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Here Be Dragons!

The Sea

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. (Gen 1:1–2)

We shall begin our tour of the biblical universe by travelling out to sea because, as we will discover, ancient Israelites thought that the world began in a state of watery chaos. It was from this dark, primeval waterworld that the ordered cosmos emerged. So if we are to start at the very beginning we need to get out into a boat and push off from the shore.

The sea is an awesome place bursting with life, but also a vast, wide, deep, dark, and dangerous place for human beings. It is overwhelmingly powerful and uncontrollable. Ancient people had never explored the bottom of the seas so their depths were largely unknown. As God asks Job, “Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep?” (Job 38:16). Absolutely not! In the same way, their expanse was also unexplored. All that was known was that the sea went further than any people had ever sailed. And it was an inhospitable place for humans that could be braved by seafarers, but only at risk of their lives. Even seasoned sailors lost out to the power of the sea in the midst of violent and unpredictable storms. It was a restless, ever-moving, undifferentiated mass that spoke to the ancients of great wonder and life but also deep mystery, mortal danger, raw power, and utter chaos. And it was inhabited by fearsome beasts:

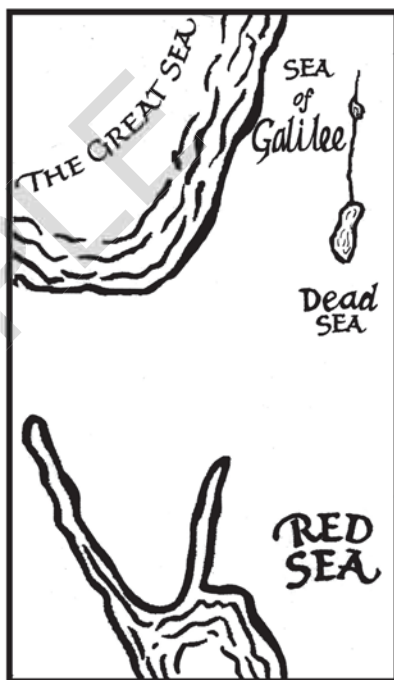
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Those who sail the sea tell of its dangers,
and we marvel at what we hear.
For in it are strange and marvelous works,
all kinds of living things,
and huge creatures of the sea. (Sir 43:24–25)

Biblical authors were familiar with several “seas.” The big sea was the Mediterranean, and was understandably referred to as “the Great Sea” and “the Western Sea.” Inland and to the south was the Dead Sea, known as the “Salt Sea,” “the Eastern Sea,” or “the Sea of Arabah.” In the north was the little inland Sea of Galilee, known as “the Sea of Chinnereth.” Finally, because of its importance in the exodus story, there was “the Red Sea” (*Yam Suph*) by Egypt.¹

The Mediterranean Sea, running along Israel’s west coast, was hugely significant to the civilizations around it. It had long been an important source of food and became increasingly important for trade, cultural exchange, and migration. Certain cities became very wealthy on the riches brought by sea trade. And the water’s edge was the location of important sea-related trades such as the extraction of salt (used as a preservative), sourcing building materials (sand and quarried stone) with easy access to sea transport, and the production of purple dye for the über-rich. (Natural purple dye comes from the secretions of certain sea snails. It took the secretions of 240,000 snails to dye one kilogram of wool or silk! Hence its association with the very wealthy.)

Familiar though it was with various seas, ancient Israel was not a seafaring nation. The Bible does speak of the occasional Israelite sea traveler, like the prophet Jonah or the apostle Paul (both of whom had life-threatening



1. Although the *Yam Suph* was often associated with the Red Sea, we are not sure precisely which body of water this name refers to.

trouble at sea),² and the Gospels testify to a small-scale fishing industry on Lake Galilee, but for the most part Israel left the sea to others.

While not a seafaring people, Israel was familiar with those who were. Their neighbors, the Philistines, had migrated across the sea from the Aegean region in the 1200s BC and settled along the coast, becoming a thorn in the side of Israel. Further north along the coast was the ancient, wealthy, and well-fortified harbor city of Tyre. This city's financial success was based on its maritime trade. Kings David and Solomon had good trading relations with Tyre.³ Israel's southwestern neighbor Egypt had also long benefitted from the riches of the Mediterranean, and later powers known to Bible writers, such as Greece and Rome, went to great lengths to flex their muscles at sea. So it is no surprise to discover that the sea washes up on the pages of Scripture.

The Primal Sea

Water, Water, Everywhere . . .

To better appreciate ancient understandings of the sea we need to try to grasp their mythological beliefs about of its place in creation.

In Egyptian mythology everything begins in a vast sea (a god called Nun) and in darkness. This is the ancient Egyptian equivalent of “nothing” or “void.” That image makes sense because sea appears to be an unlimited and unpredictable mass. Nun is not the creator god, but in this watery chaos Atum, the creator god, generates himself (!) and then creates the other gods. From the sea rises a large primordial mound of land. The waters and the darkness are constrained in their allocated places and on this land the creator god causes life to burst forth.

Mesopotamian mythology too sees creation beginning from a pre-creation ocean. *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation myth, explains that before there were any other gods and before heaven and earth were set in place, there were only Apsu (the freshwater ocean) and Tiamat (the salt-water ocean). The sky and the earth and everything else were born from this primeval father (Apsu) and mother (Tiamat), whose waters mingled. Several other gods were created from these waters, but they were noisy

2. Acts 27; 2 Cor 11:25–26 says that Paul was shipwrecked and adrift at sea three times.

3. 1 Chr 14:1; 2 Chr 2:3–4 (and parallel texts in 1 Kings). Though in later periods various biblical prophets spoke oracles of doom against it (Amos 1:9–10; Isaiah 23; Jer 27:3; 47:4; Ezekiel 26; 29).

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and annoying, and freshwater Apsu planned to kill them. Saltwater Tiamat warned the most powerful of these gods, Ea, of Apsu's plan. Ea then killed Apsu and established himself as chief god. Tiamat decided to take vengeance for the death of her husband so Ea's powerful son Marduk engaged her in battle. He slew her and from her divided watery corpse created the heavens and the earth. Here is an Assyrian depiction of a chaos dragon like Tiamat.



In this cultural environment it is perhaps no surprise that Genesis 1 also sees a cosmic sea prior to God's creative activity. "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep (*têhôm*). And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (1:2). This primeval state was pure darkness and ocean, chaotic disorder unable to support life, without form and void.

It was from this dark, watery chaos that God created cosmos. The first three days are all about putting the primeval darkness and water into ordered zones to create environments in which life can thrive. First, he pushes back the darkness with light, keeping it within the bounds of nighttime (1:3–5). (What God actually creates on Day One is not simply light, i.e., bright stuff, but *time*. He creates ordered *temporal* spaces, day and night, into which he will later place bright objects, the sun, moon, and stars.) Next he divides the waters vertically, pushing some of the water up, behind a protective barrier—the firmament or sky-dome. This created a space between the waters above the waters below (1:6–8). Then he pulled the waters back on the horizontal plain, separating the land from the sea (1:9–13). The

primeval condition was one “without form” so the first three days concern God’s activity of in-forming a world.

This primeval watery chaos has not gone; it is still there, but is held back within certain boundaries by God. In fact, the world of biblical writers is *surrounded* by this dangerous water. The primeval waters remain above the sky-dome,⁴ as can be seen from texts such as the following:

Praise him, you highest heavens,
and *you waters above the heavens!* (Ps 148:4)

It is he who made the earth by his power,
who established the world by his wisdom,
and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.
When he utters his voice, there is a tumult of *waters in the heavens*
... (Jer 10:12–13)

God’s throne room in heaven is above the *heavenly waters* and he rules over them.

The voice of Jehovah is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
Jehovah, over many waters . . .
Jehovah sits enthroned over the flood;
Jehovah sits enthroned as king forever. (Ps 29:3, 10; cf. 104:1–3)

The terrestrial ocean itself, with which humans were familiar and upon which they sailed, was also a remnant of these very same primeval waters.⁵

Not only was water above and around, but the land itself was founded *upon* waters (held fast by its pillars). Thus there was yet more primeval water *beneath the earth*, sometimes referred to as “the abyss” or “the deep.” This belief in an earth that “floats” upon an ocean also mirrors a view common across the ancient Near East, from Egypt in the west to Sumeria and Babylon in the east. Several biblical passages speak of water below the earth:

The earth is Jehovah’s and the fullness thereof,
the world and those who dwell therein,
for *he has founded it upon the seas*
and established it upon the rivers. (Ps 24:1–2)

4. Which, as an aside, means that recent creationist theories of a water canopy around the earth that collapsed in the Flood are not only unprecedented in the history of the church but also unbiblical. The water canopy *remains in place*.

5. Gen 1:7.

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Give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever . . .
to him *who spread out the earth above/on* (Heb. *ʿal*) *the waters*,
for his steadfast love endures forever. (Ps 136:3, 6)

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness
of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth be-
neath, or that is in *the water under (taḥat) the earth*. (Exod 20:4)

As we will see in the next chapter, this primeval ocean that the earth
“floated” upon was considered to be the source of the water in springs and
rivers.

In the context of a world surrounded by water those Bible passages
celebrating God’s setting of boundaries for the sea make sense. The sea was
dangerous and should God ever stop holding these chaotic waters at bay the
world would collapse.

When he [God] established the heavens, I [Wisdom] was there;
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command . . .
(Prov 8:27–29)

Do you not fear me? declares Jehovah.
Do you not tremble before me?
I placed the sand as the boundary for the sea,
a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass;
though the waves toss, they cannot prevail;
though they roar, they cannot pass over it. (Jer 5:22)

He [God] gathers the waters of the sea as a heap;
he puts the deeps in storehouses. (Ps 33:7)

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Israel was not alone in the ancient world in associating the sea with chaos
and the danger of descending back into chaos. Indeed, it was a common
association. Ancient Near Eastern mythologies told of a cosmic battle

between a sky god and a sea monster in which the sea monster is vanquished. In the Ugaritic version, Baal, the storm god, battles and beats Yam, the sea god.⁶ In the Babylonian myth already mentioned, *Enuma Elish*, the fight is between Marduk (the sky god) and Tiamat (a sea dragon goddess). Marduk slays Tiamat and splits her body in half. From one half he makes the sky and



from the other half he made the earth. The well-known creation story in Genesis 1 in which God separates the waters above from the waters below is a non-violent, monsterless version of this same idea.

Nevertheless, we do find the sea monster myth elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. There are echoes of it in biblical language about God rebuking the sea,⁷ guarding the sea,⁸ and controlling the sea.⁹ But sometimes the chaos monsters slither into full view:

The pillars of heaven tremble
and are astounded at his [God's] rebuke.
By his power he stilled the sea;
by his understanding he shattered Rahab. (Job 26:11–12)

You rule the raging of the sea;
when its waves rise, you still them.
You crushed Rahab like a carcass;
you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. (Ps 89:9–10)

The first text above is a reflection on the wonders of creation. Rahab¹⁰ is a chaos sea beast shattered by Jehovah. So dramatic is this event that the

6. As an aside, the Hebrew word for “sea” is also *yam*.

7. Ps 106:6–9; Isa 50:2; Nah 1:4.

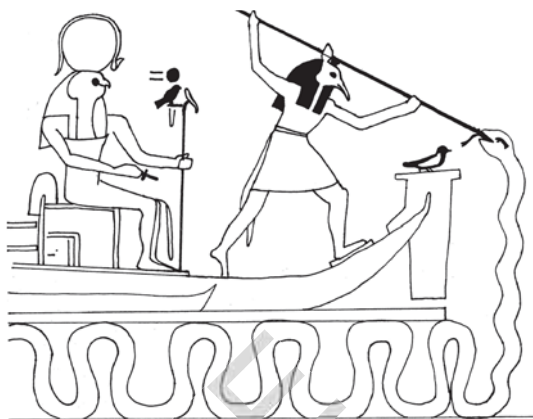
8. Job 7:12.

9. Job 38:8–11; Pss 89:9; 107:29; Prov 8:29.

10. The name Rahab is possibly connected to a root meaning “be boisterous, agitated,” like the sea.

pillars of heaven themselves, observing the fight, tremble in awe at God's angry rebuke.¹¹ This "rebuke" (*gē'arâ*) is more of an explosive blast of breath than a verbal rebuke; the kind of blast that can dry up the sea.¹² But it is not simply force that God uses to defeat Rahab—he uses his divine wisdom and understanding. Understanding is something that chaos does not have.

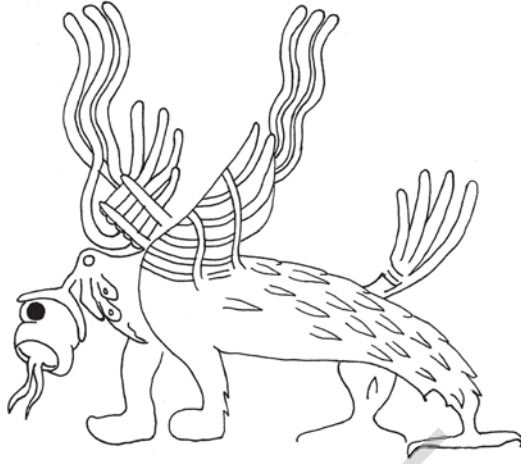
Psalm 18 pictures Jehovah as a lightning-hurling storm deity battling the sea as he comes to the rescue of the psalmist. So awesome is the Lord that the sea runs off in fear, laying the sea floor exposed, before he even arrives.



He [God] rode on a cherub and flew;
 he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.
 He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him,
 thick clouds dark with water.
 Out of the brightness before him
 hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds.
 Jehovah also thundered in the heavens,
 and the Most High uttered his voice,
 hailstones and coals of fire.
 And he sent out his arrows and scattered them;
 he flashed forth lightnings and routed them.
*Then the channels of the sea were seen,
 and the foundations of the world were laid bare
 at your rebuke, O Jehovah,
 at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.*
 He sent from on high, he took me;
 he drew me out of many waters. (Ps 18:10–16)

11. Cf. Job 9:13.

12. Isa 50:2; Nah 1:4.



And then there is Leviathan:¹³

Yet God my King is from of old,
working salvation in the midst of the earth.
You divided the sea by your might;
you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters.
You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.
You split open springs and brooks;
you dried up ever-flowing streams. (Ps 74:12–15)

The Leviathan of this psalm is the Israelite version of the monster Litanu, a seven-headed chaos beast linked with the sea. Here is a part of an Ugaritic poem in which Mot (god of death) is angry with Ba'al (the storm god) for defeating Litanu:

Because you [Ba'al] smote Litanu the slippery serpent
[and] made an end of the wriggling serpent
the tyrant with seven heads . . .

13. The name Leviathan probably means “coiled one.”



What is particularly interesting is the similarity of this Ugaritic poem and the following text from the Bible: “In that day Jehovah with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the slippery serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea” (Isa 27:1). The language is strikingly similar

Ugaritic	Hebrew
<i>Ltn</i> (Litanu)	<i>Lvytn</i> (Leviathan)
<i>btn brh</i> (slippery serpent)	<i>nhsh brh</i> (slippery serpent)
<i>btn qltn</i> (wriggling serpent)	<i>nhsh qltn</i> (twisting serpent)

There can be little doubt that Isaiah is drawing on Canaanite mythology and adapting it for Israelite religion. These sea dragons personify the chaos that must be defeated and put in its place so that order and life can flourish. For the authors of the Bible it is *Jehovah*, the God of Israel, who takes on the role of dragon slayer.

However, this is not the only thread in the Bible describing God’s relationship with the sea monsters. There is a second strand in which the dragons are God’s fierce pets, creatures that *only God* can command. Job 41 is a classic instance of this second strand. Leviathan, as a sea monster, is presented churning up the waters into a white foam:

He makes the deep boil like a pot;
he makes the sea like a pot of ointment.
Behind him he leaves a shining wake;
one would think the deep to be white-haired. (Job 41:31–32)

And this fearsome beast is completely untamable. God uses his relationship with Leviathan as a means of contrasting himself with Job. Could Job hunt and capture Leviathan? Hardly!

Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook
or press down his tongue with a cord?
Can you put a rope in his nose
or pierce his jaw with a hook? (Job 41:1–2)

Job, unlike God, cannot tame such a beast to make it a pet. The very thought is laughable.

Will he make many pleas to you?
Will he speak to you soft words?
Will he make a covenant with you
to take him for your servant forever?
Will you play with him as with a bird,
or will you put him on a leash for your girls? (Job 41:3–5)

“Lay your hands on him/ remember the battle—you will not do it again!” (Job 41:8). This beast is large and strong with armor plated scales that neither swords nor spears nor arrows can pierce, and terrifying teeth. Worse still, he breathes fire!

His sneezings flash forth light,
and his eyes are like the eyelids of the dawn.
Out of his mouth go flaming torches;
sparks of fire leap forth.
Out of his nostrils comes forth smoke,
as from a boiling pot and burning rushes.
His breath kindles coals,
and a flame comes forth from his mouth. (Job 41:18–21)

But much as this dragon is a threat to humans, he is not God's enemy. He is one that God can hunt and capture and tame; one that makes a covenant with God to serve him; that God can play with as with a bird.

Chaos monsters pose no problem for Jehovah. Indeed, they are his servants. The famous Genesis 1 creation story tells the tale of creation without seeing God engaging in any combat with monsters. Now there may well be echoes of the monsters in Genesis 1. We do begin with dark watery chaos, and note that the Hebrew word for "the deep" (*têhôm*) in verse 2 may echo the name Tiamat, the sea dragon goddess of *Enuma Elish*. But if there is an echo here it is only very faint. There is no battle; God creates by issuing effortless commands. And the water and darkness are not removed from creation but incorporated into it. Indeed, they are described as *good* when, on Days One to Three, they are put in their right place and kept within bounds. There are great sea dragons (*tannîn*, the same word used to describe Leviathan in Psalm 74 and Isaiah 27) in Gen 1:21, but they are simply creatures that God created and their creation "was good." A similar take on Leviathan is found in Psalm 104.

Here is the sea, great and wide,
 which teems with creatures innumerable,
 living things both small and great.
 There go the ships,
 and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it.
 These all look to you,
 to give them their food in due season. (Ps 104:25-27)

This is no evil enemy, it is a creature looked after by God and created to "play" in the ocean.

This balance between the conflict and the no-conflict motifs is important. In terms of the way that the biblical material was compiled and organized into a canonical whole, the no-conflict Genesis 1 story is placed first and becomes the lens through which the other passages are to be understood. In other words, the primeval waters are a powerful and chaotic force in God's creation but are only a bad thing when not constrained, when out of control. But God can command them and compel them to serve good purposes. Indeed, they praise God in their submission to his will. Leviathan, God's ferocious pet, represents the forces of chaos woven into the very fabric of God's good creation. These forces are dangerous to humans and beyond human control, but they are not beyond divine control. In certain contexts

God's command of the dragons is pictured in terms of a ferocious battle, but even then there is never any question of the outcome. The dragons cannot possibly win.

Read in the light of Genesis 1 the conflict passages become very vivid ways of describing the power of chaos and of God's surpassing power in taming it. It is also worth noting that the conflict-with-dragons motif is rare in creation contexts in the Bible. It usually crops up when God is resisting political powers, portrayed as monsters, in the midst of history and fighting to rescue his people. God is the divine warrior who comes to deliver his chosen ones. Even in such contexts there are echoes of creation through conflict—such echoes come along with the ancient Near Eastern motif that has been borrowed—but in the Bible they usually become images of *new creation through salvation*.

Tales of the Sea

Understanding this perspective on the sea also opens up our understanding of some other well-known biblical stories. Here are a few to ponder.

Noah's Flood: Uncreating the World

The story of Noah's flood is a story in which the waters of chaos were no longer held at bay and the world ended! Modern people struggle making sense of the story because we cannot understand how there could be a global flood in which the tops of the highest mountains were submerged.¹⁴ Where on earth could so much water come from, and what happened to it afterwards? But we are trying to understand the story from the wrong cosmology. In our understanding of the earth there isn't enough water for the job, but in a biblical cosmology there most certainly is, for the world is surrounded by water. The book of Genesis tell its audience exactly where the water came from: "In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all *the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened*" (Gen 7:11).

Contrary to common claims, even by scholars, biblical authors did *not* think that the rain came from holes in the sky. They were well aware that rain came from clouds.¹⁵ However, this was no ordinary rain. On this

14. Gen 7:19–20.

15. 1 Kgs 18:45; Pss 135:7; 147:8; Prov 16:15; 25:14; Ecc 11:3; Isa 5:6; 45:8; Zech 10:1.

occasion—and *only* on this occasion—the rain *did* come through holes in the sky-dome. Water also burst forth from the subterranean ocean beneath the earth. *That* is how there was enough water to flood the earth.

The significance of the flood story is that it is told as a story of the undoing of Genesis 1, as a move towards *de*-creation. God is unraveling the separations he had put in place between the waters above and the waters below, and between the land and the sea. The terrifying story of Noah's flood—and to the ancient mind it really was terrifying—is almost a return to the primeval chaos of Gen 1:2.

And it would have been the end of the world had God not “remembered Noah” and shut up the fountains of the deep and closed the windows of the heavens,¹⁶ promising never to flood the earth again.¹⁷ As a sign of this end to hostility God reversed his archer's bow and extended it away from himself towards the earth as a sign of peace. Genesis speaks merely of a “bow” in the sky, but we call this divine archer's bow a rainbow.¹⁸



The Israelites Crossing Sea: Defeating the Dragon

Everyone knows the story of the Israelites, led by Moses, crossing through the “Red Sea.” To our minds it is an amazing miracle showing God's great power. But for biblical authors it was more than that.

A strong battle motif can be seen in Exodus 14 in the story of the crossing of the sea itself. As the Egyptians approach the trapped Israelites Moses assured the people that “Jehovah will fight for you.” God then tells Moses to stretch out his staff and divide the sea. This Moses did, and a strong wind from Jehovah blew all night, dividing the waters, allowing the Israelites to pass through the sea without getting wet. God, in other words, commanded the waters to step aside, allowing Israel to pass through, but then to collapse back in again as the Egyptians attempt the passage. The song in Exodus 15

16. Gen 8:1–2.

17. Gen 9:11–12. As an aside, God does sometimes use local floods as a means of judging a city. For instance, God says he will cause the deep to cover Babylon (Jer 51:42) and the seaport of Tyre (Ezek 26:19).

18. I owe this rainbow insight to Dr. Eric Smith, who kindly showed me an Assyrian image of a ruler extending a bow in just this way.

goes overboard in its use of the language of battle and triumph to describe the crossing. Jehovah used the sea as a weapon to defeat Egypt. The sea—a dangerous primal power—is under God’s complete control.

However, the conflict motif in other biblical texts relating to the crossing sometimes turns in more monstrous directions. Several texts speak of the divine warrior Jehovah’s awesome presence terrifying the sea into submission in the exodus,¹⁹ while in other passages the divine warrior slays the sea monsters. In Isaiah, Jehovah’s victory over Pharaoh is portrayed as a victory over Rahab, the sea dragon:²⁰

Awake, awake, put on strength,
 O arm of Jehovah;
 awake, as in days of old,
 the generations of long ago.
*Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces,
 who pierced the dragon?
 Was it not you who dried up the sea,
 the waters of the great deep,
 who made the depths of the sea a way
 for the redeemed to pass over?* (Isa 51:9–10)

The sea was Pharaoh’s weapon against Israel, blocking their escape. But Jehovah turned that weapon back against Egypt. God defeated the sea by controlling it, and in so doing defeated Egypt. The exodus is spoken of here in terms of an act of creation. This may seem weird to us.



We can appreciate that it is an act of salvation, but how can it be an act of creation? Well, the reason is that salvation is being understood as an act of *new creation* in the midst of the old creation. It is an act of holding back chaos so that life and order can flourish.

Psalms 74:12–15 (quoted earlier) may also allude to the crossing of the sea in the exodus as a battle between God and Leviathan. Notice the language it uses: “God . . . working *salvation*. . . . You

19. Pss 77:16; 106:9; 114:3, 5.

20. Egypt is also referred to as Rahab in Isa 30:7 and Ezek 29:3–5 speaks as Pharaoh as a dragon living in the rivers of Egypt.

divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan; . . . You *split open springs and brooks*; you *dried up ever-flowing streams*.” What is interesting is that both Isa 51:9ff. and Psalm 74 are addressed to God to ask him to deliver the people as he did in the days of the exodus. The chaos monster that they faced in Egypt is in need of repelling again so that there can be salvation, which means new creation.

It is worth pointing out that the dragon motif was used in these passages of political-historical events. This should alert us that in such contexts Israelites did not imagine a *literal* scaly beast that could be seen with the eyes.²¹ We need to allow for more sophistication in their use of mythological motifs than that. The powers that threaten to unravel the meaningfulness of history are portrayed as chaos monsters that need killing for stability and meaning to return.

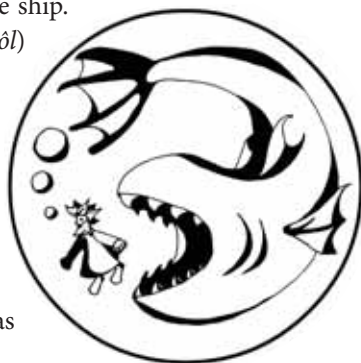
The final “end” of Egypt’s story, in some texts, is more positive.²² There is salvation in the end for *even Rahab and Babylon*, God’s archenemies: “Among those who know me [Jehovah], I mention Rahab [Egypt] and Babylon” (Ps 87:4).

Jonah and the Gargantuan Fish: God’s Dangerous Pets

God told Jonah to go east to Nineveh in Assyria, so Jonah got into a boat and went . . . west, across what we call the Mediterranean Sea. Running off to sea to escape God is a pretty daft idea because the sea itself is under God’s control, as are its wee beasties (and the not so wee ones).

First God sends a terrific sea storm that threatens to destroy the boat. The sailors are powerless and terrified. Eventually, Jonah asks the sailors to throw him overboard in order to save the ship.

God then sends a “gigantic fish” (*dāg gādōl*) to swallow Jonah and, in effect, rescue him. We typically think of this “fish” as a whale, but the book of Jonah does not say this. The word used, *dāg*, is simply the generic word for fish. However, this is no ordinary fish! It is *huge* and swallows Jonah down in a single gulp. (Tales of giant fish have been around as



21. Though *some* passages do appear to envisage an actual Leviathan swimming in the sea (Ps 104:25–26; Job 41).

22. Isa 19, etc.

long as people have sailed the seas—Lucian, in his second-century parody of such tales, *True History*, claims to have seen fish in the Atlantic Ocean that were over 150 miles long!!! One such monster swallowed down his whole ship without even having to chew it.)

It is quite possible that the fish was a cosmic sea monster of the kind we have considered above. It is interesting to note that when the Hebrew text was translated into Greek the word chosen to translate *dāg* was not *ichthus* (fish), nor *enalion* (sea creature), but *kētos*, meaning gargantuan fish or sea monster. This was a word with dark and scary connotations. When Jesus in Matthew's Gospel speaks of the beast that swallowed Jonah it is, of course, a *kētos* (Matt 12:39–40), a vast and lethal sea monster. This is not the friendly whale of modern children's Bibles, smiling sweetly as it rescues Jonah.

Another thing worth noting in this story is the prayer that Jonah prays from the belly of the fish. He prays,

For you cast me into the deep (*tēhôm*),
 into the heart of the seas
 and the flood surrounded me;
 all your waves and your billows
 passed over me. (Jonah 2:3)

Jonah has been thrown into the chaotic and dangerous depths of the sea. He speaks of sinking, being surrounded by “the deep,” of being tangled in seaweed, and then of going down *further still*—of descending to the roots of the mountains into “the land whose bars closed upon me forever,” “the pit” (2:6), “the belly of sheol.” Jonah speaks as if he were *dead*—in sheol, the realm of the dead. Christian readers through history have, following Jesus' lead (Matt 12:39–40), noted this link between being in the belly of the fish and being in the realm of death and have seen Jonah's tale as paralleling Jesus' own story of descending into death for a period and then returning back to life. But the association of the giant fish with the realm of the dead further enhanced its monstrous image. This fish, certainly for early Christian readers, *was death*.

Yet, monster though it may be, this is one of God's lethal pets, serving God's purposes. The fish is the means not of Jonah's terrible end but, unexpectedly, of his salvation from the sea. Even the dragons serve God.

Jesus Calms the Waves: Putting the Sea in Its Place

Here is Mark's version of the well-known story:

And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Quiet! Be silent!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.

He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:36–41)

Notice first that Jesus spoke to the wind and to the sea as if they were personal agents. Notice too *how* he spoke. He “rebuked” the wind and he commanded the sea to “be silent” and cease its thrashing. The language of “rebuke” and the command to “be silent!” are both found in Jesus’ words to the evil spirit in Mark 1:25: “Jesus *rebuked* [the spirit], saying, ‘*Be silent*, and come out of him!’” So the language of the story suggests a sense of conflict and calls to mind the Old Testament motif of God’s battle with the sea. There too God *rebukes* and *stills* the sea.²³ The wind and the sea are no match for Jesus either; to the amazement of the disciples, they obeyed him, just as they obey Jehovah. Indeed, when Jesus commands the sea he is acting *as Jehovah*, the divine warrior defeating the chaotic waters.



Jesus Walking on Galilee: Divine Sovereignty over the Sea

We all know the story of Jesus walking on water.²⁴ And for most of us it is simply a great show of his power and authority but, truth be told, we don’t really see the point of it. However, Jesus did not actually walk on water. You *did* read that correctly. Jesus did not walk on the water . . . he walked on the *sea*. There’s a difference and it is important. Here is Mark’s version:

And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. And he saw that they were making

23. Job 26:11–12; Pss 18:15; 104:7; 106:6–9; 107:29–30; Isa 50:2; Nah 1:4.

24. Mark 6:47–53; Matt 14:23–34; John 6:16–21.

headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, *walking on the sea*. He meant to pass by them, but when they saw him *walking on the sea* they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore. (Mark 6:47–53)

This is not simply a great party trick to show off his power. This is, in the words of John’s Gospel, a *sign*—a powerful deed with a meaning. And that meaning was very much tied up with the meaning of the sea. The Jewish Scriptures had spoken of God, the powerful creator, as the one who walks on the sea, exercising his great power over it: “[God] who alone stretched out the heavens/ and *trampled the waves of the sea*” (Job 9:8). The Greek translation of Job 9:8 says that God “walks about on the sea as on the ground.” Mark uses this same word for Jesus walking about (*peripateō*) on the sea. Jesus is acting out the role of God in Job 9!

Jesus, like Jehovah, exercises complete control over the chaotic sea and walks upon its waves as on the dry ground. And in case ancient readers were dumb enough to miss the point, Jesus’ words of comfort to his disciples in verse 50 should clarify things. Jesus says, literally, “Be confident, *I am*.” This is deliberately ambiguous. On the one hand, it simply means “Take heart, it is me, Jesus.” On the other, it is an allusion to God’s self-designation, “I am.”²⁵ In other words, in this story Jesus is acting *as Jehovah himself*, Lord of the Sea.²⁶

The Sea in Daniel and Revelation: Beastly Powers!

The mythic association of the sea with dangerous monsters crops up in the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation.

25. Isa 43:10–11; see also 41:4.

26. Matthew expands the story with an account of Peter attempting to join Jesus. Interestingly, when he speaks about Peter he switches his vocabulary. Matthew tells his readers that Jesus was “walking on the *sea*” (14:25–26; cf. John 6:19). Peter, however, was walking “on the *water*” (14:28–29). This was presumably because Peter was not the divine warrior defeating chaos monsters.

The prophet Daniel had a disturbing vision in which he saw four great beasts come up out of the sea.²⁷ Each was composed of the parts of various animals blended in unnatural combinations, and each represented a human political kingdom that was more animalistic than human. The beastly kingdoms stand in contrast to “one like a son of man” (Dan 7:13), a human figure who represents “the saints of the Most High” (Dan 7:18, i.e., Israel). His rule was truly human. We do not need to understand the details of the vision. We simply need to observe the understandable symbolic origin of the beasts—the sea. As such, they are forces of chaos and opponents for the divine warrior.

In Revelation this image of Daniel’s is picked up and reapplied to a new situation. In chapter 13 John has a vision of a blasphemous beast with seven horns and ten heads that rises out of the sea. As with Daniel’s beasts, this ugly brute was composite, like a leopard with bear’s feet and a lion’s mouth. This sea monster was a symbol for Rome and its emperor, a great political power, granted temporary authority by the dragon (Satan), and in opposition to the church and God. As in Daniel’s vision, this was not a literal monster, but the imagery used by both Daniel and Revelation draws on the longstanding tradition of God’s battle with chaos monsters from the sea.

Perhaps now we can understand a peculiar comment near the end of the book of Revelation to the effect that in the new creation there will be *no more sea*.²⁸ We might think of that as a disappointing idea—no more beach holidays, scuba diving, or wind surfing. That is not the point. This is not about water as such. This is about the ever-present danger of chaos and its eventual permanent removal.

“Living” Water?

The Bible shows a lack of interest in classifying marine biology, but biblical authors do celebrate the lush abundance and variety of marine life. In Genesis 1 God dealt with the problem of the formless primeval chaos by forming it—separating the waters—and once the seas were in their place God saw that it was *good*. God then dealt with the problem of the lifelessness of the primeval state by filling it with life. Here is the account of the Wednesday of creation week:

And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures . . .” So God created the great sea monsters and every

27. Dan 7:1–8.

28. Rev 21:1.

living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds . . . And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas . . .” And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. (Gen 1:20–23)

We see God’s great delight in having the seas swarming with life of all kinds. This the psalmists also celebrate:

Here is the sea, great and wide,
which teems with creatures innumerable,
living things both small and great. (Ps 104:25)

Fish, among other creatures (including bushes!), can be thought of as discerning the hand of God in events:

But ask the beasts, and they will teach you;
the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you;
or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all these does not know
that the hand of Jehovah has done this? (Job 12:7–9)

The fish and sea creatures are also obedient to God. The sea creatures obey the Lord, who addressed them directly:

And Jehovah *appointed a great fish to swallow up* Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. . . .
And Jehovah *spoke to the fish*, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. (Jon 1:17; 2:10)

We see this in the Gospels also, where Jesus arranges for amazing catches of fish for his disciples.

Sea beasts can also be called to worship God: “Praise Jehovah from the earth / you great sea monsters (*tannim*) and all deeps . . .” (Ps 148:7).

Not only the inhabitants of the sea, but *the sea itself* is addressed by God—and, in ritual contexts, by humans—as if it were conscious. Jesus, as we have seen, spoke directly to the sea. The sea also acts and speaks in response to God. Thus God “calls” for the waters and they respond.²⁹ During the exodus, he “rebuked the Red Sea”;³⁰ both it and the Jordan river “looked

29. Amos 5:8; 9:6.

30. Ps 106:9—or whatever body of water *yam supf* refers to.

and fled” when Jehovah led Israel out of Egypt;³¹ “they were afraid; indeed the deep trembled” (Ps 77:16). In the awesome presence of God, nature—the sea included—quakes:

Was your wrath against the rivers, O Jehovah?
 Was your anger against the rivers,
 or your indignation against the sea,
 when you rode on your horses,
 on your chariot of salvation?
 You stripped the sheath from your bow,
 calling for many arrows. *Selah*
 You split the earth with rivers.
 The mountains saw you and writhed;
 the raging waters swept on;
 the deep gave forth its voice;
 it lifted its hands on high. (Hab 3:8–10)

In non-ritual normal-life contexts humans do not speak to the sea but *in worship* humans can call on the terrestrial seas³² and the heavenly seas³³ to praise Jehovah. The waters, in turn, were expected to offer up joyful praise to God; a praise not in words so much as in crashing and roaring obedience.

Interestingly the dominion that God gave humanity in Genesis 1 extends to “the fish of the sea,” but no mention is made of the sea itself. That remains beyond human rule. This may explain why the sea never responds to humans in the Bible—it does not obey human orders³⁴ and it never addresses humans—nor do humans ever call it to. God is the creator of the sea³⁵ and thus its line-manager, so it is to *God alone* that it responds.

By now you may be feeling a little sea sick. It is time to make our way back to the safety of dry land and to begin the next phase of the pilgrimage.

31. Ps 114:3, 5.

32. Pss 96:11; 98:7; 148:7; 1 Chr 16:32.

33. Ps 148:4.

34. Moses’ activity with the staff at the “Red Sea” might suggest otherwise. However, note that Moses simply “stretched out his hand over the sea [follow a direct divine command to do so], and *Jehovah drove the sea back . . .*” (Exod 14:21).

35. Exod 20:11; Pss 95:5; 146:6; Jonah 1:9; Neh 9:6; Prov 8:24–28.