

The Hidden Things of God in the Ocean

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Deuteronomy 33:18-19

¹⁸ About Zebulun he said:

‘Rejoice, Zebulun, in your going out,
and you, Issachar, in your tents.

¹⁹ They will summon peoples to the mountain
and there offer the sacrifices of the righteous;
they will feast on the abundance of the seas,
on the treasures hidden in the sand.^{1>}



Ocean – the hidden things of God

Walking down a typical beach, it would be easy to surmise that there is little living there. If it is a calm day, you might be looking out on the sea which resembles more a sheet of glass than an aquarium. Yet below your feet, crawling in and amongst the sand grains, swimming below the surface of the sea, and fixed to rocks just out of sight live an amazing array of marine

creatures. All usually hidden from sight. For most of human history, the incredible biodiversity of the sea has remained hidden from sight or only seen on the end of a fisherman's line.

Yet there are tantalizing glimpses provided for us by our Creatorⁱⁱ. Genesis 1 reminds us that on the fourth day the sun and moon were established to mark out time.ⁱⁱⁱ While not mentioned specifically, this obviously includes the tidal cycle. Due to the force of gravity exerted on the ocean by the sun and moon (but especially the moon due to its proximity) the oceans rise and fall in regular and predictable patterns. In some places this can cause very large fluctuations in sea level. At low tide, when water is pulled to the other side of the planet, we begin to see the hidden things of God in the ocean.

“There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number – living things both large and small” (Psalm 104:25). It is easy to focus on the “large” aspect of this verse. Whales and dolphins or, for the more discerning, whale sharks and manta rays fill us with awe at their size and power. Yet hidden from site are innumerable “small” creatures which are equally amazing; their intrinsic value not determined relative to us. They have value because they are God's creation (Psalm 104).

A Rocha Kenya has recently begun a Marine Conservation and Research Programme.^{iv} Part of our marine biodiversity research involves examining and describing species that live in the many habitats found in Watamu Marine National Park such as coral reefs, seagrass beds, and sandy beaches. In 2013 we began studying the rockpools that are revealed at low tide, but remain hidden from sight at high tide. In the course of several days we found red algae, green algae, brown algae, sponges, coral, flatworms,



crustaceans, marine worms, sea stars, brittle stars, sea cucumbers, sea urchins, sea squirts, and fish. Each a major taxonomic group of marine organisms – all living in tiny rockpools hidden from sight. The hidden things of God in the ocean, revealed to those that search them out.

Marine Research – revealing the hidden things of God

Psalm 111 has been called the research scientists' psalm (Berry 2008). The second verse reads "Great are the works of the Lord; they are studied by all who delight in them." What is the role of marine research? Certainly there are many roles, but I want to focus on that of revealing the hidden things of God. When we study the works of the Lord, we are able to make them known to those who might not otherwise have been able to see. We as Christian marine researchers utilize God's book of Words (the Bible) to make sense of and understand his book of works (the hidden things of God in the ocean – among other creative works). This doesn't, of course, mean that the Bible will tell us how to make sense of whether competition or predation is structuring a coral reef community. However, what do these things mean ultimately? How can we see signs of the Creator in his creation. This is a different kind of natural theology as Alister McGrath so clearly points out; Paley and those arguments are long gone (McGrath 2011). But that does not mean that we cannot show the resonance of Biblical motifs in the work of creation and to use science to inspire and turn our hearts towards our Creator.

Matthew 5:14-16

¹⁴ *'You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

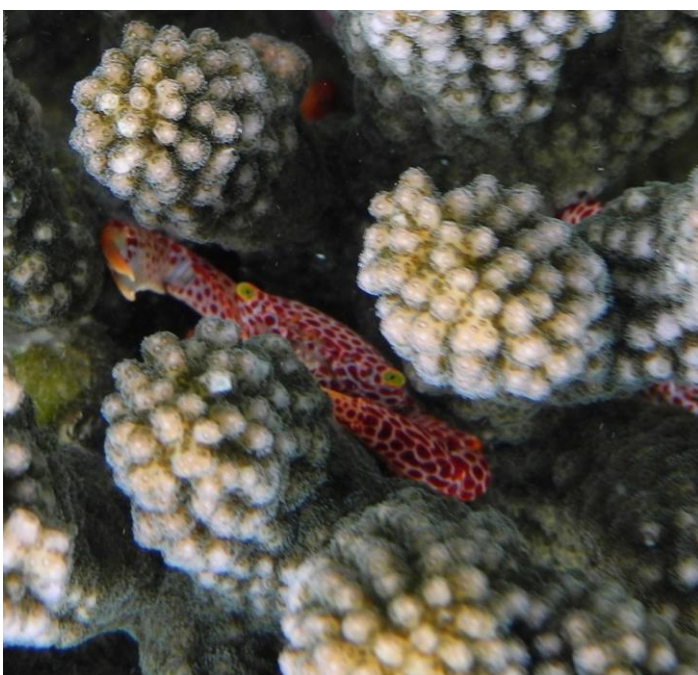
The context of these verses is the Sermon on the Mount. A crowd gathers and Jesus delivers the compelling beatitudes. These verses have usually been interpreted in light of evangelism



and, of course, they are likely primarily to be seen in that way. Yet I think that we can use them as a guide to think about the ultimate purpose of marine research, really any research. The key to this is in verse 16 and of course, other passages that exhort us to work as unto the Lord (e.g Col 3:23). Ultimately,

our purpose in research is to glorify our Father in heaven.

Marine research in many ways is like lighting a lamp. There is darkness; the unknown. We use the research process to bring light to a habitat, species or process. I don't think it stretching the verses too far that we the researchers are the light of the world, illuminating the works of God in His creation, this being a good deed so that the Father is glorified. For Christian researchers, then, it is very important to make this connection. Whilst there is value in "pure" research that we do for God's glory alone – perhaps only coming to light by



publishing in specialized research journals, there is a point where our research must not be a town built so that it can't be seen. It must not be a lamp hid under a bowl. So how do we as researchers make the link between our research and God's glory?

I think we first have to settle this for ourselves. Do we see how our research

glorifies God? Can we articulate that even internally? Are we ready to give an answer to those who ask us to give the reason for the hope that we have? Certainly too, there is a role for writing and teaching other Christians. Perhaps you can give a talk at church reflecting God's beauty and wonder seen through your research – putting the lamp out for others to see what you have already internalized. Building that town on a hill. There are many other possibilities for glorifying our Father in heaven through the light that our research shines on Him. God's book of works, interpreted through His book of Words, giving glory to the Father.

How do we put our lamp out for all to see without shining it so brightly in someone's eye that they are blinded or even driven away from the light into the darkness? But this we must do, sensitively, gently, in love, making known the mystery of Christ hidden from times past (Eph 1:9) – brought to light through our research and in our lives.

Marine research then is ultimately, metaphorically speaking, bringing to light the hidden things of God in the ocean. Setting them out as a town on a hill or a lamp giving light to a dark room – publishing, speaking, educating, and sharing. Ultimately, we are revealing the hidden things of God, pointing to the Father, being careful to glorify Him.

Marine Conservation – healing the hidden things of God

The ocean is not as it was nor as it will be. Humans are playing a significant role in changing the very nature of the ocean and its inhabitants. We will not go into detail about the many threats to the ocean, the most significant being overfishing, climate change, and land-based sources such as pollution.^v These impacts have solutions, again this is not my purpose here to spell out the whats and wherefores of marine conservation. Suffice it to say, that we can take action and while we need to exercise proper humility in this endeavour (Bratton 2003, Sluka 2012), marine conservation science as a discipline grows each day.

What is the ultimate goal, though, of marine conservation? When we think of ultimate things in the Christian faith, we often turn to the final book of the Bible, Revelation. However, is the final fate of the sea to “be no more” as Revelation 21:1 states? This passage has been discussed extensively by Moo (2009) and to a lesser extent by Sluka (2012), clearly indicating that this passage and many other references in the Scriptures relate to the symbolic nature the sea held for ancient people as a symbol of chaos. This passage is not to be taken literally – there will be marine life in heaven and therefore presumably sea water as Revelation 5:9-13 so clearly indicates. I believe that this passage is a key to understanding the current role of marine conservation as healing, bringing the marine portions of our world into the new creation where they will be a part of the throng before the throne worshiping the Lamb.

Revelation 5:9-13

⁹ *And they sang a new song, saying:*

‘You are worthy to take the scroll

and to open its seals,

because you were slain,

and with your blood you purchased for God

persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.

¹⁰ *You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,*

and they will reign on the earth.’

¹¹ *Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.* ¹² *In a loud voice they were saying:*

*'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honour and glory and praise!'*

¹³ *Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and
all that is in them, saying:*

*'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honour and glory and power,
for ever and ever!'*

There is much that can be gleaned from this passage, but I want to focus on the praise of all creation before the throne of God. This passage comes in the midst of a difficult reading regarding judgement, coming pain and misery. But it gives us a glimpse of the ultimate goal and end of all that is. Many have focused on verse 9, all nations, tongues, tribes of humans before the throne. Giving impetus, and rightly so, to a desire to fulfil Jesus' command to go to the ends of the earth. But the passage goes on and gives an even wider and more glorious view of the throne room: all creation before the throne, praising and worshipping God.



Too often we have a truncated version of history that starts at the fall and ends at the cross. In the larger view of the world, we must include in that meta-history the beginning and the end;

which is creation and new creation. When we begin with creation and take into account the magnitude of the Fall, which broke all relationships include those between humanity and non-human creation and between non-human creation and God, we have a grander, non-anthropocentric view of history. The metanarrative of scripture isn't primarily about humanity, though of course it focuses on humanity as the Bible is communication from God to one species. The Fall much more deeply affects the world around us than simply breaking humanity's relationship with its Creator. The corollary to this is that the cross is so much more vastly wondrous and so much more deeply universe-changing than simply offering individuals the opportunity to get right with their Creator.

If all was broken at the Fall, then all is set right at the cross. Colossians 1:15-20 makes that clear. The cross then sets the stage for and ushers in the Kingdom of God: new creation. What then does that new creation look like? That is mostly a subject for another article. However, we see in the Revelation passage above that this ultimately is about praise of the Lamb. All creation worshipping before the throne.

The ultimate goal, then of marine conservation, is the healing of the ocean so that it praises God as new creation. How can the ocean praise God? One way of looking at it is that creation praises God when it functions as it was created to function. One place we see this spelled out in Scripture is in Genesis 1 where the sea is blessed and commanded to be fruitful and creatures teem, swarm, and are in abundance. This highlights the importance of studying the ocean in places where impacts are minimal and in setting up protected areas where the ocean can begin to function as it was intended to.

A Rocha Kenya Case Study

We are trying to live out these ideals at the A Rocha Kenya Field Study Centre, utilising science to make discoveries and then revealing them to our neighbours far and wide in such a way that we hope God is glorified.

The intertidal zone is well studied in temperate areas, but much less so in the tropics. Our recent investigations have revealed how important these habitats are for many juvenile fish species which migrate offshore and enter the artisanal fishery.

Additionally, a rare coral was found in abundance that is not seen in the rest of studies areas in East Africa and we are working towards its conservation. These rockpools serve as places of education, revealing these hidden things to those who might not have the chance to understand.

We have made a number of observations of IUCN Near Threatened or Vulnerable elasmobranchs – sharks, rays and guitarfish. This is becoming a current focus and we hope to develop a major centre of elasmobranch research at the field study centre.

The majority of our work has been focused on coral reefs and this has provided us an opportunity through social media to share the beauty of this habitat as well as the threats it faces.

We seek then, to uncover these hidden things of God through our research and then become a light on a hill, revealing these hidden things in a way that brings God's kingdom on earth (including the ocean) as it is in heaven.

Conclusion

Marine research and conservation go hand in hand. We must continue to understand how the ocean works, its biodiversity, and what it means for the sea to teem with abundance. Most alive today have never seen it as it once was and can only imagine how things were. The role of the marine researcher is to bring to light these hidden things and work with those in marine conservation to protect and bring to fruition new creation in the ocean. Ultimately, the goals for the Christian involved in this endeavour is to glorify the Father and work towards all creation functioning as it will in order that God is praised.

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ⁱ Many commentaries were consulted on these verses with most perplexed by these references to the sea as according to Joshua 19:10-16 the land of Zebulun did not touch the sea (e.g. Thomson 1974). One idea is that this tribe was once a maritime people or had access to the sea or even that they were on a trade route for sea products (cf. Genesis 49:13 “Zebulun will live by the seashore and become a haven for ships; his border will extend towards Sidon” NIV)

ⁱⁱ Note that by using the term Creator I am not assuming a particular origins narrative.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a fuller discussion of Gen 1 from a marine point of view, see Sluka (2012)

^{iv} For more details see <http://www.arocha.org/ke-en/work/research/marine.html>

^v For a summary paper describing the main threats see Halpern et al (2008)