

Institute of Hazrat Mohammad (SAW)

Symbolism and Significance of Water in Religion

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Abstract







Water is the essence of life and an intrinsic aspect of the constitution and the developments of religion. Firstly, water is an element common to many accounts of the creation of the world and its inhabitants. Religious water is never neutral and passive. It is considered to have powers and capacities to transform this world, annihilate sins and create holiness.

Water plays a central role on the major religions of the world such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism; its characteristics are defined to have a symbolic meaning- a sacred element that purifies the spiritual and the physical.

Water is perceived in nature as an entity of light in rainfall; and then again, it is a torrid of darkness that avails with floods that so often encountered in religious doctrines. Then, from its deep, dark, and mysterious abyss, it possesses qualities from which life emerges. Water symbolizes the purity that is used when one is born and then used again to prepare the dead by washing their sins so that they return to their Creator in a state of purity.

The multitude ways in water is symbolized and used in religion is evident in most religious beliefs and practices. In this regard, this paper proposes to discuss the dimensions and the extensive significance of water in various religions, faiths and practices. In doing so, it will elaborate on the symbolism of water as a gift of our Creator, a source of sustenance, life and our existence.

Figure1

COMPARATIVE USE OF WATER IN VARIOUS RELIGION						
SIGNIFICANCE	RELIGION					
	 Buddhism	 Christianity	 Hinduism	 Judaism	 Islam	 Zoroastrianism
ABOLUTION		✓	✓	✓	✓	
GREAT FLOOD		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
HOLY WATER FOR DRINKING	✓				✓	✓
HOLY BATHING WATER		✓	✓	✓		✓
HOLY RIVERS / SPRINGS		✓	✓	✓	✓	
HOLY USE OF WATER AT BIRTH		✓				
HOLY USE OF WATER FOR BURIAL	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Holy Water

*The divine was revealed
made clean, prepared, anointed
not with a crown;
but with water
not in the Temple
but in the Jordan,
in the wilderness*

*Submitting to an act of trust,
a washing away of sin
in supplication and fulfillment
to begin his own journey
his mission, his fate
our savior.*

-Raymond A. Foss

Introduction

The process of life begins through the medium of water. The physical and chemical properties of water are all well suited to the necessary requirement of life and it is no accident that life is a water based phenomenon. Human beings are made up mostly of water, in roughly the same percentage as water is to the surface of the earth. 70% of the world's surface is covered in water, similarly, water makes up 71 percent of the human body and the average water content in animals is approximately 68%. This proportion is no coincidence; but the divine design of our Creator.

According to Al Gore “when environmentalists assert that we are, after all, part of the earth, it is no mere rhetorical flourish. Our blood even contains roughly the same percentage of salt as the ocean, where the first life forms evolved. They eventually brought onto the land a self-contained store of the sea water to which we are still connected chemically and biologically. Little wonder, then, that water carries such great spiritual significance in most religions, from the water of Christian baptism to Hinduism's sacred water of life.”



Water is the essence of life and an intrinsic aspect of the constitution and the developments of religion. It is an element

common to many accounts of the creation of the world and its inhabitants. Water that is considered as holy by different religions is never neutral and passive. It is believed to have the powers and capacities to annihilate sins and create holiness.

In major religions of the world such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism water plays a central role; its characteristics are defined to have a symbolic meaning- a sacred element that purifies the spiritual and the physical.

The multitude ways in which water is symbolized and used in religion is evident in most religious beliefs and practices. This paper proposes to discuss the dimensions and the extensive significance of water in various religions, faiths and practices. In doing so, it will elaborate on the symbolism of water as a gift of our Creator, a source of sustenance, and existence of life forms.

In this context we will explore the various facets of water as -

A Means of Purification and Creation

Water plays an important role not only in the five major religions, but also in nearly every recognized religion and faith in history. While each religion may differ in rituals and beliefs, there are some consistent views on water related to the foundation of most religions in terms of its purifying characteristics. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand the meaning and reasoning behind the religious devotion to water because the concept evolves from the basic connotation that represents it as the source of birth and rebirth.

Most religions are based on a set of morals, delineating the implications of right and wrong. Hence, all religions view doing the wrong thing as being “impure” and simplistically, this perception relates to water as a means that cleans and purifies and washes away the impurities of wrong doing. The basic premise associates this cleansing at the moral impurities level – that is the thought process which translates into action and becomes a wrong doing or a sin.

The conceptualization of water is at both the life and death level in most religions. Many of them recognize and associate water as the very source of first life or existence. Simultaneously, its spiritual healing power is delineated through the physical cleansing and preparing the body and soul for the passage from this to the life hereafter in most religions and faiths. As such it is found to be an essential component for birth and death related rituals.

The essence of water is in its widely accepted and believed quality that cleanses the body, and symbolically extents to purify it. This essential nature of water confers a highly symbolic-even sacred-status to it. Water therefore, continues to be a key element in ceremonies and religious rites. Not only does water wash away the external signs of dirtiness, in many cultures, it also erases spiritual difficulties. Through contact and immersion in water, believers can cleanse

themselves of signs of the physical world, and prepare themselves to enter the religious and spiritual realm.

It is evident that water and religion are inevitably connected to life through its purifying properties to erase sin and defilement, and its intrinsic role in the process of creation, birth and rebirth.

It is worthy to note that from the inception of civilization water has been revered as life giving, life saving and purifying agent. Water has always remained a source of hope, fulfillment and gratification because of its life generating properties for example for growing food as in agriculture, for feeding life stock and for sustaining water based food forms like fish. As such rituals of faith and religions understandably revolved around it from the beginning of mankind.

Thus, the perception of water as Holy is perhaps the most important aspect of water irrespective of religion. In this context the following are some general traits or aspects of water in world religions:

- 1) Purifying Rituals, Preparations for Death and Further Life
- 2) Theories of Retributions for Committed Sins
- 3) Places where Good Deeds are Rewarded and Bad Deeds are Punished (Heaven and Hell)
- 4) Eternal Life
- 5) Sin and Pollution
- 6) The Qualities of Holy Water
- 7) The Relation Between Water and Fire as Purifying Agents
- 8) The Relation Between Water and Blood as Purifying Agents
- 9) Water as a Medium Linking This World to the Otherworld

The Use and Significance of Water in Various Faiths

The paper would now elaborate on the use of water in purifying rituals as practiced by some religions-

Christianity:

Almost all Christian churches or sects have an initiation ritual involving the use of water. Most prominent of those is the use of water in baptism. Baptism is regarded differently in different denominations within Christendom. Baptism is a symbol of liberation from the oppression of sin that separates us from God. In baptism, water symbolizes purification and the rejection of the original sin. The Catholic Church on the other hand believes that baptism itself does not merely cleanse one from sin, but rather it is a public declaration of a person's belief and faith in Christ.

Catholics believe that baptism is important for its own symbolic value in three ways; first, it cleanses and washes away dirt. Secondly, it fills everything it enters as God fills those who are immersed in Him. Lastly, we need water to survive physically as we need God to survive spiritually.

When one is baptized, they are fully or partially immersed in water, or one's head may simply be sprinkled (aspersion) with a few drops of water. The sacraments has its roots in the Gospel, wherein it is written that the Prophet Jesus (pbuh) was baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan.

The use of water other than baptism goes back to the 4th century in the East and 5th century in the West. The custom of sprinkling people with water at mass began in the 9th century. At this time, basins for holy water from which people could sprinkle themselves on entering a church, were in common use. Holy water is also used at blessings, dedications, exorcisms and burials.



Ablutions in Christianity involve baptism and the washing of fingers and communion vessels after the communion. This takes place in two parts. Firstly the chalice is rinsed with the wine, and then the chalice and priests' fingers with wine and water. This ablution is important because after the bread and wine has been consecrated, Christ is believed to be present.

Roman Catholic rituals distinguish four different kinds of holy water. There are:

- Holy water *per se*, of the kind found in the stoup, which has been blessed with a small amount of salt as a preservative. This is the holy water used in aspersions and blessings;
- Baptismal holy water, to which a slight amount of chrism (anointing oil) and the oil of catechumens has been added, used in church baptisms;
- Gregorian water, also called "water of consecration"; small amounts of wine, salt, and ashes are added to it, and it is used by bishops at the consecration of a church; and
- Easter water, which is distributed to the faithful on Easter Sunday for use at home.

Judaism:

In Judaism ritual washing is intended to restore or maintain a state of ritual purity and its origins can be found in the Torah. These ablutions can be washing the hands, the hands and feet, or total immersion which must be done in 'living water', i.e. the sea, a river, a spring or in a *mikveh*. Jews use water for ritual cleansing to restore or maintain a state of purity. Hand-washing before and after meals is obligatory.

Historically, ablutions were practiced by priests and converts to Judaism as part of the initiation rites. It is also practiced by women on the seventh day of menstrual period. Priests had to wash their hands and feet before taking part in Temple services.

The Red Sea is significant in Jewish history because its parting by Prophet Moses (pbuh) was a miraculous event at the beginning of the Exodus which enabled the Israelites to escape from the Pharaoh's Egyptian army. God allowed Prophet Musa (pbuh) to part the sea so that the Israelites could walk safely to the other side on dry land, while the Egyptians drowned as the sea came together again.

This miracle was a reward for the faith of Moses and the Israelites, God's Chosen People. The parting and crossing of the Red Sea signifies that God has power over nature, even the mighty ocean. Water here is powerful, but an instrument of God for punishment (for the Egyptians) and a source of blessing (in the case of the Israelites). This phenomena is symbolic in the sense of water as savior and as annihilator – the aspect of purity is exemplified by event where the believers were saved and the persecutors or perpetrators of sin were destroyed



Islam:

In Islam, water is important for cleansing and purifying. Muslims must ritually cleanse and purify before approaching God in prayer. In Islam ritual purity (tahara) is required before carrying out religious duties especially *salat* (worship).

There are three types of ablutions. Firstly, *ghusl*, the major ablution, is the washing of the whole body in pure water, after declaring the intention to do so. Ghusl is compulsory after physical relationships between man and wife and recommended before Friday prayer and before touching the Holy Koran. Ghusl is also obligatory for the dead before they are buried.

The second ablution is *wudu*, the minor ablution, this must be carried out before each of the five daily prayers and involves using pure water to wash the face, head, arms and feet.

The Holy Koran States:

"Allah has created every moving (living) creature from water. Of them there are some that creep on their bellies, and some that walk on two legs, and some that walk on four. Allah creates what He wills. Verily, Allah is able to do all things." (Verse 24 : 45)

"...And you see the earth barren, but when We send down water (rain) on it, it is stirred (to life), and it swells and puts forth every lovely kind (of growth)."
(Verse 22: 5)

In Islam, centrality of water in religion lies in its significance in Creation and the beginning of life. Allah created the earth in seven days and it is from water that all life form has evolved. Therefore, water is the essence of our being; it is our existence and sustenance.

The Well of Zamzam is located within the Masjid al Haram in Mecca, 20 meters east of the Holy Kabaa Sharif the holiest place in Islam. According to Islamic belief, it was a miraculously-generated source of water from Allah, which began thousands of years ago when Ibrahim's infant son Ishmael was thirsty and kept crying for water and was kicking at the ground when water gushed out. Millions of pilgrims visit the Well each year while performing the Hajj or Umrah pilgrimages, in order to drink its water.

Islamic history states that Zamzam well was revealed to Hajra, the wife of Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim)(PBUH) and mother of Prophet Ishmael (PBUH) around the year 2000 BC. According to Islamic tradition, she was desperately seeking water for her infant son, but could not find any as Mecca is located in a hot dry valley with few sources of water. Muslim traditions say that Hajra ran seven times back and forth in the scorching heat between the two hills of Safa and Marwah, looking for water. Getting thirstier by the second, her son, Ishmael anxiously scraped the land with his feet, where suddenly water sprang out.



This well has never dried up since then. On the contrary it has always filled the demand for water and continues to do so. It has always maintained the same salt composition and taste ever since it came into existence. Pilgrims from all over the world visit Ka'aba every year for Hajj and Umrah, but have never complained about it. Instead, they have always enjoyed the water that refreshes them.

Appeal of Water from Zamzam well appeal has always been universal. This water has never been chemically treated or chlorinated as is the case with water pumped into the cities. Biological growth and vegetation usually takes place in most wells. This makes the water unpalatable owing to the growth of algae causing taste and odour problems. But in the case of the Zamzam well, there wasn't any sign of biological growth. As such it signifies the essential

characteristics of any pure form.

Hinduism:

Water in Hinduism has a special place because it is believed to have spiritual cleansing powers. To Hindus all water is sacred, especially of rivers, and there are seven sacred rivers, namely the Ganges, Yamuna, Godavari, Sarasvati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri. Although, Hinduism encompasses so many different beliefs among those that most Hindus do share is the importance of striving to attain purity and avoiding pollution. This relates to both physical cleanliness and spiritual well-being.

Pilgrimage is very important to Hindus. Holy places are usually located on the banks of rivers, coasts, seashores and mountains. Sites of convergence, between land and river or two or even better three, rivers, carry special significance and are specially sacred. Sacred rivers are thought to be a great equalizer. In the Ganges the pure are made even more pure and the impure have their pollution removed if only temporarily. The sacred waters of the rivers are supposed to wash away the caste distinctions as everyone bathes in its waters together.



The Ganges river is the most important of the sacred rivers in the Hindu religion. Its waters are used in *puja* (worship) and if possible a sip is given to the dying. It is believed that those who bathe in the Ganges and those who leave some part of themselves (hair, bone etc) on the left bank will attain *Svarga* (the paradise of Indra).

The river is said to flow from the toe of Vishnu to be spread into the world through the hair of Shiva.

Funeral grounds are always located near a river. Sometimes at the funeral a small hole is drilled in an earthen pot, which is then filled with water. As the son of the deceased walks around the burning funeral pyre with the pot, dripping water forms a limiting line to prevent the soul from escaping back into the earth as a ghost. When the heat of the pyre cracks the skull of the corpse, the mourners bathe in the river and return home. On the third day after the cremation the ashes are collected and, on or after the tenth day they are cast into a holy river.

For Hindus, morning cleansing with water is a basic obligation. *Tarpana* is the point at which the worshipper makes a cup with his hands and pours the water back into the river reciting mantras. After sipping some water, he may then apply the distinguishing mark of his *sampradaya* (tradition), and say the morning prayer, *samdhya*. *Sodhana* is Hindu purification and is necessary for different reasons and at different levels. Physical purification is a part of daily ritual which may, in the case of *sadhus* (Hindu holy people who renounce the world seeking Brahman), be very elaborate. *Sodhana* is also necessary if caste rules have been broken, for example if someone drinks from the same vessel as a member of a lower caste, and

before *puja*. Every temple has a pond near it and devotees are supposed to take a bath before entering the temple.

The story of the Great Flood of Manu appears in Hindu scriptures. This is the story of how all creation is submerged in a great deluge but Manu is rescued by a fish that he once saved from being eaten by a larger fish. The fish told him to build a large boat and to take into it seeds and animals. The fish then towed the boat to safety by anchoring it on the highest of the Himalayas. He stayed on the mountain (known as Manu's Descent) while the flood swept away all living creatures. Manu alone survived.

Zoroastrianism:

The significance of water in Zoroastrianism is a combination of its purifying properties and its importance as a fundamental life element. Therefore, while water is used in purification rites and rituals it is sacred itself and so must be kept from being polluted.

Zoroastrianism is a very dualistic creed with a great emphasis placed on the opposing forces of good and evil. When the world was created the Evil Spirit Angra Mainyu attacked the earth and among other things made pure water salty. Zoroastrians believe that pollution is evil and that water, when pure, is sacred. Zoroastrians themselves must avoid pollution of any kind and must perform ritual ablutions before saying their prayers (which are said 5 times a day facing a source of light) and before any religious ceremonies such as weddings.

Purity and pollution are central concerns in Zoroastrian thought and practice. For minor pollutions, *padyab-kusti* is performed, which involves washing and saying special prayers (*kusti*). Serious pollution, for example contact with a corpse, requires the nine day *baresnum* ceremony which is held in the temple precincts and includes periods of prayer and washing with the aid of priests.

The sanctity of water is very important to Zoroastrians. People must not urinate, spit or wash one's hands in a river or allow anyone else to. In Zoroastrianism the dead are not cremated, buried or immersed in water because fire, earth and water must be kept pure. Thus, corpses are left to birds of prey.

Haurvatat (meaning wholeness, health and integrity) is a feminine being and the creator of water and is represented by consecrated water used in priestly acts of worship. The holy day of Haurvatat and water is in midsummer and people pray and make offerings by the seashore or any natural water. In everyday life Haurvatat is observed by keeping water unpolluted and being temperate and self-disciplined. Haurvatat is the personification of what salvation means to the individual.

Zoroastrianism also has a Great Flood story. Ahura Mazda warned Yima that destruction in the form of floods, subsequent to the melting of the snow, was threatening the sinful world and

gave him instructions for building a *vara* in which specimens of small and large cattle, humans, dogs, birds, fires, plants and foods were to be deposited in pairs.

Buddhism:

For Buddhists symbolism and ritual is pointless because they seek spiritual enlightenment that comes from seeing the reality of unreality. Bodhidharma, thought to be the first teacher of Zen Buddhism said this in the 5th Century CE: Water does however feature in Buddhist funerals where water is poured into a bowl placed before the monks and the dead body. As it fills and pours over the edge, the monks recite "As the rains fill the rivers and overflow into the ocean, so likewise may what is given here reach the departed."

Thai-Buddhism

Water plays a central role in Thai Buddhism. Lustral water is water that has been infused with magical powers or has received a blessing from monks during a sacred ceremony called "Nam Mon". Thais believe that those who drink lustral water or have it sprinkled on their head, the most sacred part of the body, will be blessed.

Lustral water is traditionally made from underground water contained in a bronze pot. Buddhist monks can use their alms bowls to hold the Lustral water. A wax candle is often on the rim of the bowl in which Lustral water is being prepared. As drops of wax fall into the bowl, disease, sorrow and evil are believed to be washed away. Gold leaves, Bermuda grass and even lotuses may be placed in the bowl to increase its magical powers.

The most sacred lustral water is made with four elements: Earth, Water, Fire and Wind. Earth is represented by the drops of wax, water by that in the bowl, fire by the candle flame and wind by the extinguishments of the candle. A sacred white thread or "*Saisin*" passes from the Buddha image and through the hands of each of the chanting monks during the ceremony.

Bahá'í:

Water is fundamental in the rites, language and symbolism of all religions, and the Bahá'í Faith is no exception. There are Bahá'í laws concerning water and cleanliness, and many ways that water is used as a metaphor for spiritual truths.

In a more general context, the Bahá'í Faith places great importance on agriculture and the preservation of the ecological balance of the world. Water is of course a fundamental resource for agriculture. It is essential to the functioning of all ecological communities and plays a key role in all the life support systems of the planet. It is essential to life itself, which is why it is so often used in spiritual symbolism.

For Bahá'ís, respect for the creation in all its beauty and diversity is important, and water is a key element of that creation.

"The Almighty Lord is the provider of water, and its maker, and hath decreed that it be used to quench man's thirst, but its use is dependent upon His Will. If it should not be in conformity with His Will, man is afflicted with a thirst which the oceans cannot quench." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, in Prayer, Meditation, and the Devotional Attitude (compilation), pages 231-232)

The wise management of all the natural resources of the planet, including water, will require a global approach, since water is not a respecter of national boundaries. The use, sharing, protection and management of water need to be governed by spiritual principles of justice and equity, and the fundamental concept of moderation. Decisions on water need to be taken through processes of consultation involving all those concerned or affected.

Shikh:

The Sikhs prepare holy water, which is called *Amrit*, and used in a ritual Sikh baptism (known as *Amrit Sanskar* or *Amrit Chhakna*).



This ceremony is observed to initiate the Sikhs into the *Khalsa* brotherhood. The ceremony requires the drinking of the Amrit. This water is created by mixing a number of soluble ingredients, including sugar, and is then rolled with a *Khanda* (a type of knife) with the accompaniment of scriptural recitation of five sacred *Banis* (chants). This Amrit is also referred to God's name as nectar which is obtained through Guru's word.

Chanting God's name during Amrit Sanskar or Amrit Chakna uplifts a persons' physical and spiritual consciousness to a state of immortality.

Amrit in Sikh religion is repeatedly referred to as the drink of the gods, which grants them immortality. *Amrit* features in the *Samudra manthan*, where the gods, because of a curse from the sage *Durvasa*, begin to lose their immortality. With the help of the *asuras* (demons), they churned the sea in order to find the nectar of immortality, amrit. After drinking it, the gods regained their immortality and defeated the demons.

HOLY RIVERS

The following rivers are considered as Holy by Judaism, Christianity and Islam – the three Abrahamic religions

River Jordan:



The River Jordan is a river in Southwest Asia which flows into the Dead Sea. It is considered to be one of the world's most sacred rivers. It is 251 kilometers (156 miles) long.

The biblical river is a holy site for Christians, Jews and Muslims. For millions of people around the world, the Jordan holds a special religious symbolism. As well as being the location of Prophet Jesus's (pbuh) baptism, many of Prophet Mohammad's (pbuh)

companions are buried near its banks, making it also a holy site for Muslims.

At Yardenit in Israel, there is a major Baptism site on the river which attracts Greek and Russian Orthodox Pilgrims and the Mandeans of the only surviving Gnostic religion.

It is believed that at Jordan River, Prophets Joshua, Elijah, Elisha, John the Baptist, and Prophet Jesus (pbuh) crossed.

The Bible says that after the death of Prophet Moses (pbuh), God stopped the waters from flowing, allowing Joshua to lead his people across the river into Canaan (Joshua 3: 14-17).

The Red Sea:

The Red Sea is a seawater inlet of the Indian Ocean, crossing of the Red Sea by Moses and the Israelites in their flight from the pursuing Egyptian army is a part of the Exodus narrative on their journey out of Egypt, and is believed by the Christians and Muslims.



Dead Sea:

The Dead Sea is a salt lake in Jordan to the east and in the West Bank and Israel to the west. The Dead Sea is 378 m (1,240 ft) deep, the deepest hyper-saline lake in the world. It is also one of the world's saltiest bodies of water, with 33.7% salinity. Another property of the Dead Sea is that the salt content of its water is very high, the density being nearly 30%. Because of this, no living organism, such as fish or moss, can survive.

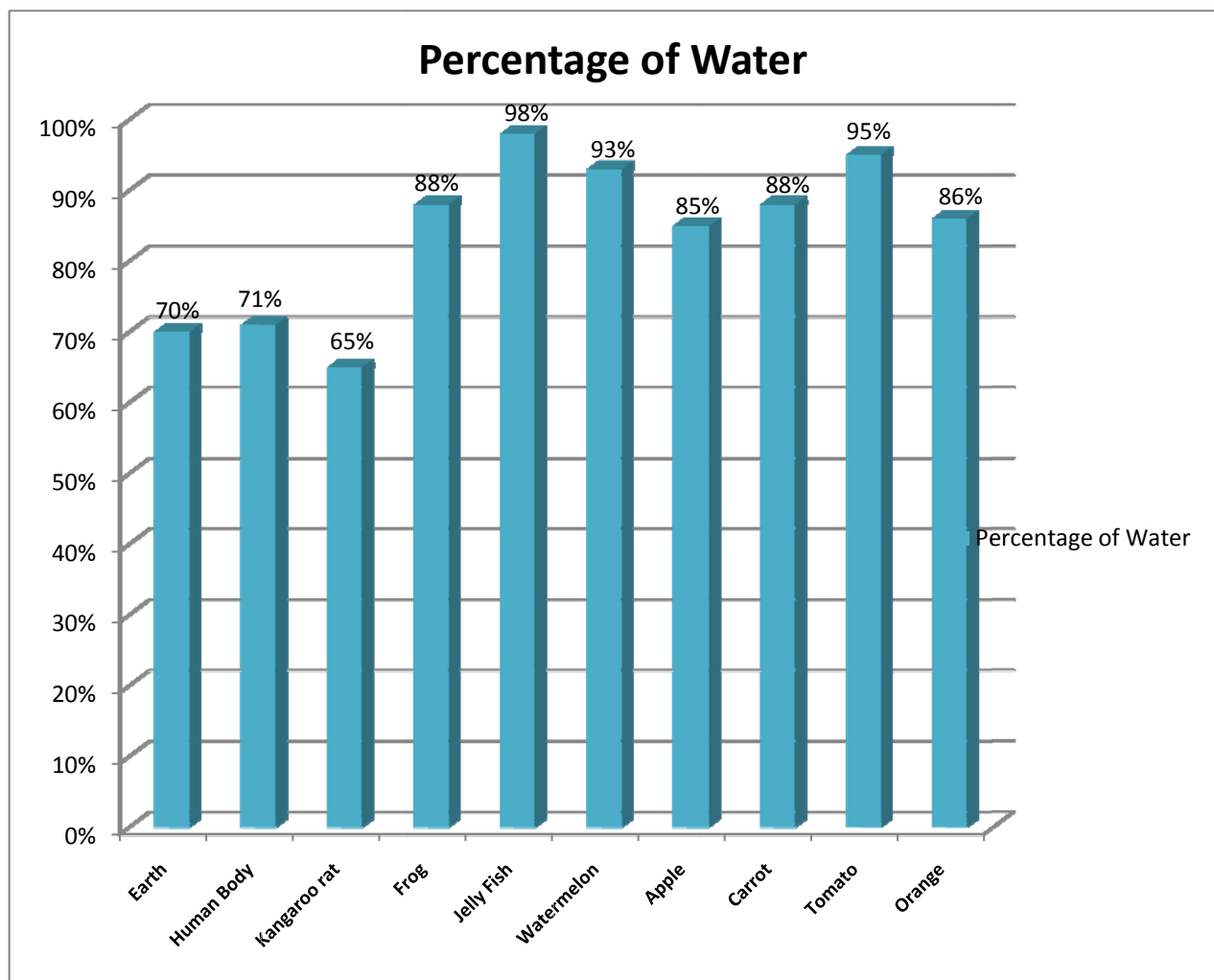
In Judaism, Zoar escaped destruction when Abraham's nephew Lot escaped there from Sodom (Genesis 19:21-22). Before the destruction, the dead sea was a valley full of natural tar pits,

which was called the valley of Siddim. King David was said to have hidden from Saul at Ein Gedi nearby.

Conclusion

Water is an important medium for linking us with the environment in the complex interactions that are such an important feature of our integrated planetary system.

Figure 2



As discussed at the beginning of the paper, water plays a vital role in the concept of Creation in religions; from there, water has extended itself as physical necessity for all life forms on earth. Water is never still; rather it flows and evolves just as life evolves. Therefore, it is most apt that water is the one gift of our Creator that sustains life from its birth to its death.

Since water is the essence of our existence, its symbolic meaning in the use of it in various religions and in many cases, its healing properties sets water apart from other elements such as wind, earth and fire. The institutions of science and religion both agree that water is an aspect of nature from which life has evolved.

Water in the form of rainfall is not only an essentiality for the growth of crops, it serves to eliminate diseases as well. In the religious sense, rain possesses the qualities of healing and a clear sign of God. In recent times rainwater harvest has become quintessential with resolving drinking water shortage issues and providing pure water in places that would otherwise be consuming polluted water. Rainwater is a reflection of the constant movement of water; it brings to life the nature from which we nourish our physical self. It also represents the cycle of life here on earth to our passing to the Hereafter.

Water related themes and narratives are recurrent in most religious doctrines. Nearly all cultures have some version of the great flood story, wherein water symbolizes both death and rebirth. In these stories, human, animal and plant life is all but wiped out from the Earth through a great flood that covers all the land, and only through acts of repentance on humankind's part, or forgiveness on the part of the respective deities, is total extinction averted.

Perhaps in age where religious pluralism is being emphasized as a means to overcome the differences within the human race and its cultures, faiths, and ways of life, a closer evaluation of nature, in particular water, reflects that the differences of all faiths is perhaps more a fabrication of Man rather than the Divine Design of our Creator. The concept of water in religions as discussed in this paper only ensures us that we are a step closer to the Truth; the truth of the Oneness of our Creator, the purity upon which we enter the world, our existence here on earth and our final return to Him.