesopotamian civilization along the Tigris and Euphrates River, the ancient Chinese civilization along the Yangtzi and Yellow Rivers, and the ancient Indian civilization along the Ganges River. This proves how important water is to human existence. Indeed, between 60% and 70% of an adult human's body is made of water. Because water is essential to life, water scarcity has historically caused disputes and even wars (Zheng & Budiraharjo, 2024:244).

## 3. Exegesis of John 4:13-14

*13. Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14. but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."*

### 3.1 Literary and Historical Context

This passage is found in John 4:1–42, during Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. Jesus' interaction with her transcends cultural and religious boundaries, and the woman represents a marginalized figure (a woman, a Samaritan, and someone with a morally dubious past).

### 3.2 Key Terms & Symbolism

This water (v.13): This water (v.13): Alludes to actual well water that momentarily satisfies bodily thirst.

Living water (v.10, implied in v.14): A rich biblical concept. According to Jeremiah 2:13 and Zechariah 14:8, "living water" in the Old Testament represents God as the source of life, rebirth, and covenantal blessing. Christologically speaking, Jesus reinterprets this term to refer to Himself as the ultimate source of spiritual life.

Never thirst (v.14): Never thirst (v.14): Human longing is cyclical, whereas eternal contentment is permanent. The human search for purpose, forgiveness, and a relationship with God is symbolized by spiritual thirst in this context (cf. Psalm 42:1–2).

Spring of water welling up: The Greek phrase "spring of water leaping up," *pēgē hydatos hallomenou*, conjures up an ever-present, ever-changing source.

Eternal life: Eternal life: According to John's theology, "eternal life" (*zōē aiōnios*) is a present, transformative relationship with God via Christ rather than just a postmortem existence (John 17:3).

### 3.3 Theological Themes

Christ as the Source of Salvation: Jesus transcends the physical (water from the well) to reveal His divine identity. By offering "living water," He claims to fulfill humanity's deepest needs—forgiveness, purpose, and reconciliation with God—which no earthly resource can satisfy. This aligns with John's broader theme of Jesus as the "I AM" (John 6:35; 8:12) who alone provides life.

Universality of the Gospel: The Samaritan woman, an outsider in Jewish eyes, becomes a recipient of Jesus' offer. This foreshadows the gospel's expansion beyond ethnic Israel (John 10:16; 12:32). The "living water" is for all who believe, regardless of social or religious status.

The Holy Spirit: Later in John's Gospel, "living water" is explicitly linked to the Holy Spirit (John 7:37–39). The "spring" within believers signifies the Spirit's indwelling presence, empowering them for worship, mission, and sanctification.

Eschatological Fulfillment: The "welling up to eternal life" suggests both present and future dimensions. Believers experience the Spirit's work now, culminating in the resurrection and eternal communion with God (Revelation 22:1–2).

## 4. The Symbolic Value of Water in African Cultural Contexts

Along Africa's lakes and coasts, water has historically drawn the development of commercial cities and

towns. Africans acknowledged and revered water bodies as spiritual sources. Before British officer John Hanning Speke gave Lake Victoria in East Africa its current name, for example, it was known as Nalubaale, which translates to “the home of spirituality.” A vast body of water links Africa and America, and according to traditional systems, water links valleys and mountains, plants and animals, by sharing goods or byproducts that are necessary for each. . Since water facilitates the natural phenomenon of interdependence, bodies of water were owned and protected by communities, and people worshipped the spirit of water freely. All activities relating to water were conducted in accordance with peoples’ customs and cultural beliefs (Sewapo, 2022:10).

However, Sewapo (2022:11) notes that the civilisation of Africa by the Western world changed native people’s attitudes and rights to water as a natural resource. The sacred relationship between people and water almost ended with the advent of Western ideology of political governance in Africa. Water became a commodity to be taxed. Commercial fishing was introduced. Corporations were established to process and supply fresh water for payment. Western religious teachings demonised native cultural practices and the indigenous attitude and moral responsibility towards water as a sacred being gradually changed. Their teachings associated African cultural beliefs and practices with Satan and primitivity. In addition, the faith institutions preach the supremacy of a divine being, which is beyond humanity according to the spiritual hierarchies, though humanity is accountable to this divine nature.

In spite of the westernisation of Africa and the teachings of European missionaries in Africa, the symbolic value of water is intrinsically unalterable. Water is often central to African cosmologies as a primordial element. Among the Dogon of Mali, water symbolizes the genesis of life, linked to the creator deity Nommo, who is depicted as a water spirit (Griaule, 1965). Mami Wata, a pan-African water deity, embodies duality—representing both healing and danger, wealth and chaos—illustrating water’s ambivalent power (Drewal & Drewal, 1983). These deities underscore water’s sacred role in mediating human and divine realms.

Water is still perceived among Africans as one of the mysterious gifts of nature that supports and holds life on earth. Many indigenous communities in Africa knew the value of water and to them water was considered to be the source of life, especially among the Beninois Christians of Benin Republic. In the worldviews of the Gun of Benin republic (Capo-

Chichi, 2014), water is regarded as a sacred entity that sustains life on Earth, a food source, a mode of transportation, a place for recreation, or a component for purification and cleansing. In other words, a seed in the ground cannot sprout until it is irrigated, proving that the spirit of water is what drives the creation of life.

Water is seen as the best medicine in Yoruba culture. According to Jegede (2019), water is the true physician and pharmacist in Yoruba culture. Jegede asserts that water can cure any illness, including diabetes, paralysis, gonorrhoea, malaria, hemorrhage, and more. Since these creatures also rely on water for survival, searching for trees, plants, or animals to cure illness ignores the water’s healing power. In Osun-Osogbo, in Southwestern part of Nigeria, water is called agbo “prepared medicine for human consumption,” “spring forth.” Babatunde says:

A permanent agreement was made between the founding fathers of Osogbo land and the river goddess. It was a special covenant that cannot be broken. . Since we have always honoured our own part, the goddess of the river has to honour hers. The Osun festival has become a global event that is now observed not only in Osogbo or Nigeria but also in Brazil and France, among other foreign nations (Babatunde, 2015).

Water is still regarded as a creative and destructive force by the Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria. It represents protection, healing, spiritual purification, and fertility. Sacred rivers, such as the Osun River, are thought to have divine abilities that can cure infertility and bring wealth. Water’s regenerative power is highlighted by the fact that rituals involving it frequently commemorate important life transitions, such as birth, marriage, and death.

Idowu (1962) and Awolalu (1979), for instance, claim that the Yoruba indigenous religion has a long-standing belief that the river goddess can cure infertility. It is fascinating to observe that thousands of people from all over the world gather to either watch the votary maid empty the sacrificial materials into the river or wash themselves in it during the annual Osun Osogbo Festival in Osun State, southwest Nigeria. On festival days, a lot of people drink from the river, despite the fact that it is frequently polluted by the large number of people walking through it (Sewapo, 2022:11). The Yoruba also, associate water with Yemoja, a riverine goddess governing fertility and maternal protection (Olupona, 2014). Water’s association with fertility is evident in rituals and myths. The Nile River, historically vital to Egyptian agriculture, symbolizes sustenance and cyclical renewal (Assmann, 2001). In Zulu traditions, water is

used in rituals to invoke ancestral blessings for crop fertility, reflecting its life-giving properties (Berglund, 1976). Such practices highlight water's symbolic ties to abundance and ecological interdependence.

The Yoruba also associate water with divine entities such as Olokun (deity of the ocean) and Osun (river goddess), who embody both nurturing and aggressive qualities. This duality mirrors the biblical concept of "living water," which sustains life but also challenges individuals to undergo spiritual transformation.

In particular, water, whether of running streams or from wells, plays inestimable roles (positive or negative) in all forms of divine worship (whether minor or major), ritual ceremonies, and socio-religious rites performed in honour of preternatural beings and on behalf of human beings. It is axiomatic that no ritual takes place without water (Adewale, 1982:2). Water facilitates rites of passage, marking transitions between life stages. Among the Luo of Kenya, water poured during funerals guides spirits to the afterlife (Ocholla-Ayayo, 1997). Libations, common in West Africa, involve pouring water to honor ancestors, symbolizing connectivity between the living and the dead (Mbiti, 1990). Purification rituals, such as ceremonial baths in Yoruba traditions, cleanse individuals of spiritual impurities (Abiodun, 2014).

Sewapo (2022:12) asserts that the use of water for multipurpose rituals is a response to African Christianity yearning for a form of Christianity that is psychologically, physically, as well as spiritually satisfying, such that demonstrates power. Besides the cultic use of water for multifarious purposes in African Christianity, water is more of an indigenous attempt at making Christianity relevant to an African religious consciousness and worldview. The African worldview interprets almost every issue in life in a spiritual way, and as a result, it looks for equally spiritually grounded solutions to life's problems. Most Africans think that most issues in life, like infertility, chronic illness, unemployment, and even a common headache, have spiritual causes and are best resolved by spiritual means. In the African initiated churches, this explains the significance of water rituals for healings, deliverances, and other associated forms of spiritual support.

## 5. Nexus between John 4:13-14 and African Beliefs

**Healing and Renewal:** Yoruba traditions use sacred water for both physical and spiritual healing, much like Jesus offers living water for spiritual renewal. Rituals performed near the Osun River, for example, are thought to improve health and fertility.

**Connection to Abundance:** In John 4:13-14 "living water" represents an abundance of life (John 10:10). Similarly, Yoruba cosmology views water as a source of prosperity and vitality, essential for holistic well-being.

**Spiritual Bridging:** Water acts as a conduit between people and the divine in both situations. In Christian theology, the transformational power of living water is analogous to the Yoruba belief that rivers serve as portals between the living and the dead.

## 5.1 Differences between John 4:13-14 and African Beliefs

In John 4:13–14, the symbolic meaning of water is very different from how water is interpreted in African cosmology and culture. Although both frameworks recognize the life-giving qualities of water, there are significant differences between their theological, communal, and existential emphasis. The following are the main contrasts:

**Communal versus Individual:** Individual vs. Community: While John 4:13–14 stresses individual salvation, African rituals place a higher priority on the welfare of the group.

**Plural versus Exclusive Spiritual Mediation:** African systems recognize several gods, ancestors, and natural forces, while John's theology views Jesus as the only source of spiritual nourishment (Mbiti, 1990).

**Material-Symbolic--Metaphorical:** African rituals use physical water (such as baths and libations) as a spiritually potent symbol, whereas the Bible abstracts water into a metaphor for grace (Olupona, 2014).

**Eternal versus Cyclical Renewal:** While African symbolism frequently stresses cyclical renewal (for example, Nile floods, seasonal rains; Assmann, 2001), John's "eternal life" is a linear, ultimate destiny.

**Ancestral Connectivity:** Among the Luo of Kenya, water poured during funerals guides spirits to the afterlife, maintaining ties between the living and the dead (Ocholla-Ayayo, 1997). This contrasts with John's emphasis on a transcendent, individualized afterlife.

## 6. Conclusion

The exploration of John 4:13-14 through the lens of African cultural perspectives on water reveals a rich tapestry of meanings that transcend mere symbolism. This study underscores the necessity of integrating

indigenous worldviews into biblical interpretation, particularly in contexts where traditional beliefs and practices remain deeply rooted. The metaphor of “living water,” as articulated by Jesus, resonates profoundly with African understandings of water as a source of life, healing, and spiritual renewal. By highlighting both the convergences and divergences between Johannine theology and African cultural practices, the article advocates for a contextualized hermeneutics that honours the complexities of faith experiences in Africa. Such an approach not only enriches African Christian practices but also fosters a more inclusive and comprehensive theological discourse that bridges cultural divides. Ultimately, recognizing the symbolic importance of water in both biblical and African setting encourages a deeper appreciation of spirituality that is both transformative and relevant, affirming the vitality of indigenous beliefs in contemporary faith practices.

## 7. Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

- There is need to establish pastoral care and approaches that integrate the symbolic significance of African christian contexts;
- The need to develop worship and liturgical practices that demonstrate the omportance of water in African christianity cannt be overemphaised:
- Symbolic importance of water can be used as catalyst for the development of community and social justice.

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