

The Light of the World Is Jesus

John 1:4 with John 8:12 et al

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Christ the King Sunday

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One of the characteristics of the Gospel of John is the way in which it consistently equates Christ with Light. Indeed, John opens his Gospel by saying of Jesus that “in him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (John 1:4).

There are numerous references to light in the chapters which follow until finally Christ declares in John 8:20, “I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Biblical scholars have postulated that Christ was inspired to make that proclamation by gazing at a temple menorah or some other type of flame which might’ve been used in sacred rituals around the temple. That may be true, but I think it’s fair to say that there’s more behind that statement than simply a candle or a menorah. Indeed, I would like to suggest to you that when Christ declared himself to be the Light of the World, he was saying something about himself that has scientific implications as well.

And this takes us into rather curious territory, because Christianity and science haven’t always gotten along with each other very well. However, recent scientific discoveries are bringing Christianity and science into dialogue with one another.

In his 1999 book, *God’s Equation: Einstein, Relativity and the Expanding Universe*, Mathematician Amir Aczel opens with this startling line: “In January, 1998, the way we perceive the universe changed forever.

For centuries, much of how we view the universe was shaped by Sir Isaac Newton. And no wonder: the Englishman was a physicist, a mathematician, an astronomer, a philosopher, an alchemist and a theologian. He has been considered by many to be the greatest and most influential scientist to have ever lived. It was Sir Isaac Newton who gave us the Theory of Gravity. It was Sir Isaac Newton who gave us his famous Three Laws of Motion. And Newton was also the first to say that the universe is infinite.

I’ve already stated that in addition to being a scientist, Sir Isaac Newton was also a theologian. Nonetheless, the church wasn’t quite sure what to do with Newton. Some called him a man of great faith; others described him as a heretic.

The church, in particular, had a problem with Newton’s theory that the universe was infinite: if it was infinite, then there was no room for transcendence and there was no room for heaven. If the universe is infinite, then the universe is everywhere and if the universe is everywhere then there’s no room left for God or for heaven. I would add that if we say the universe is infinite, then we are ascribing to the Creation that which can only be ascribed to God.

Nonetheless, for the next three centuries, no one could put up a critical challenge to Newton’s theory of an infinite universe—that is, until Albert Einstein appeared on the scene and offered up his Theory of Relativity.

Unlike Newton, Einstein proposed that the universe was not infinite; rather, Einstein said that the universe is ever expanding. Einstein came to this position as the logical conclusion to his theory of relativity. However, shortly after proposing this radical new idea of an expanding universe, Einstein quickly retracted it, calling it his biggest blunder. Nonetheless, every year new developments prove the accuracy of Einstein’s theories. Finally, in January, 1998, cosmologists from the Supernova Cosmology Project published evidence that Einstein was right in the first place—that the earth is indeed expanding and that it is expanding at an ever-

increasing rate. It turns out then, that Einstein was right, even when he was certain that he was wrong.¹

Despite the fact that Einstein retracted his theory of an ever-expanding universe, that notion captured the imagination of scientists ever since Einstein first put it forth in 1917.

In fact, in 1978 Einstein's theory eventually led the United States of America to make an initial investment of \$78 million to develop an elaborate scientific experiment to either prove or disprove once and for all Einstein's Theory of the Expanding Universe.

Twelve years later, that scientific experiment was launched into space: you've heard of it—it's the Hubble Space Telescope and it's still in operation today.²

The Hubble Telescope was named after Edwin Hubble, an American astronomer who in 1925 profoundly changed our understanding of the universe by confirming the existence of galaxies other than our own Milky Way. He also advanced Einstein's theory that our universe is expanding.

What does all this mean for us as Christians?

First of all, it means that if the universe is expanding, it must be expanding out from somewhere. In other words, it means that the entire universe has a common point of origin.

Interestingly enough—and thanks to Albert Einstein and Edwin Hubble—scientists have something to say about that point of origin. Scientists are now virtually unanimous in their belief that the universe began with an explosion; that explosion is more commonly known as “The Big Bang Theory.”

According to this theory, the universe began with a single mass of light and energy which, in comparison to the universe was infinitesimally compact and incredibly pressurized. The Big Bang Theory cannot and does not provide any explanation for the origin of that original mass of light and energy; it simply describes and explains the general evolution of the universe once it exploded in the Big Bang.

It also means that the universe has a beginning; it would logically follow that the universe also has an end. However, that's a topic for a different sermon. Suffice it to say that the prospect of the universe—not just the world—coming to an end gives a whole new meaning to the words of Jesus when he said, “Heaven and earth shall pass away but my word will stand forever” (Matthew 24:35).

By calculating the expansion of the universe, scientists believe the Big Bang happened a little less than 18 billion years ago. All of the stars and all of the galaxies resulted from that explosion and that explosion is the point of origin for our expanding universe.

What this means is that Genesis 1 verse 3 is scientifically accurate: the universe began when God said, “Let there be Light.” The universe began with light. The origin of the universe is light.

Now I said Genesis 1 verse 3 is scientifically accurate. However, I recognize that if you suggest that on the campuses of Iowa City or Champaign, Illinois, they'll laugh you out the front door. The problem is that we get hung up on the meaning of “day.” What did Moses mean when he brought this particular oral tradition into the Torah? Did he mean a 24-hour unit of time? Or did he mean something else?

We have to recognize that “day” is a unit of time and it is determined by how long it takes the earth to make one rotation. However, at the origin of the universe, the earth didn't rotate because the earth didn't exist as yet. Time had not yet been created at this point in the expansion of the universe. The problem is that we assume time is infinite just as we (like Sir Isaac Newton) used to assume that the universe is infinite. But just as Einstein's Theory of

¹ Amir Aczel in *God's Equation*, pg. ix.

² See <http://www.stsci.edu/hst/>

Relativity debunks the infinitude of the universe, so his Theory of Relativity debunks the infinitude of time. Time, like the universe, has a beginning.

The Theory of Relativity tells us that time is relative. Ferdinand Magellan's crew learned this when they became the first sailors to circumnavigate the earth. They left Spain on August, 10, 1519 and arrived back in Spain on September 5, 1522. However, despite the fact that they faithfully maintained their ship's log, when they returned, they discovered the rest of the world said it was September 6, 1522; because they had sailed west, they lost a day in the trip. Time is relative to the rate of travel.

However, I didn't want to talk about finitude of time today; I wanted to talk about light.

Thanks to scientific inquiry, we now know that the point of origin for the entire universe was the bursting forth of a single super compact super proton. And of course, a proton is Light. Every star and every galaxy—all life and all energy was contained in that super mass of Light. The tiniest gnat and the furthest galaxy were all contained in that super proton. In other words, the universe began with a single beam of light.

Knowing that, how does that shape your understanding of the words of Jesus in John 8:12: "I am the Light of the world"?

I find this to be so mind boggling that I am left almost speechless—*almost*. But what it does say to me is that science is proving the accuracy of the Bible. No matter how much science marches on, the truth of the Bible stands; the truth of the Bible remains relevant for today.

The Bible declares that Jesus is the Light of the World. That's not a statement inspired by a menorah; that's a statement rooted in science. Consider the opening verses of John chapter 1: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people"—that sounds like the super proton I just described for you: all life was contained in that original super-proton of light. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

I just want to sit back and absorb the meaning of those words in light of the various scientific discoveries made over the course of this past century: Jesus is the Light of the world. Jesus is the force behind the creation—not just the creation of the world, but the creation of the entire universe. The universe began as energized light and Jesus is the Light—not just of the world—but of the universe. In fact, because of what we now know thanks to science, you cannot say that Jesus is the Light of the world without saying that Jesus is also the Light of the universe.

That's not to equate God with creation, but it does help us to see both God and creation in a whole new light—and yes, that pun is intended.

The Light of the World is Jesus. The Light of the *universe* is Jesus. Thanks be to God.