

A Biblical Perspective on the Oceans

A realization that many of the diverse efforts to improve the environment are supported by both biblical texts and scientific findings has motivated many congregants to act on these efforts for those dual reasons. Plastic Oceans Project requested information about where within Judaism one finds teachings about care of God's oceans. The Psalms provide one rich source of such expressions, with a verse in Exodus 19 possibly serving as the root of the psalmist's teachings.

Exodus 19 opens with Moses going up Mount Sinai and hearing God speak about the conditions for a covenant with all who left Egypt. Verse 5 includes the words "all the earth is mine." "The earth" includes the land and the oceans.

In Leviticus, God gives the condition under which the Israelites may use the land, owned by God, to plant seeds, grow crops, and have food: the condition is to take care of the needy and the stranger. Multiple verses in Leviticus and Deuteronomy provide examples of how to accomplish that care.

The academic Alan Avery-Peck synthesized these teachings by writing:

"The same notion of God's ownership of the land explains Scripture's insistence that the land be used only in ways commensurate with the holiness of its owner."¹

I believe that if we substitute the word "oceans" for "land" in Avery-Peck's statement, we have an equally valid synthesis of biblical intent. Using the oceans as a trash container, in particular a repository for discarded plastics, is not an action "commensurate with the holiness of its owner." The Psalms reinforce this perspective.

The opening of Psalm 24 proclaims:

- ¹ The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
- ² for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.

¹ Alan J. Avery-Peck, *Mishnah's Division of Agriculture: A History and Theology of Seder Zeraim* (Chico, California, Scholars Press, 1985, xiii).

By “earth,” the psalm refers to the entire natural world, for the Hebrew word translated as “world” is “tevel,” which means nature in its entirety.

The expression “The earth is the LORD’s” connects with the Exodus 19:5 verse, discussed above.

Psalm 95:5 gives another reminder that both the oceans and the land belong to God:

⁵ The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

In modern times, we can take away the corollary that we are not to foul that which belongs to God. We may use the oceans, but with the understanding that they belong to God. Indeed, Leviticus 11 contains about two dozen verses detailing what may and may not be eaten, and the list includes constraints on what marine life may be consumed. When we load the oceans with plastics, we introduce substances alien to the waters, a consequence incompatible with the psalmist’s teachings.

Psalm 104 is virtually a paean to the natural world, with references to the waters in verse 3,

³ you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,

verses 6-9,

⁶ You cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.

⁷ At your rebuke they flee;
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.

⁸ They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys
to the place that you appointed for them.

⁹ You set a boundary that they may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.

and verses 25-26,

²⁵ Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.

²⁶ There go the ships,
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

Thus, through the Psalms, as one source, we learn that the natural world belongs to God and that God “has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.” These teachings evoke a strong concern for the oceans of the world within both Judaism and Christianity.

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