

The Heavens Declare the Glory of God

Few sights are as truly marvellous as that of a starlit sky on a clear night. Seeing the myriad twinkling lights across the heavens makes us conscious of our insignificance – what are we, compared with the immeasurable vastness of space? Nothing!

With 21st century technology we know so much more than our predecessors about the wonder of what is out there, but people from long ago have looked and marvelled, just as we should.

Hymn of Praise

Psalms 19 is a hymn of praise, written centuries ago by a Hebrew hymn-writer, or Psalmist, who wanted to express his belief and understanding that nature, in every aspect, is the handiwork of God.

He had only to look upwards, for it seemed to him that this truth was something the heavens were always declaring. Every one of his thoughts led to God, and he had only to think of God to marvel at His wisdom, power and goodness towards mankind. So, he wrote:

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard (Psalm 19:1–3).

At the time when this was written, many people believed that these heav-

enly bodies were gods, thus they worshipped the sun, moon and stars. However, God taught Israel that all things were made by Him, and that it was not the stars that governed people's lives: He did! In fact, the wrong practices of misguided nations were expressly forbidden. This is what the prophet Jeremiah said:

Thus says the LORD: "Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them. For the customs of the people are futile" (Jeremiah 10:2–3).

In those days, a natural event – like an eclipse of the sun – was regarded as an omen of terrible disaster to all nations. But, guided by their scriptures, the Jews knew better. They could look at these frightening phenomena with confidence, not because they understood how they happened, but because their Creator had taught them that they occurred in the natural world and were not to be feared.

Star-Gazers

That didn't mean that the Jews took no notice of changes in the skies. As we have already seen, they saw the starry heavens as a revelation of God's almighty power and His total control of the universe He created. It is clear from the many Bible references to the heavenly bodies, that their movements made a deep impression on the Jewish writers.

They noted the daily progress of the sun, rising in the east, moving slowly upwards to its height in the midst of heaven, and passing down unflinching to set in the west. For them, such a cycle of movement was expressive of the way a strong man might run a race – steadily and without haste. Here is the Psalmist again:

In them [the heavens] He has set a tabernacle for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoices like a strong man to run its race. Its rising is from one end of heaven, and its circuit to the other end; and there is nothing hidden from its heat (Psalm 19:4-6).

Night revealed a different order, more majestic still, as each star moved in its appointed path, some in small circles around the poles, others in long curves across the sky. That majestic procession once was used as the figure of a great army going into battle:

The kings came and fought, then the kings of Canaan fought in Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo; they took no spoils of silver. They fought from the heavens; the stars from their courses fought against Sisera (Judges 5:19-20).

For the discerning Israelite, what happens in the heavens was expressive of how God marshals His forces on earth, to achieve His will and to fulfil His purpose.

Understanding Observers

It would be a mistake to think that the Jews looked heavenwards and made up myths and legends about the stars, or the constellations. With the guid-



ance God provided, they were far more knowledgeable and perceptive. In contrast to the man-made superstitions about the shape of the earth and how it is supported, Job declared that God "stretches out the north over empty space; He hangs the earth on nothing" (Job 26:7).

The purpose of the various heavenly ordinances – the sun, moon and stars – is given right at the beginning of God's revelation to man, when God said:

Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years (Genesis 1:14).

- ❖ the sun marks out the days,
- ❖ the moon by her changes marks the months,
- ❖ the sun and stars mark out the seasons and years.

These are divinely appointed divisions of time and men learnt to associate the appearance of certain stars or groups with a particular season. Thus God asked Job:

Can you bind the cluster of the Pleiades, or loose the belt of Orion? (Job 38:31).

The rising of these two groups of stars at a specific time in relation to the sun heralded the coming of spring and winter respectively. In the next verse, Job was also asked:

Can you bring out Mazzaroth in its season? Or can you guide the Great Bear with its cubs? (v32).

It is thought that ‘Mazzaroth’ refers to the twelve constellations – the zodiac. These words declare that man is totally powerless to influence or move those heavenly bodies, each in their turn, so that the earth passes through its successive seasons. The might of the all-powerful Creator is required to control and direct the natural processes upon which all life depends.

Spiritual Significance

References to the stars also occur to emphasise number, height and expanse. God once made a promise to Abraham which directed his gaze to the heavens:

He brought him outside and said, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them”. And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be”. And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:5–6).

Elsewhere the height of heaven is taken as a fitting symbol for the dwelling place of God:

Is not God in the height of heaven? And see the highest stars, how lofty they are! (Job 22:12).

The Psalmist expresses the mercy and forgiveness of God in similar terms:

For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us (Psalm 103:11–12).

If people from long ago could gaze up into the heavens and find spiritual significance as they gazed, what do we make of it all?

Do we look upwards and wonder about how all that happened, thinking that it all just came about with no divine action? Do we look outwards and wonder if life has evolved on some other planet, and hope that they might make contact? Or do we draw the conclusion that all we see is evidence of design, and that presupposes a Designer?

This stargazer finds the sight of the night sky a wonderful declaration of the works of God and believes that a consideration of all His created wonders can help our appreciation of the way in which God has revealed Himself and His purpose with man. Here's an ancient testimonial that is recommended to modern readers:

You alone are the LORD; You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all things on it, the seas and all that is in them, and You preserve them all. The host of heaven worships You (Nehemiah 9:6).

We should worship Him too!

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