

THE ORDER OF DISTINCTIONS OF CREATION

The order of distinctions of creation refers to the sequence in which God created the different components of the physical universe. It deals with esoteric questions such as, “How did physical matter emerge out of nothingness? Was it begotten of a spiritual substance?” A closer look at the mechanisms by which God created the world gives us insights into the meaning of the resurrection, the structure of this world, and the hope of the World to Come.

HaMavdil

Jewish mysticism teaches that, before God could create this world, he needed to conceal himself and, in a sense, limit his infinite self. The universe itself can exist only because God has withdrawn himself from it, so to speak. If God did not conceal his presence from time and space, there would be no room for time and space as we understand it to exist. We call this concept “the concealment of God.” It means that God has concealed his infinite presence from this finite universe so that this finite universe has space to be a real universe of cause and effect.

By a process of such constrictions, limitations, and concealments, he created the lower world of our reality. Initially, the created universe existed only in potential. That potential was the basic stuff from which he created the physical universe, but before the six days of creation, it existed in a state of chaos as a formless and void emptiness. Within the formlessness of the primordial state, there was no distinction between one thing and another. There was no up or down, inside or outside, light or dark, energy or matter. Existence lacked any definition. The Bible says, “The earth was nothingness and emptiness, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). The darkness over the deep and the primordial water symbolize the chaotic formlessness of the universe at that time. Everything consisted of a single substance, so to speak: the colorlessness of darkness and the shapelessness of water. The Spirit of God hovered over the water like a master craftsman surveying the raw materials for the project he is about to begin. Creation started as God began to separate one thing out from another.

God is *HaMavdil*, a Hebrew word that means “The One Who Makes a Distinction.” At the end of every Sabbath, we say this blessing to mark out the end of the holy day and the beginning of common (normal) time:

Blessed are you, O LORD, our God, King of the universe, who makes a distinction between what is holy and what is common, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations, between the seventh day and the six days of creation. Blessed are you, O LORD, who makes a distinction between holy and common.

Why do we call God “the One Who Makes a Distinction”? Because God created everything that exists through “the order of distinctions of creation.” In the story of the six days of creation, God creates the universe by separating one thing from another, placing them opposite one another,

and creating a distinction between them. In this universe, everything exists in a state of distinction.

Opposites Create Definition

On the first day God said, “Let there be light,” and “God separated the light from the darkness.” When you think about it, if there was no such thing as darkness, we wouldn’t know what light is. It would be like trying to explain to a fish what “dry” means. For the concept of light to have any meaning at all, there needs to be darkness too. Our ability to see an object or discern a color depends upon the diminishment of light. If we saw only light all the time, we would be blind, unable to distinguish color, shape, and hue. Try staring into the sun for a while and you will better understand the concept.

The same principle works the other way. If there was no such thing as light, darkness would not mean anything. Darkness is only the absence of light, so if light does not exist, it cannot be absent. If all that we ever saw was complete darkness, we wouldn’t know that we were in the dark because the concept of not-dark would have no meaning. In order to create light and in order for light to have any meaning, it was necessary to also allow for the existence of darkness, that is, the absence of light.

This very simply concept explains the concept of the order of distinctions. It’s the whole principle of creation. More than creating things out of nothing, God preferred to create by separating one thing out from another. Even time came into being through this process. Prior to the separation of light and dark, time did not yet exist. By separating light from darkness and calling the light “day” and the darkness “night,” God created a sequence distinct events, setting the progress of time in motion. From our perspective, a timeless world would be a static existence in which there no change occurs.

A World of Opposites

When God created the world, he wanted it to be a real world, not an artificial universe where nothing bad ever happens. Try to imagine such a place. It’s impossible for the universe as we know it and understand it to function if nothing bad or unpleasant ever happened at any time to anyone. Just as light can have no meaning without darkness, this world could have no positive quality without the negative qualities.

God is good. He wanted good to exist in the world. But for good to mean anything at all, there must also be the opposite of good. If there was only good, and no evil, good would not be a thing. God is truth. He wanted truth to be found in the world. But if truth is going to mean anything, there has to be untruth in the world too. God is love. He wanted love to exist in the world. But for love to mean anything at all, there must also be the opposite of love.

Without wet there is no dry. Without cold there is no warm. Without small there is no big. Without old there would be no young. Without male there is no female. Everything finds meaning and definition relative to its opposite.

God declared that everything he made was good except for one thing. When he made Adam without an opposite, he said, “It’s not good for man to be alone. I will make him an equivalent opposite (*ezer kennegdo*)” (Genesis 2:18). So he made the female.

During the six days of creation, God blessed his creatures and told them to be fruitful and to multiply. Even God’s blessing has its opposite. After Adam’s sin, God cursed the serpent who enticed the human beings, and he cursed ground to produce thorns and thistles. Whenever God offers a blessing, he also offers its opposite.

I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. (Deuteronomy 30:19)

This principle also explains why bad things happen in your life. Of course, we don’t like it when bad things happen. Nobody wants to get hurt, to be sick, to be sad, to be lonely, to feel rejected. But for every negative experience there is an opposite. If it wasn’t possible to be hurt, you would never be whole. If it wasn’t possible to be sick, you would never be healthy. For example, have you ever been really sick and then returned to normal health. Only after being sick do you realize how tremendous it feels to have your normal health.

It’s the same with all life’s ups and downs. If there weren’t downs, there would be no ups. Without grief we would have no joy. When hard times befell Job and his wife, his wife advised him to curse God and commit suicide. Job replied, “You are talking like a foolish person. Would it be fair to accept only the good from God and not accept the bad?” (Job 2:10).

Life and death work the same way. Nothing is worse than losing someone we love, and what can be worse than death? The Bible calls death “the last enemy.” But even death serves an important function in this world. Without death, life does not have any real meaning. It would just go on forever, and we would take it for granted. There would be no motive to achieve anything, to improve, or to love. Without fear of loss, nothing would be valuable. It’s death that makes life precious.

This universe exists in opposites. If you live in this universe, you can expect to experience both good and bad, both happiness and sorrow, both health and sickness, both love and loss, both life and death. Even if you are a disciple. That’s what makes this a real world, and it’s what makes it worth living in this world.

Heaven and Earth

On the second day, God created heaven and earth when he “separated the waters which were below the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse.” The Hebrew word for water is *mayim*. The Hebrew word for sky is *shamayim*. You can hear the relationship between the two words. *Shamayim* can be translated as “sky” or as “heaven.” That doesn’t mean that the heavens are literally made of water. The distinction between the waters above and the waters below implies a separation of the primordial potential into the domains of heaven and earth.

If there was no sky above us, we would not have any sense of being on the ground. Imagine trying to explain the concept of “sky” to an earthworm that has never left the ground. He doesn’t know he’s in the ground because it’s the only world he knows.

Even though God does not literally dwell in the sky, we metaphorically speak of heaven as the place he resides. It makes sense. The sky is full of beauty and wonders that we cannot reach, and it stretches on for what appears to be infinity. In this way, it’s a good metaphor for God’s dwelling place and the spiritual existence that transcends our finite one on the ground.

Spiritual and Physical

The separation of the waters above from the waters below and the difference between heaven and earth alludes to another important distinction in our universe: the distinction between the spiritual and the physical. We live in a world that contains both spiritual beings and physical beings, but they exist as opposites. Most of the time, the spiritual side of the world is invisible to the physical side of the world. The stuff of physicality includes matter and energy and everything we can perceive with our five senses. If you can see it, hear it, smell it, taste it, or touch it, it’s physical and part of the physical world. The spiritual world is beyond our five senses, but that does not make it any less real. Just as there are physical beings like people, domesticated animals, birds, and wild beasts, there are also spiritual beings like angels, archangels, demons, powers, spirits, and souls.

Human beings are made of stuff from both heaven and earth. We have both a spiritual part and a physical part. God made Adam out of the dirt of the ground, but he breathed the spirit of life into him. Because we contain some of the heavenly in us, we never feel completely at home on earth. It’s as if something is missing. Every person feels that strange sense of longing for what we know not. We embody the distinction between spiritual and physical.

Yeshua teaches us about how to attend to the spiritual side of existence, and by doing that, he lifts up our physical side too. In the resurrection, the physical and the spiritual will merge together into a new creature that is no longer separated into two different states. Our physical bodies will be recreated into bodies which are simultaneously both physical and spiritual.

Land and Sea, Sun and Moon

On the third day God separated between the waters and the dry land. He gathered the waters and called them “sea,” and he called the dry parts “land.” If he had not done so, there would have been no such thing as the sea because the whole earth would have been covered with water.

On the fourth day he created sun and moon “to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:18). The sun and the moon represent opposite domains of day and night. The movements of the sun, moon, and stars mark off time: hours, days, seasons, years, and appointed times. The marking off of days became important on the seventh day. After six days of creation, God rested on the seventh day and declared it holy. That created yet another

set of distinctions: the distinction between the seventh day of rest and the six days of labor and the distinction between holy and profane.

The Six Days and the Seventh Day

God rested on the seventh day. He also asks the Jewish people to rest on the seventh day as testimony that he made the universe in six days and rested on the seventh. Why did God rest on the seventh day? Was it because he was tired out from making the universe? Of course not. He rested on the seventh day because the work was finished. The Hebrew word *shabbat* is better translated as “to cease” than “to rest.” God ceased from creating because the creation was finished, not because he was tired and need to rest.

By ceasing on the seventh day, God distinguished between creating and not-creating. When he commanded the Jewish people to also cease from creating on the seventh day, he invited them to experience a little bit of his state of being—the state in which things are finished and complete and do not need to be further modified, corrected, improved, or altered.

Imagine a person who was constantly writing a novel. So long as he continued working on the novel, the novel was never finished. Now imagine that the person completes the novel. The novel is finished. Not for the characters inside the novel. To them, life continues, and anything is possible. But to the novelist, the story is already complete and already perfect. Inside the created world, nothing is ever finished. It’s like a novel that never ends. It’s always being written. Everything is always changing. That’s our perspective. But things look different from God’s perspective. God never changes. The world is finished and complete—he dwells in the world of rest. It’s like he has already written the book and read it too.

Disciples of Yeshua look forward to the day when we will enter God’s presence in the world of rest where all imperfection is perfected and all incompleteness is completed. That world is called the World to Come. The sages call it the world that is completely Shabbat. This is what the Bible means when it says, “A Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God. For one who has entered his rest has ceased from his work, just as God did with his” (Hebrews 4:9-10).

Disciples of Yeshua experience a little taste of that world of rest when we abide in Yeshua. He says, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest ... and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28).

The Holy and the Normal

Not only did God cease on the seventh day, he also declared it holy. By declaring it holy, he made another distinction: he distinguished between holy and normal. When something is “holy,” that means it has been set aside from the normal and ceremonially reserved for the LORD. The seventh day is holy because God set it apart from the other days of the week and reserved it for himself. The opposite of holy is not something evil or bad. There’s nothing wrong with being normal. The other six days, such as Tuesdays, are not evil, they are normal. But the Sabbath belongs to God. It’s not a normal day because it’s the LORD’s day. That’s the difference

between holy and normal. By making the Sabbath holy, he distinguished between the seventh day and other six day of the week and he distinguished between holy and common.

Israel and the Nations

God made a similar distinction between Israel and the rest of the nations. He did it at Mount Sinai when he invited the Jewish people to enter a covenant with him.

Now then, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you will be my trophy from among all the peoples. Even though the whole earth belongs to me, you will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:5-6)

He gave the Sabbath to the Jewish people as a sign of his everlasting covenant with them. That's why we call the Jewish people "the chosen people." God chose the nation of Israel to be his holy people.

Disciples of Yeshua are also involved in the holiness business, even if they are not Jewish. We are made holy by God's Spirit, called to be holy, and called to live holy live. The disciple's call to holiness is not about the functions of ceremonial holiness like that of a Levitical Priest (or even like the Jewish people's ceremonial obligations) but rather a call to moral and ethical purity which sets the sons and daughters of God apart from the rest of the world:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy, how I am holy." (1 Peter 1:14-16)

That's why we can't engage in all the same behaviors as the rest of the world. We are supposed to be different. We should be set apart from the rest of the world. We are not supposed to be like normal people. When disciples of Yeshua conduct themselves in holiness, they participate in the priestly mission of Israel and the chosen status of the Jewish people as a people separated out from the nations to become God's possession. It doesn't mean that they become Jewish, but they nonetheless become part of the people of God:

But you are a chosen family, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you can declare the greatness of Him who called you out of darkness and into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

The World to Come

Everything exists in distinction against its opposite. Even this world has an opposite. In the World to Come, the order of distinctions of creation are reconciled and reversed.

For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things will not be remembered or come to mind. (Isaiah 65:17)

In this world, we distinguish between day and night and between light and dark, and the sun and the moon mark off time. In the world to come, however, “There will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 22:5). There will be no time because that world never fades or changes. It is the world of ceasing from work and the world of rest—forever young and forever perfect. The apostles refer to life in this body and in this world as “the imperfect,” but life in the resurrection and the World to Come is called “the perfect.”

When the Perfect comes, the partial will pass away. (1 Corinthians 13:10)

To create this world, God separates between heaven and earth. In the world to come, the heavens and the earth pass away. Then God recreates them as a new heaven and a new earth. Heaven descends to unite with the earth in the form of the city of New Jerusalem. Then “the dwelling place of God is among men, and he will dwell among them” (Revelation 21:3).

God separated between dry land and water to make land and sea, but in the world to come, it says, “the sea is no more” (Revelation 21:1). In this world, God has separated between clean and unclean but in the world to come, “nothing unclean shall ever come into it” (Revelation 21:27). In this world, God has distinguished between Israel and the nations, but in the world to come, “nations will walk by its light” and enter its gates. “Its gates will never be closed” (Revelation 21:24-25), and the tree of life will yield fruit and leaves “for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:2).

In this world, God sets before us blessing or curse and tells us to choose blessing, but in the world to come, “there will be nor more curse” (Revelation 22:3). This world has meaning for us only because it exists in opposites. That is why we must endure mourning, sorrow, pain, and death, but in the World to Come, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will be no more death; there will be no more mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

Isaiah describes the future reward of the righteous as something that has neither been seen nor imagined in this world:

For since the beginning of the world it has not been heard, nor given ear, neither has an eye seen, O God, beside you, what he has prepared for the one that waits on him.
(Isaiah 64:4)

The World to Come is beyond human ability to grasp or understand because we live in a world defined by opposites. The World to Come perfectly fuses the spiritual and the physical in a way we have never experienced. Unlike this world, it’s an imperishable world, in which there is no decay or corruption, no flaw or impermanence, and because of that, it’s impossible for us to comprehend it. Just as a fish cannot imagine dry, and a person who has never seen cannot imagine colors, we cannot imagine a world that is not defined by distinctions and opposites. But

in the world to come, we will know what it is to know God and to be known by him, and there will be no separation.

I will give you what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no hand has touched, what has not arisen in the human heart. (*Thomas 17*)

As it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. (1 Corinthians 2:9–10)