

“Rivers” – A Prophetic Symbol

Introduction

Many rivers are named or alluded to in Scripture.

- They usually refer to literal bodies of water.
- God chose, however, to use several rivers as prophetic symbols.

“Water” in prophecy has a distinct meaning:

- *“And he saith unto me, The waters which thou sawest, where the whore sitteth, are peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues”* (Revelation 17:15).
- “Waters,” whether rivers, seas, or as here, are generally accepted to represent people in some form.
- Other examples illustrate this.
- *“Woe to the multitude of many people, which make a noise like the noise of the seas; and to the rushing of nations, [that] make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters! The nations shall rush like the rushing of many waters: but God shall rebuke them, and they shall flee far off, and shall be chased as the chaff of the mountains before the wind, and like a rolling thing before the whirlwind”* (Isaiah 17:12-13).
- *“Thus saith the LORD; Behold, waters rise up out of the north, and shall be an overflowing flood [conquering armies], and shall overflow the land, and all that is therein; the city, and them that dwell therein: then the men shall cry, and all the inhabitants of the land shall howl”* (Jeremiah 47:2).

The “River” Story: begins in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:10-14).

- There – four distinct rivers are named.
- Intriguingly, they are numbered.
- Their names and Sequence:
 1. Pison – encompassed “the whole land of Havilah.” That is where there is high quality gold plus bdellium and the onyx stone.
 2. Gihon – this encircles “the whole land of Ethiopia
 3. Hiddekel – goeth east of Assyria
 4. Euphrates – no information
- Note the considerable information regarding Pison and no comments on the Euphrates.

We don’t know the “fate” of Pison and Gihon.

- But intriguingly God chose to make the Hiddekel and Euphrates important rivers in prophecy.
- Since they represent people:
 1. The Euphrates symbolizes the people in support of Babylon. Since Babylon is a symbol of apostasy in prophecy, these people are apostates.

2. The Hiddekel (today called the Tigris River) “flowed” to the “east” (another prophetic symbol representing “deliverance”) and symbolize those who are “delivered” or “restored.”
 - They are righteous – holy – as will unfold shortly.

Four Key Prophetic Rivers Daniel and Revelation

Note how each one relates in some manner to the end of time.

“River of Life”

- Its origin was God’s throne “and the Lamb” (Revelation 22:1).
- It flowed down the middle of apparently a very wide street (Revelation 22:2).
- Its banks supported two trunks of the Tree of Life.

This river has no representation of people or nations that is understood.

- It is the Water of Life that has its source in the seat of the universe.
- It is a river of hope to the saints of *eternal life* as they look forward to its beauty.

The redeemed will drink of its water (*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, pp. 30-33).

- It will also water the heavenly Paradise of God (*Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, p. 63).
- The River of Life is a beautiful picture of what awaits the saints.

Beside that river, Jesus will conduct continuing education for the saints.

“Here in this world we are to learn what we must be in order to have a place in the heavenly courts. We are to learn the lessons that Christ desires to teach us, that we may be prepared to be taken to the higher school in the courts above, where the Saviour will lead us beside the river of life, explaining to us many things that here we could not comprehend. ... There we shall see the glory of God as we have never seen it here. We get but a glimpse of the glory now, because we do not follow on to know the Lord.” (*Heavenly Places*, p. 365).

“Some among the redeemed will have laid hold of Christ in the last hours of life, and in heaven instruction will be given to those who, when they died, did not understand perfectly the plan of salvation. Christ will lead the redeemed ones beside the river of life, and will open to them that which while on this earth they could not understand. – Undated manuscript 150.” (*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, p. 262).

The three other prophetic rivers are tied to the time the end of the world comes.

- They represent the *people* in the last battle between right and wrong.
- The righteous – the wicked

An important river distinction is to be observed between the two great prophetic books, Daniel and Revelation:

Daniel

Ulai River
Hiddekel River
(Euphrates not mentioned)
The people of the east
Covenant fulfilled

Revelation

Euphrates River
(Ulai and Hiddekel not mentioned)
The people supporting Babylon
Covenant rejected

“Ulai” and “Hiddekel”

The Ulai (called also Oubal, Ulaa, Eulaeus and Kerkhah today) flowed immediately to the north of Shushan – the ancient capital of Elam, later Persia (now Iran).

- In 640 B.C. Ashurbanipal, last king of Assyria, attacked Shushan (Susa).
- Its king, Te-umman with his army, were killed and dumped literally into the Ulai.
- Record of this was made by Ashurbanipal and now preserved in the Nineveh Gallery at the British Museum.
 - He noted the river ran red with blood.
 - Shushan was destroyed along with the palace.
- This is an important piece of history to know. When Daniel had his vision of the *ram, he-goat* and the *little horn*, he was at the palace in Shushan by the Ulai river. The city and palace **which were not existent at that time!** (They had been recently destroyed.)
 - That suddenly invites a symbolic meaning to all the “objects” in that vision.
 - Its **timing** fulfillment is in the explanation portion of Daniel 8 (vs 15 on).
- Daniel is physically in Babylon when he has this vision.
 - The Ulai River is in the *far east* from his location.
 - The Hiddekel River is in the *immediate east*.
 - They both prophetically represent **people** of the **east** (see article on the “East” for deeper explanation) at the time of the end – the “season” or “period” when the harvest comes (Matthew 24:32 – in prophecy – “summer”) – the “appointed time” of Daniel 8:19 and Habakkuk 2:2-3.

The Hiddekel (Tigris), also known anciently as the Idiglat [Tenny, Merrill; *Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 5, (Zondervan Publishing House)], along with the Euphrates, gave verdure to the great Mesopotamian plain.

- This supplied water for key cities like Ur of Chaldees, Babylon and Ninevah.
- Mesopotamia was also called the *Land of the Two Rivers*.
- The Hiddekel is nearly 1200 miles long.
- Its headwaters are in the vicinity of Mt. Ararat.

In prophecy we note two groups of end-time people.

- Revelation 7 describes the 144,000 – “the number of them that were sealed” (vs 4; 14:1-5).
- Revelation 7 also notes “a great multitude” “which no man could number” (vs 9; likely 19:6).
- Both groups go through the end of time tribulation.
- These two groups are represented by the two horns of Daniel 8’s ram.
 - The ram represents Jesus (cf. Genesis 22:13).
 - The horns were of different sizes, the larger coming up last.
 - This ties to the work of the smaller 144,000 who bring in the “great multitude” later.

The Ulai is small – some historical accounts suggest that it was a canal that passed Shushan. The Hiddekel was great.

- How can we be certain that there is this symbolic meaning of people in the east?
- This is one of the most important issues to discover in Daniel 8–12.

Rivers are noted four times in those chapters.

1. Daniel’s ram, he-goat and little horn vision (8:2-12) were by the Ulai (8:1-2).
2. In the verses that follow that vision, Jesus gave the 2300-year prophecy (8:14).
 - Daniel needed to know what that meant because he felt it was an omen [he would soon fall to the ground in weakness (8:18) and then faint (8:27)].
 - Jesus then requested of Gabriel that he explain things to Daniel to help him (8:16).
 - It is in *that* verse that it notes **His voice** came from **between** the banks of the Ulai.
 - He was above the people of this body of water.
 - He was over them – protecting them.
 - His words were for them.
 - This smaller body of people, the Ulai, was under Jesus’ watchful care.
3. The Hiddekel River is the **place** of a vision of Jesus (Daniel 10:4-8).
 - He is seen as priest, judge and king.
 - It is similar imagery as Revelation 1.
 - Daniel was by the “side [bank] of the great rivers” – Hiddekel is specifically mentioned.
 - He lifts up his eyes and sees Jesus in these three roles.
 - It doesn’t say, but likely, by the description, in front of him over the water.
 - He spoke – but we aren’t told what He said: “the voice of his words like the voice of a multitude.”
 - Once again with prophetic imagery:
 - Jesus is with people that are His.
 - He is functioning as their helper, pastor, guide – HOW DO WE KNOW?

- In Revelation 1 His same imagery instructs us.
 - WHAT IS HE DOING?
 - Walking **among** the churches (candlesticks), nurturing them.
4. Finally, we see Jesus as a High Priest (clothed in linen) (Daniel 12:5-13).
- This is Day of Atonement imagery from His attire.
 - He is above the waters of “the river” (12:5) with two witnesses (one on either side) – a courtroom scene.
 - In an oath towards God, He promises an end to the great *conflict with sin* in the context of three timing messages.

This unnamed river is likely the Ulai – because it was next to Shushan.

- Shushan was the city of deliverance (Cyrus and Esther) – a symbol of the “New” Jerusalem.
- The 144,000 were a special body of messengers to Christ associated with that city.

Thus – rivers, people to the east (direction of deliverance where the sun of righteousness will arise (Malachi 4:2) is associated with the personal imagery of Jesus.

The Euphrates River

This is one of the most important rivers in the world.

- Turkey, Syria and Iraq compete for the use of its water for irrigation and hydroelectric power.
- It was the eastern boundary of the land God promised to Abraham (Genesis 15:18; Deuteronomy 1:7, 11:24; Joshua 1:4; II Samuel 8:3).

This river has apocalyptic significance. The dispensational world takes Biblical interpretation literally. Thus, there is an anticipation of prophetic meaning to **this area**.

- The Middle East likely will play a role – specifically the “glorious land” (Daniel 11:41) with apparently other countries being involved.
- But within prophecy, we rise to a deeper meaning of water and peoples.

With the Euphrates supplying water to ancient Babylon comes the metaphor of people supporting Babylon, symbolic of the city of apostasy and wickedness.

- This is why twice in Revelation an end-time cry is to “come out of Babylon” and be not “partakers of her sins” (Revelation 18:1-5; cf. 14:8).
- Jeremiah noted that the Euphrates was “towards the north,” “the north country” (much of the river was “north” to the people of Judah) (Jeremiah 46:2-10).
- Important is the key that all apostasy relates to action and behavior that supplants God.
- This is symbolized through Babylon, the Euphrates River and the “north.”

The north is represented as where God's throne is (Psalm 48:2)

- Lucifer (Satan) wanted to exalt his throne (Isaiah 14:13) to the "sides of the north."
- Why? "I will be like the most High on His throne."

The final apostate leader (head of Babylon and the Euphrates people) is called by Daniel as the "king of the north" (Daniel 11:40).

- Intriguingly, the prophecy goes on to note that "tidings out of the east" (**where deliverance comes from**) "and out of the north" (where God's throne is) "troubled him" (Daniel 11:44).
- **Why?** God's people, "they that understand," "shall **instruct** many" (Daniel 11:33a). The Loud Cry of the gospel to the world is being effective.
 - This represents the final work of that gospel – when the end comes (Matthew 24:14).
 - This is the work of the 144,000, the Ulai people.
 - That is why tidings out of the **east** trouble him.

In the sixth plague, the waters of the Euphrates are dried up.

- Literalists look to see some damming of the Euphrates, having it dry up. BUT:
- This plague is related to the very apocalyptic end (Revelation 9:13-14).
 - The apostate people who have been supporting Babylon – and the King of the North – cease their support.
 - The "waters are dried up."
 - This is when another third of mankind is destroyed – part of the great conflict of Armageddon.

Euphrates represents people who have supported wickedness.

God draws on things of familiarity to develop great teaching metaphors.

- Rivers are remarkable illustration tools for end-time people and associated events.
- In that context the stunning prophecies of Daniel 8–12 bring a revelation of God working with His people.
- It is a story of "ends," "finished" and "time of the end" expressions
- It is a collection of prophecies that develop the foundation for:
 - A covenant people becoming righteous and holy
 - The wicked in their last stand coming to an end

The grand finale of the *chazown* vision is:

- The deliverance of God's people (Daniel 12:1; cf. Revelation 11:11)
- Special resurrection (Daniel 12:1; cf. Revelation 1:7)
- The Ulai and Hiddekel people will be those "delivered."