

SHORT NOTES

THE GREAT SEA OF DAN. VII 2

Scholars have disputed whether “the great sea” (יָם רָבָא) in Dan. vii 2 refers to the Mediterranean or the sea of mythological chaos. Those who favour the former view¹ say that “the great sea” elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible refers to the Mediterranean. The vast majority of scholars, while admitting the validity of the linguistic evidence and its usual application, reject on two grounds the notion that in this case the sea referred to is the Mediterranean. First, the sea imagery and the beasts which arise from it recall Babylonian or Canaanite chaos mythology.² Secondly, the beasts are likely, by analogy with Dan. ii 37-39 and viii 20-21, to include Babylonia, Media and Persia, none of which were Mediterranean powers, thus to posit that they emerged from the Mediterranean Sea is nonsensical.³

In this circumstance, a re-examination needs to be made of the Biblical usage of the phrase “the great sea” and the explanations of the phrase given by scholars who reject that it means “the Mediterranean”.

The Aramaic יָם רָבָא (the great sea) of Dan. vii 2 is the equivalent of the Hebrew phrase הַיָּם הַגָּדוֹל. The latter appears in Num. xxxiv 7; Josh. i 4; ix 1; xv 12, 47; xxiii 4; Ezek. xlvi 10, 15, 19, 20; xlviii 28 where it refers indisputably to the Mediterranean. In each instance the (Aramaic) Targumim translate the Hebrew phrase as יָם רָבָא i.e. by the same expression which appears in Dan. vii 2. In order to overcome the apparent linguistic impasse it is tempting to adopt Montgomery’s solution,⁴ which is indeed followed by the majority of scholars,⁵ that the Hebrew phrase תְּהוֹם רָבָא (great deep) was intended by the Aramaic יָם רָבָא. In support it can be said that (1) תְּהוֹם carries the overtones of the mythological sea through its linguistic relationship to Tiamat, the Babylonian monster of chaos, and as such fits the Danielic context, and (2) רָבָא which appears in the Danielic phrase is used with תְּהוֹם in Gen. vii 11; Is. li 10; Amos vii 4 and Ps. xxxvi 7(6). The question then arises why the author of Daniel vii used יָם and not תְּהוֹם. The יָם גָּדוֹל of the Hebrew Bible is *always* translated יָם רָבָא in the (Aramaic) Targumim, while the תְּהוֹם רָבָא of the Hebrew Bible is rendered as תְּהוֹם רָבָא in the Targumim. In other

words, the Hebrew phrase is rendered by exactly the same phrase in Aramaic. Unless one assumes that the author of Daniel vii was simply imprecise when he used יָם instead of יַם־הַיָּם to indicate the mythological sea of chaos, the search for an explanation of his linguistic choice must continue.

A.A. Bevan⁶ presented another interpretation. He commented that, although “the great sea” usually refers to the Mediterranean, in Daniel “the sea represents the nations of the earth (cf. Is. xvii 12) and accordingly in v. 17, it is explained by אֶרֶץ ‘the earth’”. However, Is. xvii 12 does not seem to be particularly appropriate as a background to Dan. vii 2, because (1) in Isaiah it is the *noise* of many peoples which is likened to the *noise* of the seas (and note the plural “seas” יָמִים), (2) “great” is not mentioned, and (3) “earth”, which Bevan notes as the parallel to “sea” in Dan. vii 17, does not appear.

A more fruitful line of enquiry seems to be to look at three Biblical passages where יָם is used in a context which blurs the distinction between an actual and a mythological sea. These are Ps. lxxiv 13-14; Is. li 9-10 and Ps. civ 25-26. R.H. Charles⁷ drew attention to the first two passages as illuminating the meaning of Dan. vii 2b but unfortunately did not make the linguistic connection explicit and as such the significance of his references has been missed by subsequent scholars.⁸ This will be remedied here.

Is. li 9-10 blends יָם and יַם־הַיָּם together, as well as associating God’s destruction of the monsters of the deep with the crossing of the Red Sea:

... Are you not the one who cut Rahab,
 who wounded the dragon?
 Are you not the one who dried up the sea (יָם),
 Waters of the great deep (יַם־הַיָּם רַבָּה),
 the one who made the depths of the sea
 a way for the ransomed to cross over?

Ps. lxxiv 13-14 seems also to blend together the Exodus tradition with the conquest of chaos:

You divided the sea (יָם) by your strength,
 You broke the heads of the dragons upon the waters,
 You broke the heads of Leviathan,
 You gave him as meat to the people in the
 wilderness.⁹

Charles overlooked the appearance of ם in Ps. civ 25-26, a passage which is particularly worthy of being considered in connection with Dan. vii 2b-3:

This sea, great (הים גדול) and wide of hands,
 There are creeping things without number,
 beasts (חיות) small or great (גדולה),
 There go ships,
 Leviathan, this one you formed to sport therein.

It is noticeable that verse 25 describes “the sea” as “great”, using the Hebrew equivalent of the Aramaic vocabulary, if not the exact grammatical structure of Dan. vii 2b. Indeed, the appearance of both “ships” and “Leviathan” in verse 26 evidences a blurring of any distinction between an actual and a mythological sea. It is interesting too, in connection with Daniel, that verse 25 not only mentions “the sea” which is “great”, but also “beasts” which can also be “great” and are said to rise out of the sea in Dan. vii 3. Ps. civ. 25 specifies that these beasts can be “great” (גדולה), matching the description of them in the Danielic text.¹⁰ There is a further point of contact with Daniel vii in Psalm civ. Verse 4 states, “He makes winds (רוחות) His messengers . . .”, thus linking with “the four winds of heaven” which “stirred up the great sea” in Dan. vii 2b.

In conclusion, it has been demonstrated that Ps. lxxiv 13-14; Is. li 9-10 and Ps. civ 25-26, which may all be post-exilic,¹¹ evidence a clear tradition of the blending of all “seas”, including the mythological, along with the notion that God is their controller. Further, it is possible that the author of Dan. vii 2-3 drew upon Ps. civ 25 in the construction of his narrative, because four key words of the Danielic text are to be found there. If so, then it explains why “the great sea” in Dan. vii 2, contrary to every other Biblical occurrence of the phrase, does not indicate the Mediterranean but rather a sea redolent of chaos mythology.¹²

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¹ The most recent scholars to insist that “the great sea” means the Mediterranean are M. Casey, *Son of Man, The Interpretation and Influence of Daniel 7* (London, 1979), p. 18, and J. Goldingay, *Daniel* (Dallas, 1989), p. 160.

² For a discussion of the religio-historical background of Daniel vii cf. J. J. Collins, *Daniel* (Hermeneia Series, Minneapolis, 1993), pp. 280-294.

³ JJ Collins, *ibid.*, p 295 and note 150 Other scholars who reject the view that “the great sea” indicates the Mediterranean will be listed below when the evidence they present for their position is considered

⁴ James A Montgomery, *The Book of Daniel* (ICC, reprinted in Edinburgh, 1979), p 285

⁵ E g M Delcor, *Le Livre de Daniel* (SB, Paris, 1971), p 144, L F Hartmann and A A di Lella, *The Book of Daniel* (AB23, Garden City, NY, 1978), p 211, O Ploger, *Das Buch Daniel* (KAT 18, Gutersloh, 1965), p 108 All these authors refer to the חורום of Genesis 1 2

⁶ A A Bevan, *A Short Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Cambridge, 1892), p 120

⁷ *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Oxford, 1929), p 175

⁸ E g Hartmann and Di Lella, *op cit*, p 211 cites Is li 10 not for its reference to חורום but because it mentions חורום

⁹ Marvin E Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (Word Biblical Commentary Series 20, Dallas, 1983), p 243 does not believe that there is a reference to the Exodus tradition in Psalm lxxiv He reads פָּרַד as “shatter/break/destroy”, rather than the less common secondary meaning of “divide”, and צַיִם he disputes as referring to the “wilderness” of the Exodus tradition

¹⁰ Daniel renders “great” as ܕܘܪܝܚ i e the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew גדול

¹¹ For a discussion of the views of scholars concerning the dating of Psalm lxxiv cf Tate, *op cit*, pp 246-7 The general consensus is that Psalm lxxiv postdates the Fall of Jerusalem For a discussion of the scholarly views about the dating of Psalm civ cf Leslie C Allen, *Psalms 101-150* (Dallas, 1990), pp 28-33 The task of assigning a date to this psalm is complex because of its literary similarity to the fourteenth century Egyptian hymn to Aten

¹² Leslie C Allen, *op cit*, pp 30-31 points out that links between Psalm civ and Genesis 1 were explored by Humbert (*RHPR* [1935], pp 19-21) and Van der Voort (*RB* 58 [1951], pp 321-47) Links between the two texts were rejected by A A Anderson, *Psalms* (New Century Bible, London, 1972), p 717, and P Craigie, *Semitica* 4 (1974), 13-15, with both positing a common cultic background for the two texts—a view with which Allen agrees The links, either direct or indirect, between the two texts are interesting in view of the assertion by a number of scholars (cf note 5) that Dan vii 2 echoes Gen 1 2



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