



SMALL *AND* INSIGNIFICANT?

By Michael J. Caba

When we consider the starry host, the transcendent and overpowering grandeur on display above us can actually make us humans feel quite small at times, and in comparison with the cosmos, we truly are small—in fact, extremely small. Moreover, modern astronomical instruments (e.g., the Hubble and JWST telescopes) have increased the human family’s sense of the immense scale of space by enabling us to peer into the far reaches of the observable universe. Indeed, these tools add a whole new punch to the attestation of our diminutive nature when assessed against the entirety of creation. Consider, for example, the JWST deep field image shown in this article. To produce this image, in which nearly every speckle of light is a distant galaxy, a very small speckle of the sky was imaged for many hours. When one considers that this picture only represents an area of the sky covered by a grain of sand at arm’s length, the total vastness of space and our unimaginably small stature within it begin to dawn on our earthbound minds.

Yet, even though we are rightly described as small when compared with the vast reaches of the physical cosmos, another word that is commonly used in these types of discussions should be ardently avoided—specifically, *insignificant*. An example of said usage is noted in the following quote by a prominent scientist who elaborates on the *insignificant* nature of the earth and, by implication, its inhabitants: “Who are we? We find that we live on an insignificant planet of a humdrum star lost between two spiral arms in the outskirts of a galaxy which is a member of a sparse cluster of galaxies, tucked away in some forgotten corner of a universe in which there are far more galaxies than people.”¹

Modern science is, of course, correct when it teaches us that the earth and the people on it are small if measured by physical extent; in terms of size we are no match for the starry host. Yet—and this is of extreme importance—this does not by any means require that

the earth and its inhabitants are insignificant, or that we are *lost* or *forgotten*. In essence, physical size and inherent significance are two different concepts, and it is a fallacy to conflate the two.



Deep field image taken by the James Webb Space Telescope. Credit: ESA/ Webb, NASA & CSA, G. Östlin, P. G. Perez-Gonzalez, J. Melinder, the JADES Collaboration, the MIDIS collaboration, M. Zamani (ESA/Webb). <https://esaweb.org/images/potm2507a/>.

Size measures our extent in three-dimensional space, whereas *significance* is a value-laden word indicating worth or importance. Truly, science has no manner of instrument that can teach us that we are insignificant, nor is there any instrumentality able to determine that we are either lost or forgotten—and it is hubristic overreach to proclaim otherwise. These types of judgments—insignificant, lost, forgotten—are actually an expression of an underlying atheistic worldview masquerading as science.

What then can we say about humanity that reflects both our small size and yet our true significance? Interestingly enough, the Scriptures directly address this very conundrum. Note in the following quote that King David the psalmist is awestruck by both the grandeur of God's heavenly creation and the *significant* place the Creator has given to mankind.

“Mystic Mountain” within the Carina Nebula. Credit: NASA, ESA, M. Livio and the Hubble 20th Anniversary Team (STScI). <https://esahubble.org/images/heic1007a/>.



When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?

You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet:
all flocks and herds,
and the animals of the wild,
the birds in the sky,
and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.

LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
(Ps 8:3–9 NIV)



NGC 1672, a spiral galaxy. Credit: NASA, ESA. <https://esahubble.org/images/heic0706a/>.

Indeed, when we consider the “heavens, the work of [God’s] fingers, the moon and the stars,” we can be awestruck. But notice that when combined with the testimony of Scripture, our awe leads us to praise the Creator because of His *elevation* of humanity to a place of distinction. We are not relegated to the dustbin of insignificance.

Sadly, many people lack a complete picture of the cosmos and our God-ordained place within it, and thus experience significant despair. The atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell, when considering the condition of modern humans without God, said, “only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.”² However, those who are enlightened by both human observations and the testimony of Scripture have a full-orbed and inspiring view of reality.

Consider also that removing God from the picture leads not only to despair but also to the correlated step of demoting humanity to the category of “insignificant.” In fact, our special place in the cosmos is tied directly to our relationship to the Creator, for Scripture teaches us that mankind is made in the image of God. If you remove God, there is no such thing as the image of God, and humanity is reduced to just another animal species, perhaps more capable in many ways than other creatures, but not qualitatively unique. To be sure, Scripture teaches us to respect animals in such verses as Proverbs 12:10, which says, “The righteous care for the needs of their animals.” However, humans are an altogether unique and significant class of beings as image bearers of the divine.

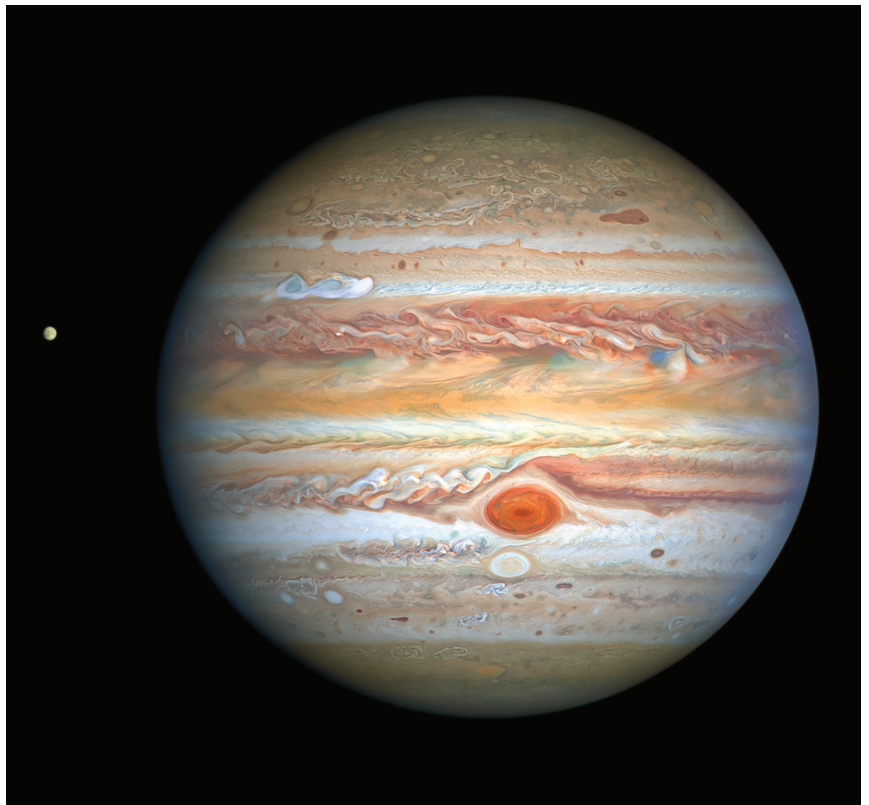
Once again, let us meditate on the great truths of Scripture. Of particular importance are mankind’s God-given rights described in the Bible, which are based on the inherent worth and significance of every person. James, for example, calls for respect toward our fellow humans because we are made in God’s likeness: “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be” (3:9–10). Indeed, humans have inherent worth and are due considerable respect because they carry God’s likeness; they are, in fact, *very* significant. There is, of course, a dark side to humanity—our collective sin nature—but even so, an inherent significance resides in every human being.

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (Gn 1:27) §

Endnotes

¹ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (Random House, 1980), 236, Kindle.

² Bertrand Russell, “The Free Man’s Worship,” *Independent Review* 1 (October 1903–January 1904): 416, https://www.google.com/books/edition/_/DfMQi_WAgqEC.



Planet Jupiter with Europa, one of its moons. Credit: NASA, ESA, A. Simon (Goddard Space Flight Center), and M. H. Wong (University of California, Berkeley) and the OPAL team. <https://esahubble.org/images/heic2017a/>.