

SUN NOT THE SOURCE OF LIGHT (?)

Try this question from a second-grade science text: Where does light come from? The correct answer at the back of the book is: From the sun. Obviously. Elementary. It goes without saying even for second-graders that light comes from the sun.

Not so fast there. What seems so elementary to modern minds was not so obvious to the ancients. Thumb through the pages of the Jewish scriptures and you'll have trouble finding a single sentence which assumes that the sun is the source of daylight.

In a pre-scientific age every goatherd and truck farmer could have argued that the sun is not the source of daylight. There's light on the earth an hour or so before the sun pops over the horizon. And the light lingers long after sunsets. The periods of dawn and dusk are the obvious proof that you can have light without having the sun around.

Check it out. For starters, try the story of the creation of the world in Genesis 1. There daylight is produced on Day One. But God doesn't get around to making the heavenly lights—sun, moon and stars—until Day Four.

Time after time, morning light is mentioned without any reference to the sun. Take 1 Samuel 14:36 for example, where King Saul urges his troops to massacre the Philistines “until morning light.” Notice it's not “until the sun comes up.”

Or Isaiah 30:26, where the light of the moon is compared to the sun, and the light of the sun to the light of day. It's as though daylight were something independent of sunlight. The list of passages where daytime and sunshine seem unconnected could go on and on.

So what's the point? There's got to be more to this than merely another piece of biblical trivia. Who cares whether the ancient Israelites didn't know enough to recognize that the sun is the source of light?

Well, it's not as though they didn't care. Or were too stupid to figure it out. What is reflected in the biblical documents is a different concern, a concern for a unique religious perspective.

The Hebrews were about the only people around who didn't worship the sun. The old time Babylonians worshiped Marduk, the god of the spring sun. And they honored the moon and stars as minor deities.

For Egyptians, the sun god Ra was the one who created the world. He had to battle the god of darkness every 24 hours.

The Hebrews however weren't buying any of that nonsense. So they made a point of stressing that their God Yahweh had created the universe, including the light of day, and including the sun. So instead of honoring the sun as the chief among the gods, they demoted the solar light to third place.

That puts a different light on the whole subject (if you'll pardon the pun). It's not as though the biblical authors would have flunked a second-grade astronomy quiz. Rather, by separating the concepts of “daylight” and “sunshine,” they avoided any confusion about whom or what was to be worshiped.

So once again a bit of trivia opens up new perspectives. In this case, the awkward idea that the sun wasn't specifically considered the source of light turns out to be another insight into enjoying the Jewish scriptures.

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