

Reference to the sea is found in all the monotheistic religions as well as in the religions of the Far East (with which I shall not deal on this occasion). This is not surprising, since the sea as a physical phenomenon is mighty and has both negative and positive sides. It is a source of life and a cause of death and destruction; it can be friendly and frightening at the same time. Even when it seems clear on the surface men are aware of the fact that in its depths it conceals mysteries. It represents unimaginable strength, and when on it, the dwellers of the dry land are totally helpless. A tradition ascribed to prophet Muhammad says that people riding a boat are like “worms on a twig” (dud ?ala ?ud) This attitude to the sea reminds me of a short tale in Persian which runs as follows:

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A person asked Plato: “You spent many years in a ship and travelled in the sea, what wonders did you encounter in the sea?” He answered: “The real wonder was that I arrived safely from the sea to the shore.” One would expect to find such a wise saying attributed to Plato although one should remember that the Greeks attitude to the sea was more sophisticated. The sea encircled their country and breaking in multitude of places into it, enabled good refuge for their boats, supplied them with food, give them enjoyment when calm, and filled them with awe when stormy. The sea was god. Not represented by a god. Tadeusz Stefan Zielinski, the famous philhellenic classical philologist who wrote an exciting book on the Greek religion (first in Russian 1918) was absolutely right when he described one aspect of the Greek

religion as the deification of nature. As such, the sea itself was the god Poseidon, and when a storm was about to break and the first roars of thunder were heard, these were his sons, the Tritons blowing their large conches. It was the time for the sailors to lower their sails and begin to row, looking to the dark sky hoping for the appearance of their protectors, the dioscuroi, the twins Castor and Polydeuces. And when they appeared behind the masts this was the time to offer prayers and gifts to Poseidon and not forget his consort Amphitrite the queen of the mysterious depths.

We will not mention all the gods of the sea here, but they all figure in the Greek religion with their supreme head Poseidon, who came in the end to be the god of the Mediterranean, which in the eyes of the inhabitants living around its shores, was the "Great Sea". This is also its name in the Bible: "This is the great and wide sea wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts. There go the ships; there is that leviathan whom thou hast made to play therein."

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However, the Mediterranean is not the ocean. The ocean was also a Greek god. The god of the huge river that encircles the world in which, according to one view, Helios, the sun, sails from the west through the night to reappear in the east each morning. The word Okianos entered in this Greek form into Hebrew, modern Arabic and Persian. However though in Hebrew it is a common word like in English, in Persian and Arabic in it is hardly in use, and definitely was never used by Bahá'u'lláh. If an Arab writer wanted to use the word depicting the ocean he used a term which exactly described it in Greek mythology: al-bahr al-muhit, the encircling river or in Persian bahr-i- muhit. The word bahr in Arabic, and through it also

in Persian, means sea and river. Thus, the Nile is called in Arabic to this day Bahr an-Nil .

The word yamm is also used to describe the Nile in the Qur'an. No doubt it is the Hebrew

word yamm, sea, which entered into Arabic. Since the term bahr muhit defining ocean was

already used in the Middle Ages by Arab geographers, who copied Greek sources, the fact

that it was not used in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh means that there was no need for it.

Let us not forget that when a writer used a natural phenomenon as a simile, that natural

phenomenon was usually in his mind's eye in an exceptionally impressive form.

All the

prophets and the scriptures that refer to the sea are influenced by bodies of water that they

witnessed. Thus, Biblical man knew the Red Sea (Sea of Reeds, Yam Suf in Hebrew) and two

major lakes which are called seas: the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. And above all the

Great Sea, the Mediterranean. The same bodies of water were known to Jesus, although he

knew about the Mediterranean and the Red Sea only from tradition and Scriptures, because

he was never near them. His knowledge of the sea was limited to the Sea of Galilee.

Muhammad knew about one sea, the Red Sea, but he heard stories about two legendary

rivers, the junction of which Moses travelled to observe. He also knew about the Euphrates

which he never saw as well. He must also have heard about the sweet waters of rivers that do

not mix with the salty water of the sea. Bahá'u'lláh was acquainted with the Caspian Sea,

Persian Gulf, the Euphrates and the Tigris, and, after his exile from Iraq also with the Black

Sea the Aegian Sea and of course the Mediterranean next to which he spent the final 24 years

of his life.

I am mentioning this because the usage which is made by the reference to the "sea" in all the

monotheistic religions reflects the actual nature of these bodies of water in one way or

another. In none of them is there any mention of anything that resembles an ocean. The

prophets usually referred to the seas or rivers with which they were

acquainted. Thus, for instance, Bahá'u'lláh, is fond of the simile of the pearls that are to be found in the sea, to which we shall soon return. Although the sea as the source of pearls is common knowledge it is a real phenomenon for anyone familiar with shallow shores, such as the Persian Gulf, and the pearls found in it. In addition to the reality of the sea, there were also legends and traditions about it transmitted by the storytellers which became absorbed into the folklore and the scriptures and were used and reused by one generation of prophets and transmitters after the other. This is why we find from time to time, stories about legendary bodies of water and legendary creatures living in the seas. The rich Greek mythology is almost totally absent from the literature of the monotheistic religions but on the other hand we find residues of ancient eastern legends and lore there.

Thus, for instance, we find a detailed description of the Leviathan in the book of Job which is not a whale as the word is used today but a mythical sea monster originating in the 5000 years old Sumerian tradition.

Let us now turn and examine the treatment of the sea in the Biblical and Qur'anic traditions.

In Judaism

In both these scriptures the sea is the real physical sea. Either calm or stormy the sea is part of God's creation; it is a testimony to God's omnipotence, and it is a tool used by Him at His will and for His purposes. The story of Creation in the Bible establishes the fact that by order of God the water receded, the dry land appeared and God gave the bodies of water their name – "seas" (in Hebrew yammim. Gen. 1:10). God's total control over the sea is represented in the parting of the Red Sea where Moses played the role of God's messenger in the event. He "made the sea dry land and the waters were divided" (Ex. 14:21). The same event is reported in the in the Qur'an (Q, 2:5; 6:128; 10:90). The poem in the Book of Exodus exalts God who displayed His great power in this event: "And with the blast of thy nostrils the waters were gathered together. The floods stood up

straight as an heap. And the depths were congealed into the heart of the sea."
(Ex. 15:8)

The aim of the Bible is to extol the absolute authority of God over his creation. Fire and flood, wind and storm, mountains and rivers, forests and deserts, the deep sea and its abundance of water are all tools in the divine planning. God uses them to punish his enemies and to impose His will on his servants. The story about the prophet Jonah is probably the best representative of this idea. God ordered Jonah to go to Nineveh "the great city" and prophecy to its people, all sinners, that they were to be destroyed unless they repent. They were given forty days to consider the warning. Jonah decided that he was not going to fulfill this mission. He knew very well that God is merciful, and that in case the people of Nineveh repent, God would surely forgive them. Jonah feels that his mission is futile. He is human and he does not want to be ridiculed as a liar once the city is saved. He also believes that he can escape God by embarking on a ship taking a long voyage away from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. God causes the sea to storm and the ship in a danger of sinking. Through the chain of events which follows, Jonah is compelled to carry his original mission to his great vexation. The prophet wanted the long time sinners to be punished this is a simple justice, but God, the story tells us, is ready to accept those who repent. "His hands are outstretched to those who return unto him" says a Jewish prayer. This is the message of the whole book of Jonah, but it could be demonstrated with the help of the storming sea used as a divine tool. God's control of the sea is present throughout the Bible (enabling Jesus walking on the water belongs to this category), even in the one place in the Book of Job where the sea is represented as an impregnable being. The suffering Job turns to God exclaiming: "Am I a sea or a sea monster that thou attest a watch over me?" (Job, 7:12) The ancient myth of the battle between the great God and the sea monster (Marduch and Tihamat for example) is echoed here, only that in the Hebrew tradition there is no battle; there is no one to contest God's

supreme authority, and even the storming Yamm, the Sumerian sea god, becomes in Hebrew the noun denoting sea with no supernatural standing, which comes like all creatures under the divine watch and command. Job also makes clear that he knows that the sea has no intelligence, and as such cannot be deified. Wisdom, he agrees, is unique: “But where shall the wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? The depth saith it is not in me, and the sea saith it is not with me.” (Job, 28: 12, 14) One may sum up the idea of the subordination of the sea to God in two clear examples. In Exodus 20:11 we read in one of the Ten Commandments: “For in six days the Lord made the heaven and the earth the sea and all that is in them ...” And the poet in Psalms, 89:8-9) overcome with exhilaration cries: “O Lord God of hosts, who is a strong Lord like unto thee? ... Thou rulest the raging of the sea when the waves thereof arise, thou stilleth them.” Ancient Israel was acquainted mainly with one sea, the Mediterranean, and to much lesser extent with the Red Sea in spite of the fact that it figured prominently in its past, and the attempts of a few kings to develop the port of Eilat (Etzyon Geber) as a second sea outlet for the Kingdom. (1Kings, 22:48) The Mediterranean represented for all the ancient inhabitants on its shores in Europe, South west Asia, and North Africa all the characteristics of a great sea: calm and beautiful on the one hand angry and raging with storms on the other. It was therefore not unusual that it was used metaphorically by prophets and poets to present, power and treachery, abundance and prosperity, wisdom and mystery. Thus Isaiah wishing to describe the reward awaiting him who hearkens to God commands says: “then had thy peace been like a river and thy righteousness like the waves of the sea (Isaiah, 48:18). On the other hand the storming sea can also be the symbol of evil: “But the wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest whose water cast out mire and dirt. There is no peace saith my God to the wicked.” (Isaiah, 57:20-21) The roaring sea is used by Jeremiah to

describe the voice of
the cruel enemy (Jeremiah, 50:42) and the vastness of the sea is used to
describe and to
portray the extent of calamity that befell Jerusalem: "What things shall I
likened to thee O
daughter of Jerusalem? What shall I equal to thee that I may comfort thee?...
For thy breach is
great like the sea who can heal thee? (Lamentations, 2:13)
The sea is used like in the last example to denote superlatives of plenty and
size. Isaiah,
promising the great final peace, describes a world free of war and weapons and
insures the
certainty of its happening because "the earth shall be full of the knowledge
of the Lord as the
water covers the sea." (Isaiah 11:9) And in more philosophical spirit (the
parallel of which we
find in Indian sources), the Ecclesiastes ponders at the mystery of the sea:
"All the rivers run
into the sea, yet the sea is not full." There can be only one solution for
the riddle: Unto the
place from which the rivers come thither they return again." (Eccles. 1:7)
The Jewish mystics
could not miss the challenge of this verse: the rivers, they say, are the
rivers of Grace
emanating from the highest sephirah, that of the Divine Crown, streaming down
to fill the
shekhinah the manifestation of the Divine Being below which is likened to the
sea.

In Islam

The attitude of the Qur'an to the sea is very similar to the attitude of the
Bible. For
Muhammad the sea is a natural object created and controlled by God. (Q, 2:161)
He also emphasized the miracle that God performed when He parted the Red Sea
before the
people of Israel. This sea is not mentioned by name but by the general noun
bahr, the
common word for sea and for river as we mentioned above. In a few places the
word yamm is
used as in Hebrew. The sea with which Muhammad was mostly familiar was the Red
Sea, not
the Mediterranean. He marveled about the ships that sail in the sea (Q, 14:32)
and for him
they were proof of God's might. He causes the boats to sail in the sea
sending good wind (Q,
31:30), but He also causes the sea to storm and in such case when he hears the
supplications

of the seafarers and their prayers, He causes the sea to calm down (Q, 10:22).
For God , and only God, knows all that is in the sea and the land (?()
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as well as what is under the darkness thereof (????? ???
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From the beginning of creation God fixed the stars in heavens to direct sailors
in the darkness
of the sea and land (?? ? ?????? ???
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It should be emphasized that the sea is mentioned in only very few places in
the Qur'an
unlike the Bible where there are an abundance of references to it, as there are
in the writings
of Baha'ullah. However, Muhammad also uses the vast sea metaphorically in two
places but
almost in the same words:
“If the sea were ink for the words of my Lord, the sea would be spent before
the words of my
Lord are spent.” (Q 18:109, trans. Arberry) A parallel verse presents this
idea even more
decisively:
“Though all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea – seven seas
after it to replenish it,
yet would the Words of God spent ... (Q, 31:27 Trans. Arberry). Incidentally,
the exact same
idea is also found in the Jewish liturgy)

In Bahá'í writings
In contradistinction to Judaism and Islam where the basic attitude to the sea
is to the physical
body of water, in Bahá'u'lláh's writings the word sea is used only
figuratively. Apart for a
few places where he uses the Persian word “darya,” he usually employs the
Arabic word
"bahr". The employment of the word bahr to describe vastness and depth in a
figurative
manner is known in Arabic literature. Thus for instance a scholar famous for
his vast
knowledge, is called al-bahr. The only occasion in which the word bahr is
translated as sea in
the official Bahá'í translation is when it appears twice, as in the opening
of the Seven Valleys
when Bahá'u'lláh says:

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"And I praise and glorify the first sea that has branched from the Ocean of the Divine Essence". In this case there is a literary reason for giving a different translation to the same word.

This brings us to the meaning of sea in the Baha'i writings.

1. Sea as representing the manifestation of God the prophet, such as in the example just quoted. The first sea in this case refers to Muhammad. Instead of repeating the usual prayer for the prophet of Islam by saying:

"and I bless and salute Muhammad and his family" (...? ?????%?)????? ????? ??? ?????

Bahá'u'lláh uses this form of blessing.

At the same time sea, is also a reference to the Divine Being Himself, and in this way the organic connection between the Essence and its Manifestation and described as

"forking off" from it just as the Persian Gulf branches off from the Indian Ocean.

Whoever sees the Gulf knows through it the mystery of the Ocean.

2. The word bahr is used to describe the words of the Manifestation, the texts revealed by him. In this case Bahá'u'lláh uses the term bahr al-kalam. This simile enables him to carry the allegory one step further and to describe the actual process leading to the revealed words of wisdom, laws and ordinances. When the "sea of words" is calm, that is when the Manifestation keeps the mystery of his revelation concealed in the depth of his being, nothing is revealed. There is the potentiality of revelation in the same way that there is the potentiality of storm in a calm sea. When the Prophet is stirred up to reveal his message this is compared to the stormy sea. The high waves represent the movement of the prophecy from its passive to its active mode or from potentiality to actuality. Here is how this dramatic process happens (Aqdas 26:)

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"Thus have the billows of the ocean of utterance surged, casting forth the

pearls of the
laws decreed by the Lord of All Mankind" (official translation)
The verse here recalls the Qur'an 27:6

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“Thou receivest the Qur'an from One Wise Knowing.” (trans. Arberry)
Bahá'u'lláh uses the same ? ? ????and describes the source
of his ordinances as himself,
being the lord of all mankind. When he wishes to bring forth the words of his
revelation compared to the pearls at the bottom of the sea it is as if the sea
of words
surges up and breaks into a storm which casts out the hidden pearls.
If we leave for a moment the canonized English text and attempt a simple
translation
(bearing in mind the Qur'anic verse) we arrive at almost the same wording
quoted
above except that following the Qur'an we would conclude the verse:
“And casted the pearls of laws from the ruler of humanity”.

So whenever the manifestation is in its active state – teaching, directing,
decreeing
and so on, it is likened to the stormy sea. This idea appears very frequently
in
Bahá'u'lláh's writings. His revelation is always a sea and almost always
in a stormy
state and he assures the reader repeatedly that his stormy sea casts forth the
pearls of
his words. Frequently describing himself as bahr al-a'zam” the “most
great sea” and
his revelation as bahr bayani the “sea of my clear utterance.” As long
as he is in this
world he is “the sea of connection” - bahr al-wisal between him and
humanity. In this
context the prophet also envisages a situation that this direct connection,
represented
by his being in this world as the “sea of connection”, will cease one day
to exist. He
sees his departure from this world as ghayd bahr al-wisal – “the
ebbing of the sea of
connection”.

3. Other definitions of sea.

Beside the depiction of the appearance of the Manifestation and its revealed
teaching
as a stormy sea, there are references to the divine, namely the
Manifestation's, mercy
as a sea. The believers, God's servants, can be seen as standing on shore and

awaiting
the overflow of the sea of mercy. In one long passage in the Aqdas the Báb is
made to
beg Bahá'u'lláh not to prevent his servants from the fuyudat of his
mercy (Aqdas,
129). The word fuyudat, by the way, seems to be a creation of
Bahá'u'lláh. In Arabic
the singular fayd takes the plural fuyud. Bahá'u'lláh created a plural
of the plural form
(which in Arabic is possible especially as a poetical license) thereby giving
further
emphasis to the idea of the swelling water of this type of sea. Naturally,
Bahá'u'lláh
attributes the qualities of the sea to the Báb and his revelation as well. The
Báb's chief
creation, the Bayan, is also a sea. It is not stormy but a quiet and deep sea
concealing
many mysteries of learning and wisdom which can be discovered only by
Bahá'u'lláh
as a divine manifestation. These mysteries are the pearls in the sea but,
unlike the
pearls of Bahá'u'lláh which the stormy sea casts out; these pearls have to
be
discovered by the revealed God.

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Should he so desire (Bahá'u'lláh speaks about himself) he will expound for
you that which is revealed therein (the Bayan) and disclose to you the pearls
of
knowledge and wisdom.

But the divine sea of mysteries is not left to a prophet to employ. The sea can
be
reached by the seekers who can abandon the passive state of those who are on
the
receiving side and become active seekers (an idea Bahá'u'lláh developed in
his Seven
Valleys and Four Valleys).

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Immerse yourselves in the sea of my words that you may unravel its secrets
and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie in its depths (Aqdas, 182).
In other words the sea of the secrets of the Divine Manifestation is open to
human

investigation, there is much optimism in this statement: the depths are open to whoever can dive!

However, even those who are passive, not only humans but everything, all things, were immersed in the sea of purity once the Manifestation appeared.

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Verily all created things were imersed in the sea of purification...(Aqdas, 75)

If this is not sufficiently clear Bahá'u'lláh takes the simile of the sea away from himself and regards the whole of humanity as drops of one sea, thus combining two images – sea and tree – that he liked to depict when he spoke about the unity of humanity:

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“You are all the leaves of one tree and the drops of one sea!”
Once humans were also allowed into the metaphor of the sea, Bahá'u'lláh, who invited them to dive into its depths, developed the idea of the ideal world of humanity.
Without saying it in so many words, the metaphor is clear:

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The divine commands are like a sea and the people are like fish.
Just as fish cannot live outside the water so human beings cannot live without the divine ordinances!

As far as I know, unlike the prophets before him Bahá'u'lláh refers to the sea in the same way that he refers to other natural phenomena, figuratively and allegorically.

The difference is that in other cases, particularly when he himself is involved he would use an expression which gives the idea of comparison as we have just seen “they are like...” but when he, or his prophecy is involved on the whole, particularly in the case of the sea there is no expression of comparison: the sea is him, the sea is the divine mystery, the sea is the prophecy. If there are exception to the rule it is very instructive to explore their reason.

— Seas Not Oceans (Used by permission of the curator)