**Light as Representative of Knowledge in the Foundational Sources of Western Culture**

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**Introduction**

Light is a distinct physical phenomenon: a wave radiating from an energy source – a light emitting body. Light can emanate from a filament in a light bulb, a star such as the sun, or myriads of other sources on Earth and in the universe. Nevertheless, different cultures in different periods of human history have also attributed metaphysical properties to light. Even today, we often resort to using imagery of light and enlightenment as a metaphor for knowledge, wisdom, truth and sanctity. In this article we shall use the genealogical method to examine, the cultural origins of the popular Western conception of light as representative of the abovementioned virtues. We shall do so by examining the role attributed to light in the great myths and foundational texts of Western culture. A genealogical-interpretative analysis of mythological text does not aim to be objective or definitive; rather it attempts to contribute to our cultural understanding of the present moment. Ancient cultures grappled with questions about nature, the universe and existence, questions that drove them to invent cosmologies[[1]](#footnote-1) that would then serve as the basis for their religious beliefs.[[2]](#footnote-2) These cosmologies influenced the development of all human thought and continue to influence it to this day.

Religion is an essential marker of culture; its doctrines reflect the systems of thought and values of any given civilization.[[3]](#footnote-3) Every human society or culture has its own proper mythology, and that mythological heritage constitutes an indivisible part of religion, since some aspects of reality require mythical conceptualization. It is a way of imposing order on a world that doesn’t make sense.[[4]](#footnote-4) Eliade maintains that religious myth not only provide a framework for explaining the cultural behavior of human beings and attest to past experience, they also construct the paradigm for future endeavors and aspirations. In fact, in his eyes, myth may be considered more “real” than “historical truth” in that it has deeper, richer and more long-lasting implications.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The Western-Christian world arose out of the soil laid by two more ancient traditions – that of the Old Testament and that of the Greeks. The two major outputs of Western culture – the Jewish Bible and Homer’s epics – served as the foundation upon which the next layers of religious and cultural production could be built,[[6]](#footnote-6) even though scholars have pointed out mutual influences between these texts and the cosmologies of the ancient Middle East.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**The creation of light in the book of Genesis**

In Genesis, which recounts the seminal myth of the creation of the world, God is depicted as an all-powerful higher being who is not subject to the laws of nature and does not require the sun, the moon or the stars in order to make light. Light in Genesis is created before the creation of the celestial bodies; it exists even though it is not emitted by any physical source: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth… And God said, Let there be light: and there was light” (Genesis 1:1–3). It therefore cannot be considered as a physical phenomenon. The differentiation between day and night at this point of the creation myth is also unrelated to the celestial bodies: “and the evening and the morning were the second day” (Genesis 1:8), for only on the fourth day does God create the “two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also” (Genesis 1:16). This distinction between the creation of light and the creation of the sun as the source of light endows light with metaphysical properties. There are hundreds of instances in the Old Testament where light is deployed figuratively, in a metaphoric capacity. Light is used to symbolize wisdom: “a man's wisdom maketh his face to shine” (Ecclesiastes 8:1), morality and righteousness: “unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness” (Psalms 112:4), the favor of God: “Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us” (Psalms 4:6), and the sanctity of divinity: “come ye, and let us walk in the light of the Lord” (Isaiah 2:5), “I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles” (Isaiah 49:6), “the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light” (Isaiah 60:19), to quote but a few.

Just as light in the Old Testament is used to symbolize goodness, righteousness and wisdom, so darkness, in turn, symbolizes not just the absence of light, but often the presence of evil. In the creation story, God designates light as good and separates it from the darkness: “And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:4). Isaiah, on the other hand, puts it somewhat differently: “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things” (Isaiah 45:7). If darkness is the absence of light and has no substance of its own, how could God “create darkness”? Most interpretations of this verse focus on the differentiation between light and darkness, and the fact that the Book of Isaiah is thought to have been written around the same time period as the Zoroastrian religion emerged in Persia.[[8]](#footnote-8) The Zoroastrians believed in two gods: the good god who created light and all the good in the world, and the bad god who created darkness and all the evil in the world. The aim of the Isaiah verse is to emphasize that there are no two separate authorities; there is only one Creator and he created one world which contains both light and darkness, both good and evil. The monotheistic dialectic that has imprinted itself on the West establishes a dichotomy between light, which represents good, and darkness, which represents evil.

**Light in ancient Middle Eastern mythologies**

The story of creation in Genesis must be understood within the context of the ancient Middle East. The Old Testament was not written in a vacuum, but developed and grew out of mythologies that preceded it, and was in continuous dialogue with its cultural environment.[[9]](#footnote-9) Just like in Genesis, the ancient Babylonian creation myth, the “Enuma Elish,” also has light appearing before the creation of the sun, the moon and the stars. Night and day too occur before the celestial bodies are brought into existence.[[10]](#footnote-10)

A similar dissociation between light and the sun can equally be found in the creation myth of ancient Egypt. The ancient Egyptian mythology is the oldest in the Mediterranean basin, and known for its multitudes of gods, sacred animals and symbols. The ancient Egyptians worshiped the major forces of nature. The sun, chief among them, had many names and the interpretations of their meanings are many and varied.[[11]](#footnote-11) The god of the sun was mainly known as Ra or Atum, while the actual physical orb of the sun was known as Aten. In ancient Egypt, the sun god was though of as the god responsible for all creation and had a temple devoted to him in Heliopolis. He lay dormant under the name Atum in the ancient ocean preceding creation, with all the seeds of creation already within him. To prevent the water from extinguishing him, he hid inside a lotus flower until one day, by an act of will, he emerged out of the depths in his full glory and illuminated the world with his light as Ra. He himself begot the first cosmic couple, Shu and Tefnut, and they in turn begot the eight main gods of the ancient Egyptian pantheon. In this creation myth, even though the sun god is the main creator and the origin of light, the light of the blue sky is actually attributed to the god Shu, the god of light and air, who was symbolic of the separation between light and darkness, as well as between the worlds of the living and the dead.[[12]](#footnote-12) The sky itself, was created after light, as the goddess of the firmament Nut is the daughter of Shu, the god of light.[[13]](#footnote-13)

It is likewise pertinent to mention, in this context, the myth of Mithra the Persian sun god, since ancient Persian mythology is a mix between Babylonian-Assyrian beliefs of the ancient Middle East and mythologies that originated in the Indian subcontinent. Mithra is an important god in Persian mythology, reminiscent in many ways of the Greek god Apollo, as well as of the God of the Old Testament. He has unparalleled military skill and is the universal source of knowledge. Since his essence is light; he drives the sun’s chariot across the sky and bestows victory and knowledge upon his worshippers. He is likewise the god of justice, wrathful and merciless in the face of corruption and deception. Nothing escapes his ever-watchful eye.[[14]](#footnote-14) As we can see, the characteristics that define Mithra, the god of light, are very much in line with the symbolic virtues associated with light in the Old Testament – knowledge, righteousness, and divine sanctity. The cult of Mithra preceded the prophet Zarathustra, father of Zoroastrianism, after whom all gods become minor in comparison to the one main, all-powerful and abstract God that is devoid of specific characteristics. Nevertheless, Mithra remained an important figure in Zoroastrianism. Knohl posits that the beliefs laid out in the Old Testament were shaped by contact with the ideas of Pharaoh Akhenaten of Egypt and Zarathustra of Persia.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The Greek myth of creation is another text where we find primordial light in existence before the creation of the celestial bodies. The first account of the origins of the universe and the genealogy of the gods appears in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, composed in the 8th century BCE, approximately two hundred years before Homer’s *Iliad and Odyssey.* [[16]](#footnote-16)In the beginning, Hesiod tells us, there was Chaos, vast and dark and formless, then came Gaia (the mother goddess, the Earth), followed by Tantalus and Eros. The two deities that spontaneously arose out of Chaos were Erebus (darkness) and Nyx (night). These two then formed a union of love to produce [Aether](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aether_%28mythology%29%22%20%5Co%20%22Aether%20%28mythology%29) (brightness) and [Hemera](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hemera%22%20%5Co%20%22Hemera) (day). Thus we can see that day and night are created completely separately from the celestial bodies. According to the Orphic theogony,[[17]](#footnote-17) on the other hand, Chaos was enveloped in darkness (night).[[18]](#footnote-18) Under the cover of night, the creative activity of Aether began to organize “cosmic matter”. This matter eventually took on the shape of a giant egg, with night as its shell. At the center of the egg was the first creature: Phanes – light. It was when this light united with the darkness that they created the earth and the heavens. Zeus, the first Olympian god and ruler of Olympus, was also born of the light. Thus while the monotheistic creation story separates light from darkness, the Orphists imagined creation as the result of the union between the two.

The god of the sun, as well as of light, prophecy, healing, music, and poetry in Greek and Roman mythology, is Apollo. He is depicted as the ideal of male beauty, often bearing a lyre.[[19]](#footnote-19) The muses are his companions, inspirations to all those who devote their time to science and the arts. He is one of the ten Olympic gods. Prophecy, in ancient Greece, was considered a gift that only Apollo could give to those he favored. It is important to note that while Apollo possesses some of the sun’s properties, such as its light and energy, he is not an embodiment of the sun. Thus, here too we see light conceived as separate from the sun. The sun itself, as a celestial orb, is represented by Helios, an older god whose chariot sets out every morning from the East and rides across the sky to the West where he vanishes into the ocean.

In Nietzsche’s analysis of Hellenistic culture, Apollo represents one of two opposing principles, the other represented by Dionysus. The Apollonian component of Hellenistic culture, as Nietzsche describes it, dictates the use of moderation, whether in ethics or in aesthetics. Apollo, the god of light, is the god of self-awareness, self-control and restraint; Nietzsche calls him the god of consciousness and reason – an “ethical divinity”.[[20]](#footnote-20)

**Conclusion**

The great myths of the ancient Middle East, which laid the foundation for the Jewish and later the Western-Christian cultures, tell us by and large that light existed before the creation of the sun and the stars, thereby stripping it of its basic physical property – that in order to exist light must be emitted from an energy source. As we saw, the gods of light are energetic – they are gods of action, warrior gods who fight and defeat those who dare go against the laws of righteousness. They are prophecy gods, like Apollo, Mithra, and the Old Testament God who delivers his word onto the world through his prophets. They are gods of supreme wisdom and perfect knowledge of everything that takes place from the beginning to the end of time. Therefore, the great mythologies of the ancient Middle East also see light as representative of knowledge, wisdom, justice, prophecy and sanctity. Darkness, on the other hand, in some mythologies represents more than just the absence of light; more often than not it represents the opposite qualities to those associated with light.

The great mythologies of the Middle East and the Mediterranean basin are not the only sources where such dichotomous representations of light and darkness can be seen; they can also be found in the early philosophical texts of Western culture. Light as a metaphor for knowledge and, conversely, the absence of light – darkness – as a metaphor for ignorance, is perhaps most famously and powerfully represented in Plato’s allegory of the cave.[[21]](#footnote-21) This well-known fable describes a reality of ignorance in which people who remain in the darkness of the cave cannot see the light of wisdom. Light is equivalent to knowledge and the process of emerging from darkness into the light, the process of coming out of the cave, is one that requires gradual acclimatization. If one of the prisoners in the cave was “untied, and compelled suddenly to stand up, turn his head, start walking, and look towards the light, he’d find all these things painful,” and he would not be able to see anything “because of the glare”.[[22]](#footnote-22) As time went by and the prisoner got accustomed to the light, he could start looking around and seeing the true forms of “the things whose shadows he used to see before.”[[23]](#footnote-23) This prisoner would have undergone a process of coming out of ignorance into an understanding of the truth, represented here by light. “The last thing he’d be able to look at, presumably, would be the sun. Not its image, in water or some location that is not its own, but the sun itself. He’d be able to look at it by itself, in its own place, and see it as it really was.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

1. Robert, Graves. (1975). Introduction, in: *New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology*. London: Hamlyn, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jeremy, Naydler. (1996). *Temple of the Cosmos: The Ancient Egyptian Experience of the Sacred*. Inner Traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Durkheim, Emile. (1971). *The Elementary Forms of the Religions Life*, London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, pp. 418–421. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. May, Rollo. (1991). *The Cry for Myth*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Eliade, Mircea. (1959). *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask, New York: Harper and Brothers, pp. 42–43. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Knohl, Israel. (2008). *Mea’in Banu? HaKod HaGeneti Shel HaTanakh* [Where Are We From? The Genetic Code of the Bible], p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John H. Walton. (2010). *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*. Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Zoroastrian religion was founded by Zarathustra Spitama, whose activity is dated by some scholars to the beginning of the first millennium BCE. Mircea Eliade (1978) , *A History of Religious Ideas: Vol. 1*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 303–304. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Darshan, Guy. (2018). *After the Flood: Stories of Origins in the Hebrew Bible and Eastern Mediterranean Literature*. Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, pp. 8–27. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Johnny V. Miller & John M. Soden. (2012). *In the Beginning… We Misunderstood: Interpreting Genesis 1 in Its Original Context*. Kregel Publications, p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Julien, Viaud. (1975). Egyptian Mythology In: *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*. London: Hamlyn, pp. 9–11 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jeremy Naydler. (1996). *Temple of the Cosmos: The Ancient Egyptian Experience of the Sacred*. Inner Traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. P. Masson-Orsel & Louis Morin. *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*. London: Hamlyn, pp. 309–322. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Knohl (2008), *Mea’in Banu?* pp. 166–169. See also Boyce, M. (2001). *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. Publishing house?, pp xvii. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. F. Guirand. (1975). Greek Mythology In: *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology,* London: Hamlyn, pp. 87–90. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The Orphic cult worshipped the poet Orpheus and, like the Pythagorian cult, was revived in the Roman empire in the pre-Christian period during the decline of the Hellenistic religion, a period that was particularly rich in beliefs that influenced the cultures around the Mediterranean basin (Ibid., p. 90). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Hockney, M. (2013). *World, Overworld, Underworld, Dreamworld*, Hyperreality Books, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. F. Guirand. (1975). Greek Mythology In: *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology,* London: Hamlyn, pp. 109–110 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Friedrich Nietzsche. (2007 [1999]). *The Birth of Tragedy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Plato. (2000). *The Republic*. Ed. G. R. F. Ferrari. Trans. Tom Griffith. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 220–226. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., p. 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., p. 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)