

The Lights

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Gen 1:16

(BHS)

וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים
אֶת־שְׁנֵי הַמְּאֹרֹת הַגְּדֹלִים
אֶת־הַמְּאֹר הַגְּדֹל לְמִמְשָׁלַת הַיּוֹם
וְאֶת־הַמְּאֹר הַקָּטָן לְמִמְשָׁלַת הַלַּיְלָה
וְאֵת הַכּוֹכָבִים:

(NRSV)

God made
the two great lights—
the greater light to rule the day
and the lesser light to rule the night—
and the stars.

“Light” is highlighted in red. Hebrew is pretty linear with English. Of course, adjectives (“great” and “small”) follow the nouns they modify. Notice that after “God,” every clause begins with the direct object marker.

Among you all who are reading this, there are no doubt a number of incompatible theories on how to read Genesis. Some are Day-Agers. Some are 6-day creationists. Some are Framework Hypothesis people. (I have a paper that tries to shed light on these approaches and more; please beam me an email for it.) But regardless of how you illumine Genesis with science (or vice versa), the big question remains: what is the point of creation? What is the narrative about? Another way of putting it is, why is it told the way it is?

I believe that one clue is found in our verse, in the word chosen for the lights: *ma’or*. This is not the common word for “light” from one verse earlier or later. *Ma’or* is rare, and except for the lights in the sky, when signifying a physical, created, visible light, it always denotes Tabernacle lights—usually with the command to ensure a constant supply of oil for them. “Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest shall have charge of the oil for the *ma’or*” (Num 4:16).

When ancient Israelites read our verse, they naturally equated the lights in the heavens with the oil-fed lamps in the Tabernacle. Or, to look at it the other way around, the Tabernacle lights signify the celestial lights. Not just the sun and moon as in our verse, but the stars too (Psa 74:16). God “stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in” (Isa 40:22). The point is clear. The universe is God’s Tabernacle, his House. The manmade sacred lamps point away from themselves to the true Sanctuary: the sky.

Whatever view you are persuaded as to the origins and history of the universe, it is important to keep in mind what is actually being created in Genesis 1. It is a Temple. It is the space in which God will dwell. When he took up his abode in it, when he rested there, the universe was sanctified and became holy—just like when his glory filled the Tabernacle. This is what Genesis 1 is *about*. Presbyterians like to do things decently and in order. Creation week is about the universe being made decently and in order, so that God could make it holy.

Genesis confronts you with this challenge: what sort of universe do you live in? Sacred space made for God, with you as his enlightened priest called to minister in his name like Aaron? In other words, do you labor as his servant when you radiate your gifts and talents in your chosen vocation? “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). Or do you live in an empty, secular world where God has not placed demands on you, nor has he made great promises?

Why are you bitter? Why are you anxious? Why do you grumble? Are you noncommittal as to whether this is God's world after all?

Genesis reveals that the world is his Temple. But there is a better Sanctuary even than that. Jesus is its cornerstone, and "you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:5). You are built into God's house. Our cornerstone—the one who holds our lives together as one—is Jesus. He is the *ma'or* of the world (John 9:5). And in him we are the *ma'or* of the world (Matt 5:14)!

So I ask again. Why are you bitter? Why are you anxious? Why do you grumble? Are you ambivalent about living in God's church after all? Until Jesus returns, you are called to shine as the *ma'or* of heaven (Phil 2:15).

This God's world! We are God's people! So get out there, and let your light shine!