

Seas Not Oceans *

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Why Ocean nor simply sea?

Reference to the sea is very frequent in the Bahá'í writings. The word *bahr* to depict the sea is used hundreds of times in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, and, to a minor extent, the pure Persian word *daryā*. In both cases the translation into English fixed and followed by the example of Shoghi Effendi, in what might be called the standard Bahá'í English style, the words are almost consistently translated as "ocean." In my mind it is an incorrect translation, and although one may argue that the Arabic with some stretching can turn an ordinary sea, into an ocean, this is not the case in classical Arabic or Persian. One can, however, understand the choice of the word ocean for the purpose of translating the word which is used extensively by Bahá'u'lláh as a simile to describe his station, his revelation, his message and many other aspects of his mission and ministry. Later I shall explain why Bahá'u'lláh always spoke about the sea and not the ocean. I mentioned above that Shoghi Effendi translated the word *bahr* by the English word "ocean" and not "sea". The reason could well be that the English translation of Bahá'u'lláh's writings were intended mainly for the American public. Since the United States is encircled by oceans, Americans use the word ocean and not sea as the term for these huge bodies of water.

In Classical use

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 Muḥammad says that people riding a boat are like "worms on a twig" (*dūd alā ād*)

This attitude to the sea reminds me of a short tale in Persian which runs as follows:

شخصی از افلاطون پرسید که سالهای بسیار در کشتی بودی و سفر دریا کردی در دریا چه عجایب دیدی؟ گفت عجب همین بود که از دریا سلامت بکناره رسیدم.

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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 Zieliński, 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 dioscouri, 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.”

כַּה) זֶה הַיָּם גָּדוֹל וְרַחֵב יָדַיִם שָׁם רָמַשׁ וְאִיִּן מִסְפָּר חַיּוֹת קַטְנוֹת עִם גְּדֻלוֹת: (כו) שָׁם אֲנִיּוֹת יְהַלְכוּן לְיָמָן זֶה יִצְרָף לְשֹׁחַק בּוֹ (תהילים פרק קד)

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-baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, the encircling river or in Persian *baḥr-i- muḥīṭ*. The word *baḥr* in Arabic, and through it also in Persian, means sea and river. Thus, the Nile is called in Arabic to this day *Baḥr an-Nil* . The word *yamm* is also used to describe the Nile in the Qur-ān. No doubt it is the Hebrew word *yamm*, sea, which entered into Arabic. Since the term *baḥr muḥīṭ* 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 Sūf* 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. Muḥammad 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'ānic 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 *yammīm*. 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 Qur’ān (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 Qurʾān to the sea is very similar to the attitude of the Bible. For Muḥammad 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 *baḥr*, 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 (ويعلم ما في البر والبحر) (Q, 6:59) as well as what is under the darkness thereof (ظلمات البر والبحر). (Q,7:163)

From the beginning of creation God fixed the stars in heavens to direct sailors in the darkness of the sea and land (لتهدوا بها في ظلمات البر والبحر). (Q, 6:97)

It should be emphasized that the sea is mentioned in only very few places in the Qur.ān 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 “*daryā*,” he usually employs the Arabic word “*baḥr*”. The employment of the word *baḥr* 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-baḥr*. The only occasion in which the word *baḥr* 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:

واصلي واسلم على اول بحر تشعب من بحر الهوية

"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” (واصلي واسلم على محمد وآله...)

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 *baḥr* is used to describe the words of the Manifestation, the texts revealed by him. In this case Bahá'u'lláh uses the term *baḥr al-kalām*. 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:)

لذلك ماج بحر الكلام وقذف لآلي الأحكام من لدن مالك الآنام

"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

وانك لتلقى القرآن من لدن حكيم عليم

“Thou receivest the Qur'an from One Wise Knowing.” (trans. Arberry)

Bahá'u'lláh uses the same *من لدن* 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'ānic verse) we arrive at almost the same wording quoted above except that following the Qur'ān 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-azam*” the “most great sea” and his revelation as *bahr bayānī* the “sea of my clear utterance.” As long as he is in this world he is “the sea of connection” - *bahr al-wiṣāl* 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 *ghayḍ bahr al-wiṣāl* – “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 *fuyūdat* of his mercy (Aqdas, 129). The word *fuyūdat*, by the way, seems to be a creation of Bahá'u'lláh. In Arabic the singular *faḍl* takes the plural *fuyūd*. 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 *Bayān*, 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.

انه لو شاء يبين لكم ما نُزل فيه وما سُتر في بحر كلماته من لآي العلم والحكمة

Should he so desire (Bahá'u'lláh speaks about himself) he will expound for you that which is revealed therein (the Bayān) 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*).

اغتمسوا في بحر بياني لعلّ تطّلعون بما فيه من لآي الحكمة والاسرار

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.

قد انغمست الأشياء في بحر الطهارة

Verily all created things were immersed 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:

همه أورايف يك شجرید وقطرهاي يك بحر

“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:

أوامر الهیه بمزلهء بحر است وناس بمزلهء حیتان

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 exceptions to the rule it is very instructive to explore their reason.