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

Dr. Bina Nir

**Abstract**

Light is a distinct physical phenomenon; it is a wave released by an energy source – a light-emitting body. However, different cultures in different periods of human history have also attributed meta-physical properties to light. Even today, we often resort to using imagery of light and enlightenment as a metaphor for knowledge and wisdom. In this article we shall use the genealogical method to examine the cultural origins of the popular Western conception of light as representative of higher knowledge, wisdom and sanctity in the great myths and in foundational texts of Western culture. 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.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In Genesis, which recounts the seminal myth of the creation of the world, light appears before the creation of the celestial bodies: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth… And God said, Let there be light: and there was light .And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:1–4).[[2]](#footnote-2) As we can see, the differentiation between day and night at this point of the creation myth is also separate from the celestial bodies, 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 and the sanctity of divinity, knowledge, morality and wisdom. There are hundreds of instances in the Old Testament where light is used to symbolize all of the above, such as: “a man's wisdom maketh his face to shine” (Ecclesiastes 8:1), “unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness” (Psalms 112:4), “Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us” (Psalms 4:6), “come ye, and let us walk in the light of the Lord” (Isaiah 2:5), to quote but a few.

The use of light as a metaphor for knowledge also has roots in the Greek tradition. In Greek mythology, the titan Prometheus brings the fire that Zeus withheld from humanity down to earth and is severely punished for his action. Fire is necessary for survival and human development and is therefore considered a great gift.[[3]](#footnote-3) For many thinkers and scholars, the Promethean myth has come to represent an iconic image symbolizing human liberation, not only in the physical sense, but in the sense of the dissemination of knowledge and wisdom that illuminates and enlightens.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Light as a metaphor for knowledge and, conversely, the absences of light or darkness as a metaphor for ignorance, is perhaps most famously and powerfully represented in Plato’s allegory of the cave.[[5]](#footnote-5) 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. The prisoner who has been exposed to the light has undergone a process of coming out of ignorance into an understanding of the truth. It is then up to him to stand his ground and try to enlighten his fellow prisoners still shackled in the darkness of the cave.

1. Knohl, Israel. (2008). *Mea’in Banu? HaKod HaGeneti Shel HaTanakh* [Where Are We From? The Genetic Code of the Bible], p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All Biblical citations are taken from the original King James translation (KJV). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Schwab, Gustav. (1946). *Gods and Heroes of Ancient Greece*. Trans. Olga Marx and Ernst Morwitz. New York: Pantheon Books, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ohana, David. (2001). *HaTshuka HaPrometeit* [Promethean Passion]. Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, pp. 3–11. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Plato. (2000). *The Republic*. Ed. G. R. F. Ferrari. Trans. Tom Griffith. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 220–226. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)