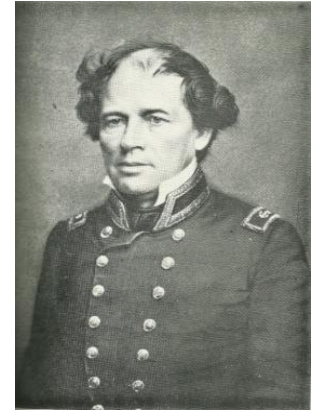


Matthew Maury: Inspired by the Bible to Discover Ocean Currents

Stephen McDowell

Inspired in his life work by Scripture, Matthew Fontaine Maury was sustained by industry derived from his Christian faith. As an enlightened seer in new fields of science and guided by his biblical worldview, he played a significant role in advancing civilization. He was one of the greatest men America has ever produced.

Maury's accomplishments include: 1) He was the father of oceanography, 2) He charted the ocean and wind currents, 3) He mapped out and proposed sea routes, including laying down lanes for steamers in the North Atlantic, 4) He developed the National Observatory, 5) He was instrumental in founding of U.S. Naval Academy, 6) He proposed the idea for a U.S. Meteorological Society or National Weather Bureau, 7) He was a key consultant for the laying of the transatlantic telegraph cable, 8) He invented the first floating mines and the first electric torpedoes, 9) He wrote many influential science books. Matthew Maury literally fulfilled the ancient mandate of God to take dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26-28).



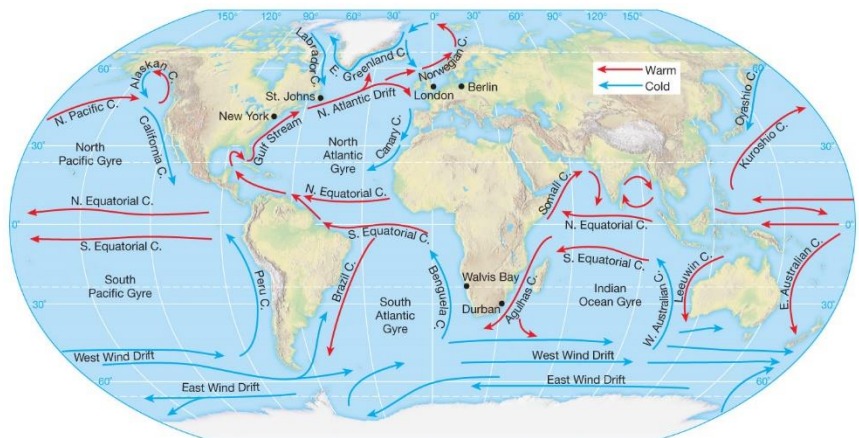
Matthew Fontaine Maury

Maury first discovered and mapped the ocean currents. See NASA animation of the ocean surface currents:

<https://www.nasa.gov/topics/earth/features/perpetual-ocean.html>

Scriptural Inspiration

Matthew Maury's faith was evident in his work and in his writings, where he often quoted the Bible. He said the same God who was the author of the Bible was also the author of nature. In both God gave a divine revelation of Himself to mankind, and that the message of the two were never contradictory. He also said "to remember that the earth was made for man."¹



Maury was originally inspired to find the ocean currents as Scripture was read to him. A monument honoring Maury was dedicated in Richmond, Virginia, in 1929. A writer for the Richmond Times, Virginia Lee Cox, spoke of this biblical inspiration in describing the monument in a newspaper article of the day. Cox wrote:

On the plinth of the monument in the flattest relief are figures of fish, representing Maury's interest in the paths of the sea. The story goes that once when Maury was ill he had his son² read the Bible to him each night. One night he read the eighth Psalm, and when he came to the passage—"The fishes of the sea and whatsoever walketh through the paths of the sea"—Maury had him read it over several times. Finally he said, "If God says there are paths in the sea I am going to find them if I get out of this bed." Thus the Psalm was the direct inspiration for his discoveries....

In his right hand are the pencil and the compass, and in his left hand a chart. Against his chair is the Bible, from which he drew inspiration for his explorations. The sculptor has caught amazingly the spirit of the man.³

Another Maury Monument—in the Goshen Pass on the bank of the North Anna River, erected by the state of Virginia in 1923—also reveals his biblical inspiration. The bronze tablet on the monument contains these words:⁴

MATTHEW FONTAINE MAURY, Pathfinder of the Seas,
The Genius who first snatched from ocean & atmosphere the secret of their laws. Born January 14th, 1806. Died at Lexington, Va., February 1st, 1873.... Every mariner for countless ages as he takes his chart to shape his course across the seas, will think of thee. His Inspiration Holy Writ: Psalms 8 & 107, Verses 8, 23, & 24; Ecclesiastes Chap. 1, Verse 8; A Tribute of his Native State Virginia, 1923

The Scriptures that inspired Maury were: Psalm 8:8 — "The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas." Psalm 107: 23-24 — "They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; these see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep." Eccl. 1:8—"All things are full of labor; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing."

Maury looked to the Bible when it gave insight into scientific knowledge. For example, he writes in *The Physical Geography of the Sea*:

And as for the general system of atmospherical circulation..., the Bible tells it all in a single sentence: "The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits." – Eccl., i., 6.⁵

Maury frequently mentioned the work of God in his scientific writings. "The ocean of air like the ocean of water, is never at rest. It has its waves and its currents." After giving three offices of winds that make life on earth possible, Maury wrote: "Discharging these various offices, they verify the Psalmist's words, 'God maketh the winds his messengers'."⁶

Maury believed giving yourself to a useful and God-ordained occupation was the secret of happiness. He "found that occupation, for some useful end or other, was the true secret of happiness."⁷ Once a man found this occupation, Maury believed industry was essential for success. He wrote: "It's the talent of industry that makes a man. I don't think that so much depends upon intellect as is generally supposed; but industry and steadiness of purpose, they are the things."⁸



Maury Monument in Richmond. "Against his chair is the Bible, from which he drew inspiration for his explorations."

A Biblical Seer

Maury was able to accomplish so many significant things because he attempted to look at creation from a lofty position, from the view of the Creator. One of his biographers wrote:

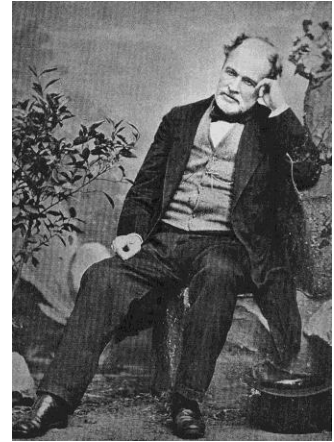
The thing above all others that made Maury a great man was his ability to see the invisible. He was a seer. He saw the cable before it was laid. He saw a railroad across the continent before it was built. He saw a ship canal from the Mississippi to the Great Lakes before it was dug. . . . He was a seer and a pathfinder not only on the seas, but under the seas, across the lands, and among the stars.⁹

He saw so much because he knew the Bible, believed it, and saw the harmony between what it taught and the natural sciences. He wrote that, “Physical geography confesses the existence, and is based on the biblical doctrine that the earth was made for man. Upon no other theory can it be studied; upon no other theory can its phenomena be reconciled.”¹⁰ In the same speech, he also declared:

I have been blamed by men of science, both in this country and in England, for quoting the Bible in confirmation of the doctrines of physical geography. The Bible, they say, was not written for scientific purposes, and is therefore of no authority in matters of science. I beg pardon! The Bible is authority for everything it touches. . . . The Bible is true and science is true. The agents concerned in the physical economy of our planet are ministers of His who made both it and the Bible. The records which He has chosen to make through the agency of these ministers of His upon the crust of the earth are as true as the records which, by the hands of His prophets and servants, He has been pleased to make in the Book of Life. They are both true; and when your men of science, with vain and hasty conceit, announce the discovery of disagreement between them, rely upon it the fault is not with the Witness or His records, but with the “worm” who essays to interpret evidence which he does not understand.¹¹

Maury, as has been true of most of the significant scientists in history, accomplished his great work because he had a biblical view of life and science. He realized the Creator of the Universe is orderly and caused His creation to operate according to set laws. Maury believed God wants man to discover and apply those laws as part of his mission to take dominion over the earth. Maury wrote:

As a student of physical geography I regard the earth, sea, air and water as parts of a machine, pieces of mechanism not made by hands, but to which, nevertheless, certain offices have been assigned in the terrestrial economy. It is good and profitable to seek to find out these offices, and point them out to our fellows; and when, after patient research, I am led to the discovery of any one of them, I feel with the astronomer of old as though I had ‘thought one of God’s thoughts!’ — and tremble.¹²



Matthew Maury said concerning Psalm 8:8, “If God says there are paths in the sea I am going to find them.”

To learn more about Maury order [Matthew Fontaine Maury, the Pathfinder of the Seas](#)

¹ Charles Lee Lewis, *Matthew Fontaine Maury, The Pathfinder of the Seas*, New York: AMS Press, 1969 (reprinted from edition of 1927), p. 82.

² Other accounts say his wife read the Bible to him.

³ Lewis, pp. 251-252.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 240a-240b.

⁵ Matthew Fontaine Maury, *The Physical Geography of the Sea and its Meteorology*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856, p. 80.

⁶ John W. Wayland, *The Pathfinder of the Seas, The Life of Matthew Fontaine Maury*, Richmond: Garret & Massie, Inc., 1930, pp. 60-61.

⁷ Lewis, p. xiv.

⁸ Maury to Frank Minor, July 25, 1855, in Lewis, p. xiv.

⁹ Wayland, p. 131.

¹⁰ Lewis, p. 96.

¹¹ Lewis, pp. 98-99.

¹² Hidlegarde Hawthorne, *Matthew Fontaine Maury, Trail Maker of the Seas*, New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943, pp. 154-155.