

CLOUD ILLUSIONS AND THE PERFECT DAY

Daniel C. Peterson

*I've looked at clouds from both sides now,
from up and down, and still somehow
it's cloud illusions I recall.¹*

*But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more
and more unto the perfect day.²*

The Sun makes life possible on Earth. It's the source of virtually all of the energy that we use or need. No wonder many ancient civilizations worshipped it as a god. During the daytime, it's the principal reason that we can see anything. Indeed, it's so bright in itself that we find it difficult, if not impossible, to look directly at it.

It's also unimaginably vast. Its diameter, for instance, is approximately 864,938 miles (1.392 million kilometers). By contrast, Earth's diameter is only 7,917.5 miles (12,742 kilometers), which means that 109 Earths could be comfortably placed side by side across the Sun's disk. And the Sun's circumference is about 2,713,406 miles (4,366,813 km). Again, that's approximately 109 times the circumference of Earth.

The Sun's mass is 1.989×10^{30} kilograms, or roughly 333,000 times that of Earth, and its total volume is 1.4×10^{27} cubic meters. Thus, about 1.3 million Earths could fit within it. In fact, the Sun contains 99.8 percent of the mass of the entire solar system, which is why Imke de Pater and Jack J. Lissauer, in their textbook *Fundamental Planetary Sciences*, quip that our solar system is essentially "the sun plus some debris."³

1 Partial lyrics from Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now."

2 Proverbs 4:18.

3 Jack J. Lissauer and Imke de Pater, *Fundamental Planetary Science: Physics, Chemistry and Habitability* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 4. See also Tim Sharp, "How Big is the Sun?" (<http://www.space.com/17001-how-big-is-the-sun-size-of-the-sun.html>).

Even so, half of the Earth is turned away from it at any given time, rendering the Sun invisible and leaving roughly half of Earth's population in the darkness.

A surface fog can hide it, and a small cloud can obscure it.

Consider this fact: An ordinary puffy cumulus cloud (significantly known as *cumulus mediocris*), for instance, typically floats at about 2500 feet (1/2 mile) over flat land and is about as thick as it is wide — a few thousand feet at most. Still, it can completely obscure the Sun, which is many millions of times larger.

Indeed, a mere hand over an eye or over the lens of a telescope can obscure it, leaving the viewer in complete darkness.

And yet, the Sun is still there. Our ability or inability to see it changes nothing about its existence or even its real appearance.

Unfortunately, we humans cannot accurately move or see in the absence of light. Lehi had this plainly illustrated for him in his vision of the Tree of Life:

And it came to pass that there arose a mist of darkness; yea, even an exceedingly great mist of darkness, insomuch that they who had commenced in the path did lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost.

And it came to pass that I beheld others pressing forward, and they came forth and caught hold of the end of the rod of iron; and they did press forward through the mist of darkness, clinging to the rod of iron, even until they did come forth and partake of the fruit of the tree.⁴

“God is light,” John writes in his first epistle, “and in him is no darkness at all.”⁵ “God is the light of the Heavens and the Earth,” agrees the Qur'an.⁶ “In the beginning was the Word,” opens the gospel of John, referring to Jesus Christ:

And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him;

4 1 Nephi 8:23–24.

5 1 John 1:5.

6 Qur'an 24:35. Reflecting upon this verse, the great philosophical theologian al-Ghazali (d. AD 1111) argued that the term *light* isn't applied to God only metaphorically but that, on the contrary, it is God who is truly light. The term is applied metaphorically to the physical “light” that we know on earth. See *The Niche of Lights = Mishkāt Al-Anwār*, trans. David Buchman (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), 13–15.

and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.⁷

Indeed, it's not even apparent that we humans can rely upon our thinking in the absence of divine light. C. S. Lewis makes this point memorably in his essay, "Is Theology Poetry?"

I was taught at school, when I had done a sum, to "prove my answer." The proof or verification of my Christian answer to the cosmic sum is this. When I accept Theology I may find difficulties, at this point or that, in harmonising it with some particular truths which are imbedded in the mythical cosmology derived from science. But I can get in, or allow for, science as a whole. Granted that Reason is prior to matter and that the light of the primal Reason illuminates finite minds, I can understand how men should come, by observation and inference, to know a lot about the universe they live in. If, on the other hand, I swallow the scientific cosmology as a whole, then not only can I not fit in Christianity, but I cannot even fit in science. If minds are wholly dependent on brains, and brains on biochemistry, and biochemistry (in the long run) on the meaningless flux of the atoms, I cannot understand how the thought of those minds should have any more significance than the sound of the wind in the trees. And this is to me the final test. This is how I distinguish dreaming and waking. When I am awake I can, in some degree, account for and study my dream. The dragon that pursued me last night can be fitted into my waking world. I know that there are such things as dreams; I know that I had eaten an indigestible dinner; I know that a man of my reading might be expected to dream of dragons. But while in the nightmare, I could not have fitted in my waking experience. The waking world is judged more real because it can thus contain the dreaming world; the dreaming world is judged less real because it cannot contain the waking one. For the same reason, I am certain that in passing from the scientific points of view to the theological, I have passed from dream to waking. Christian theology can fit in science, art, morality, and the sub-Christian religions. The scientific point of view cannot fit in any of these things, not even science itself.

7 John 1:1-5.

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.⁸

The repeatedly demonstrated human tendency to miss divine illumination, however, is the reason the scriptures are so replete with admonitions to seek after and then to share the light of the Gospel, the light of Christ. “I am come a light into the world,” he taught, “that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness.”⁹

And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things.¹⁰

“Be thou an example of the believers,” wrote the apostle Paul to his young protégé Timothy, “in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.”¹¹ “Ye are the light of the world,” Jesus taught his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount:

A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.¹²

Anybody who has flown in airplanes often has surely had the experience of arriving at an airport on a dismal, gloomy day, sitting out on the runway in a drizzle, and then, only a few minutes into a flight, bursting through the clouds into a glorious, brilliantly sunlit world that had been there all the time, although unseen and forgotten.

During my mission in Switzerland, it was possible to go for days and even, it seemed, for weeks without seeing the Sun. It’s the price you pay for living in so green and beautiful a land; if you want sunshine all the time, you need a desert. (I’m sure that there’s a sacrament meeting speech in that, somewhere.) However, I served for seven months in the Bernese Oberland region, where I quickly learned that, if you could just get above what the Swiss called the *Nebelmeer*, or “fog sea,” things were often very different. Above the fog, the sun was shining. Soaring above

8 C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 138–140.

9 John 12:46.

10 Doctrine and Covenants 88:67.

11 1 Timothy 4:12.

12 Matthew 5:14–16.

the fog, on such days, were the Alps, islands rising above an ocean of cloud in seemingly endless, spectacular rows of stunning beauty.¹³

It's the duty of those who have received the light to try to pass it on. It's not merely our duty to God but our duty to our brothers and sisters. Sending his apostles out to "the lost sheep of Israel," Jesus asked them to "heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received," he said, "freely give."¹⁴

The Interpreter Foundation exists in order to share the light — insofar as we are able to do so — in order to remove those obscuring clouds, to lift people up to a place where they can see the marvelous vistas that are so often hidden in an often dark and dreary world. Here, on this Earth with its clouds and its cycles of day and night, "we know in part ... for now we see through a glass, darkly." But someday, "when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away." Then we shall see "face to face: now [we] know in part; but then shall [we] know even as also [we are] known."¹⁵ "We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts."¹⁶

John the Revelator, in his vision of the New Jerusalem, came to understand this when he saw that city, which (like the ancient Holy of Holies of the Temple) had the dimensions of a perfect cube:

And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal; ... And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal. ... And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; every several gate was of one pearl: and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass. And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the

13 My companions and I soon sought out tracting areas where we could go on such days. It was fun to show up at district meetings with suntans, with lines where our sunglasses had been.

14 Matthew 10:8.

15 1 Corinthians 13:9–12.

16 2 Peter 1:19.

sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it. And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there. And they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it. And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.¹⁷

Mere scholarship cannot build that city. It cannot bring people to it nor inscribe their names in the Lamb's book. But it can sometimes provide a small glimmer of the pending reality that John saw, and it can help to sustain the hope for it. The Interpreter Foundation was established to contribute to that purpose. We're grateful to all of those writers, editors, administrators, technical experts, donors, and readers who have contributed to the cause. Much has already been accomplished. We're determined, though, to do even better in the future.

Daniel C. Peterson (*PhD, University of California at Los Angeles*) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University and is the founder of the University's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, for which he served as editor-in-chief until mid-August 2013. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Mormon subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Eerdmans, 2007).

17 Revelation 21:10–11, 16, 21–27.