When Was The Sun Really Created?

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Rashi:

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“And God said: Let there be lights.”

[Rashi explains: The sun and the moon] were not created on the Fourth Day, but on the First Day. On the Fourth Day, God commanded that they be placed in the firmament of the heavens to fulfill their function.

In the following lines, I will analyze the events of the Fourth Day of Creation – the most misunderstood day in the entire Creation narrative. From childhood, we are taught that on the Fourth Day God “created” the sun, the moon, and the stars. However, this popular and simplistic interpretation does not align with the view of the vast majority of our Sages of Israel – including the rabbis of the Talmud, such as Ribbi Aqiba, and the classical commentators Rashi, Radak, Maimonides, and others.

To force the biblical text to mean that the sun was created on the Fourth Day would also require assuming miracles that the Torah never mentions – something that contradicts the philosophical approach of Maimonides and Radak, who maintain that God does not perform unnecessary miracles when a natural process suffices. Such a reading would lead to untenable conclusions: that the plants created on the Third Day could have existed without sunlight; that the Earth’s atmosphere, formed on the Second Day, functioned without solar energy; and

that the alternation of day and night – already mentioned on the First Day – occurred without the presence of the sun or the Earth's rotation. Above all, it would imply that a planet can exist without orbiting a star – something we now know to be impossible, since every known planet belongs to a solar system.

The process of Creation described in the Torah is gradual and systematic. It presents a sequence that, remarkably, can be understood today through the lens of modern scientific reasoning – with one essential difference: attribution. The Torah attributes it all to the Creator.

Once we understand that the sun was created on the First Day – or, more precisely, during the initial act of Creation – we must clarify what actually occurred on the Fourth Day. This is, without doubt, the most challenging part of the narrative.

In what follows, we will explore this subject in greater depth. The text is longer than usual, but I trust it will help us better understand the biblical account of Creation – and appreciate that the more we learn about our universe, the more we recognize the exquisite precision and wisdom of our Torah.

Genesis 1:14

"And God said (on the Fourth Day): Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years."

Jewish tradition holds that the luminaries – that is, the sun and the moon (and the planets of our solar system) – were not created on the Fourth Day but on the First Day of Creation. More precisely, God created the sun, the moon, and the entire universe during the initial act of Creation (Genesis 1:1). The Fourth Day, therefore, describes the final positioning of the sun and the moon in their respective celestial orbits (reqia

haShamayim).

This detail is not minor. Modern scientists emphasize that the Earth's temperature – which allows the oceans' water to remain in liquid form and sustain the evaporation/precipitation cycle that produces fresh water – depends on the planet's exquisitely precise distance from the sun.

Our verse states, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens," but the Divine command does not refer to the creation or appearance of the luminaries, but to their placement "in the firmament of the heavens," that is, in their final, stable orbit.

This is the view of most Talmudic rabbis. According to our Sages, including Rashi (Genesis 1:14), this verse refers to the final placement of the luminaries. Rashi explicitly cites the expression teliyat ha-me'orot – "the suspension of the luminaries" – meaning their hanging or positioning, not their creation.

One detail confirms that this verse does not refer to creation: the absence of the verb bara ("create"), which the Torah uses to describe acts of creation ex nihilo. Instead, the verse uses yehi ("let there be"), a term already used for the formation of the atmosphere (Genesis 1:6), where the text referred not to creation from nothing, but to the establishment of a natural system derived from preexisting matter.

Once placed in their definitive orbits, the luminaries were assigned a broader mission. No longer would they merely mark the alternation of day and night, as before; now they would regulate other, more complex units of time – months, seasons, and years. (The seven-day week, however, remains independent of any astronomical reference and was established directly by the Creator.)

Genesis 1:15

“And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth; and it was so.”

From their new, precisely calibrated distance from the Earth – what modern science calls the “galactic habitable zone” – the sunlight would benefit future life on Earth, which depends on a very specific and narrow range of temperatures (Radak, 1:14–15).

The sun’s mission is clearly stated in this verse: leha’ir al ha’aretz – to radiate energy and warmth in just the right measure to sustain life. The Earth’s average temperature of 14°C is astonishingly stable, within a narrow range that allows oceans neither to freeze (as on Mars or Jupiter) nor to evaporate (as on Venus).

The Earth’s oceans can thus maintain liquid water, and the planet’s climate system continues to produce rain, preserving and renewing the small portion – less than 3% – of fresh water on Earth. All this is possible thanks to the precise distance established by the Creator on the Fourth Day. This “habitable zone” was essential for the emergence of life on the Fifth Day.

Genesis 1:16

“And God made the two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; and the stars.”

The moon is 400 times smaller than the sun, yet 400 times closer to Earth – a ratio that allows them to appear almost the same size from our perspective. Its gravitational pull stabilizes the Earth’s tilt and elliptical orbit, which in turn produces the seasons and ocean tides – both crucial for maintaining a stable climate and supporting life in the seas.

Genesis 1:17

“And God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth.”

The biblical commentators explained that leha’ir al ha’aretz – “to give light upon the earth” – should also be understood as “for the benefit of the earth.” Siftei Chakhamim (a commentary on Rashi) notes that the luminaries were positioned for the benefit of the world’s inhabitants (olam), not merely for the planet itself (eretz), which does not require such delicately balanced solar energy.

This idea aligns with the view that during the Second and Third Days, a stronger solar light – directed by the Creator – operated to form the atmosphere, separate land from water, and shape the Earth’s surface. But by the Fourth Day, once these geological processes were completed, the sun was repositioned in a new orbit designed to sustain life and directly benefit animals and human beings.

This concept was developed by the Italian commentator Seforno (1475–1550) in his explanation of Genesis 1:15: “Now [on the Fourth Day] a balanced light (or memuzag) reaches the Earth from the luminaries, in the right measure for its inhabitants.”

In summary, the text reports two actions on the Fourth Day (Genesis 1:16–17). Yet for our rabbis, these two verses describe one continuous act: (Gen. 1:16) “God made [=set in their final position] the sun and the moon,” and (Gen. 1:17) “placed them in the firmament of the heavens,” meaning He established their final orbits from which they would radiate a balanced, life-sustaining light.

Genesis 1:18

“To rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.”

Rabbi Menashe ben Israel (1604–1657) masterfully illustrated the stages of Creation with a metaphor. He wrote that the Creator is the architect, builder, and interior designer of our world. His project – Planet Earth – resembles the construction of a house:

- First, God creates the basic materials, the skeleton and walls (Genesis 1:1–2).
- Second, on the Second Day, He builds the roof and the plumbing system that ensures a constant supply of water (Genesis 1:6–7).
- Third, on the Third Day, He constructs the floor and a system of bioengineering that provides a steady source of food and oxygen: vegetation (Genesis 1:9–14).
- Fourth, on the Fourth Day, once everything is ready, He installs the electrical system – the light, heating, and air conditioning.

The house is now habitable. The structure, roof, floor, and all essential systems are in place and functioning perfectly. The table is set, awaiting the honored guest: man.

Genesis 1:19

“And there was evening and there was morning, the Fourth Day.”

And on the Fifth Day, God created life.