

**SPEAKING OF MIRACLES:
WHAT EVER HAPPENED WITH THE SUN AND THE MOON?
HERMENEUTICS AND INTERPRETATION IN JOSHUA 10**

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ABSTRACT

Proposals for explaining the sun's and the moon's stoppage in Joshua 10:12–13 are myriad. Traditionally, Biblical interpreters have affirmed that a miracle of colossal proportions took place, one in which the earth stopped still on its axis (to use modern scientific parlance). On the other extreme and in the wake of the Enlightenment, many deny that any miracles can take place at all, let alone one of such a magnitude. Many naturalistic explanations have arisen, as well, involving a solar eclipse, a refraction of light, or a rain of meteorites. Proposals involving ancient Near Eastern omens also have been advanced, both from anti-supernatural and evangelical perspectives.

This paper reviews the different options from the standpoint of hermeneutics, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses, and the philosophical presuppositions behind each one. It then advances another solution, one that takes seriously the phenomena of the text, including matters of grammar, genre, and actual assertions in the text.

This solution is set within a supernaturalistic framework: God can and does work miracles. It argues that there was indeed a miracle at the battle of Gibeon: a deadly hailstorm that killed more of Israel's foes than Israel's swords did (v. 11). The miracle was such a matter of astonishment that the writer of Joshua pauses to reflect on the wonder of it all, by breaking into a poetic affirmation that even the sun and moon were involved in this (vv. 12b–13).

Hermeneutically, this solution places the interpretation of Joshua 10:12–13 firmly in line with two established principles of Hebrew poetry. First, poetic texts are sometimes used in Old Testament narrative books as devices to make us reflect on the wonder and awesome nature of God's mighty acts. Second, poetic texts make freer use of figurative language than do prose texts. Both of these principles are illustrated with examples from elsewhere in the Old Testament, and they are shown to be operative here in Joshua 10, as well.

I. INTRODUCTION

The poetic fragment in Josh 10:12–13 has attracted disproportional attention for such a small bit of text, due to the extraordinary events involving the sun and the moon described therein, the identity and nature of the Book of Jashar, and other considerations of text and grammar. However, the nature of vv. 12b–13 *as poetry*, and the implications of this, have not been adequately explored. When the poetic nature of the passage is accounted for, including its function in the narrative in which it is embedded, and it is compared with other, similar texts, the passage reveals its intentions in clear and straightforward ways. I argue two main points: (1) that all of v. 13 is poetic, not just v. 13a, and (2) that vv. 12b–13b are a poetic reflection on the battle described in vv. 6–11, in the same fashion that the poem in Exodus 15 is a poetic (hymnic) reflection on the deliverance at the Red Sea (narrated in Exodus 14) or that Judges 5 is a poetic (hymnic) reflection on the victory over the Canaanites at Mt. Tabor (narrated in Judges 4).

I shall begin by placing this passage into its larger narrative context. This is the story of the battle of Gibeon, which is told in 10:1–27. A southern coalition of kings attacked Gibeon, which had made a treaty of peace with Israel (chap. 9), and Israel came to its defense. The chapter consists of four divisions, as follows:

- (1) The Southern Coalition Gathers Against Gibeon (10:1–5)
- (2) The Battle of Gibeon: Stage One (10:6–11)
- (3) The Battle of Gibeon: Stage Two (10:12–15)
- (4) The Southern Coalition Kings Killed (10:16–27)

II. THE BATTLE OF GIBEON: STAGE ONE (10:6–11)

Our interest in the battle account lies in the two stages recounted in vv. 6–15. The two stages are parallel to each other: vv. 6–11 and 12–15. They are not successive stages, but parallel ones: they both describe different aspects of the battle of Gibeon. The picture in both sections is of a great and complete victory, with different facets: (1) a successful ambush (vv. 9–10), (2) a deadly hailstorm (v. 11), and (3) even the involvement of the sun and the moon (vv. 12–13). When all was said and done, the wonder of God's listening and responding to a man's appeal stands out (v. 14), showing that God was sensitive to his people.

The first section begins with the Gibeonites appealing to Joshua under terms of the treaty made in chap. 9, and Joshua responding (vv. 6–7). God threw the coalition into a panic, and there was a great slaughter by the Israelites (v. 10). Then, in the retreat, more were killed by a hailstorm than had died in the military encounter (v. 11).

10:6–7 The Gibeonites appealed urgently to Joshua for protection, because of the impressive forces arrayed against them (v. 6). Because of the treaty that they had just concluded with the Israelites, they were able to make such an appeal, and, as such, this episode is a test of Israel's commitment and faithfulness to its word. Joshua did just as the Gibeonites requested (v. 7), coming up from Gilgal with an elite force against the Amorite coalition. In v. 8, God encouraged Joshua with words about his presence, which echo closely the words he had spoken to Joshua at the outset of the book.

Then, Joshua and his force marched all night and took the Amorites by surprise (v. 9). However, it was God—and God alone—who took the decisive actions against the enemies (v. 10). Every verb in this verse is singular, indicating that he alone *confused, struck, pursued, and struck* them.¹ Certainly the fighting force with Joshua (v. 7) was actually involved in this—notice the reference in v. 11 to the Israelites’ swords killing people—but, here, the author has chosen to ignore this fact and to focus instead on God’s direct involvement as Israel’s warrior. The land and its people were God’s to give, and he did so here. He alone were to receive the credit for this.

10:11 Whereas v. 10 summarizes the victory over the Amorites in general terms, with God receiving the credit, v. 11 gives more details, and God is again credited with the victory, but now the means by which he gave the victory is specified: a great deluge of hailstones that killed more people than the Israelite swords did. The verse builds to a climax even in the choice of words for the stones. The first time they are referred to, the expression is general: “great stones from heaven” (*ʔābānīm gēdōlōt min-hāššāmayim*). The second time, however, it is more specific: “hailstones” (*ʔabnê-habbārād*).²

III. THE BATTLE OF GIBEON: STAGE TWO (10:12–15)

The second section describing the battle of Gibeon is introduced with the disjunctive adverb *ʔāz*, translated “then” (meaning “at that time”). It introduces important action that took place at the same time as that of vv. 6–11, not something that happened later.³ This is the function of *ʔāz* when it is followed by a prefixed (imperfect) verb form, as it is here.⁴ That is, somehow, the hailstorm of v. 11 and the phenomena of vv. 12–13 either were one and the same thing or, as I argue below, they are part of only one set of events. In either case, however, the point is that vv. 12–13 do not describe a *new* set of events that *followed* the hailstorm.

The author’s emphasis in the section comes in v. 14. He marvels, not so much at the miracle or sign of v. 13, but rather at the fact that God heard and responded to the

¹ The NRSV’s and NIV’s interpretive rendering has *Israel* defeating the Gibeonites and pursuing them. However, the subject of the verb “pursued” is “he,” not “Israel.” There is some textual evidence for plural verbs in the second half of the verse—the Old Greek, Syriac, and a Targum all have “And they pursued... and they struck”—but the consonantal MT is singular. The Vulgate (Latin) also has singular verbs here and “the Lord” is the subject: “And he pursued by the way of the ascent of Beth-horon and he smote as far as Azekah and Makkedah.”

² A midsummer hailstorm would have been a rarity, rendering miraculous assistance in this instance. There are only 5–8 days of hail per year in the coastal plain, mostly in midwinter. See Boling, *Joshua*, 282.

³ *ʔāz* means “then, at that time,” but “not in the sense of ‘sequentially, next’” (*DCH* 1:167).

D. J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 3 vols. to date (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993–).

⁴ “The action introduced by *ʔāz* is to be thought of as having taken place before the completion of the preceding action and in this sense the non-perfective describes relative action” (*IBHS* § 31.6.3b). See further I. Rabinowitz, “*ʔāz* Followed by Imperfect Verb-Form in Preterite Contexts: A Redactional Device in Biblical Hebrew,” *Vetus Testamentum* 34 (1984), 53–62. Rabinowitz states (p. 54) that “referring to the foregoing context of narrated past events, *ʔāz* + imperfect indicates this context as approximately the time when, the time or circumstances in the course of which, or the occasion upon which the action ... went forward” and he translates it as “this was when...” (see p. 60 on Josh 10:12 specifically).

voice of a man (v. 14), interceding dramatically for Israel because of Joshua's petition (v. 12)! There had never been such a day, nor would there be ever again. The two previous miracles on Israel's behalf—the stopping of the waters of the Jordan and the victory over Jericho—had been at God's initiative; this time, it was in response to one man's petition.

A. Preliminary Questions

Before proceeding, we must address a few preliminary questions in vv. 12–13. (1) One question arises from the reference to an extra-biblical source in v. 13—the book of Jashar—and it concerns the extent of the quotation, if any, from that book. Many scholars are silent on the issue, either not considering the question or else appearing to assume that the quotation consists of the poetic lines in vv. 12b–13a: Joshua's words to the sun and moon and the confirmation that this happened.⁵ Others understand the quotation to be much longer, beginning immediately after the verse's opening words, which are “Then Joshua spoke to the LORD,” and including all of the rest of vv. 12–15.⁶ This has the decided advantage of accounting for the insertion of v. 15, which is out of place chronologically and which is repeated again verbatim in v. 43, although there are other, equally credible ways of dealing with this problem (see on v. 15). Other scholars have proposed that the quotation from the book of Jashar immediately follows—not precedes—the reference to it, in v. 13b.⁷ In the only other reference to the Book of Jashar in the Hebrew versions of the OT (2 Sam. 1:18), the quotation follows the reference to this book. (In the Greek versions of 1 Kgs. 8:13, the quotation precedes it.) I have argued for this understanding in print.

It may be, however, that there is no actual quotation of the book of Jashar at all, only a reference to it. The grammatical pattern introducing this book—“Is it not written upon (=in) the book of Jashar?”—is the same as that found numerous times in the books of 1–2 Kings referring to such sources as “the book of the annals of the kings of Israel” and “the book of the annals of the kings of Judah.” There, the language is the same—“Are they not written upon (=in) the book of the annals of the kings of Israel/Judah?”—and yet no one supposes that the books of 1–2 Kings are in those instances actually quoting selections verbatim from these sources. On the contrary, the references in 1–2 Kings show that the reader may go read further in these sources of the deeds of the various kings, and that presumably what is written in 1–2 Kings can also be found there.⁸

Concerning the nature of the book of Jashar, it was an extra-biblical book known from only two references in the Hebrew Bible (Josh. 10:12; 2 Sam. 1:18), and a third

⁵ The NIV's layout of vv. 12b–13a shows this, and Butler understands it so (*Joshua*, 117). Goslinga understands the quote to begin earlier, and that only the words at the beginning of the verse—“Then Joshua spoke to the LORD”—are not from the book of Jashar (*Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, 100 and n. 80). The reader should note that the NIV's dynamic equivalence rendering places these opening words in the middle of the verse, not at the beginning.

⁶ Keil, *Book of Joshua*, 107–8; Woudstra, *Joshua*, 174.

⁷ Howard, *Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*, 88; John H. Walton, “Joshua 10:12–15 and Mesopotamian Celestial Omen Texts,” in A. R. Millard, J. K. Hoffmeier, D. W. Baker, eds., *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in its Near Eastern Context* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 187.

⁸ On these sources in 1–2 Kings and 1–2 Chronicles, see Howard, *Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*, 174–75, 238–42.

time in the Greek text of 1 Kgs. 8:13. The reason for its inclusion here is probably not because the author of Joshua was using it as his only source for the information. Rather, he was stating, in effect, “If you don’t believe it, go read about it in the book of Jashar. Even that book has a record of this event.”

(2) A *second question* that arises here concerns who is speaking “in the presence of Israel” (v. 12). Here, a literal translation of the beginning of the verse is necessary, because most Bible versions rearranges and obscures several words:

“At that time, Joshua spoke to the LORD, on the day of the LORD’s giving the Amorite [before] the sons of Israel, *and he said* [in] the eyes of Israel....”

Most interpreters understand the speaker to be Joshua, and, on the face of it, this is the most natural reading of the Hebrew. However, at least two issues should give us pause in this matter. *First*, the subject of the verb *wayyōmer* “*and he said*” is not specified, and it is at least possible that the LORD, not Joshua, is the speaker; the grammar would certainly allow for this, even if it is not the first probability.⁹ *Second*, even though the text says that Joshua “spoke *to the LORD*,” the words spoken were actually addressed directly to the sun and the moon, not to the LORD. Many commentators have noted this, and some have attributed this to layers of tradition that have been stitched together in this passage,¹⁰ while others have stated that Joshua was addressing the sun and the moon through the power of the LORD, or that he in actuality was praying to the LORD.¹¹ However, this tension would be resolved much more easily if it were the LORD speaking, rather than Joshua. This suggestion is made more plausible when we remember that the LORD is a far more appropriate subject than Joshua to have addressed the sun and moon directly with a command such as this: he created them and he was their sovereign (Gen 1:14–17; Isa 40:26; Jer 31:35). If this is the case, then we have in these verses evidence of *the LORD* taking the initiative and demonstrating his great power over these natural phenomena, speaking directly to them, ordering them to obey his command.

In line with this, the end of v. 14 states that “Surely the LORD was fighting for Israel,” which can shed some light on a statement in v. 13 (usually read “until the nation avenged itself on its enemies”). If the LORD, in his capacity as their sovereign, commanded the sun and the moon to take their positions, and if, as we have noted in connection with vv. 10–11, the LORD was ultimately solely responsible for doing battle with the Amorites, then here too it should not surprise us if the LORD—rather than the Israelites—is described as taking vengeance upon his enemies. This is precisely what the Old Greek states, which reads in v. 13: “until God [*ho theos*] took vengeance on their enemies.” If this is the original reading,¹² then we see a consistent approach throughout the entire text: the LORD was the one who threw them into a panic (v. 10), who sent the

⁹ This suggestion is made by Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel*, 127–28. The Old Greek adds “Joshua” as subject of “he said,” and it is followed by the NIV and many versions and commentators, but the Hebrew and the Vulgate are indefinite.

¹⁰ E.g., Soggin, *Joshua*, 122; Butler, *Joshua*, 116–17; Nelson, *Joshua*, 142.

¹¹ E.g., Keil, *Book of Joshua*, 108; Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, 99; Woudstra, *Joshua*, 174.

¹² Michael J. Gruenthaner argues that it is (“Two Sun Miracles of the Old Testament,” *CBQ* 10 [1948], 271–90 [the relevant pages are 278–79]).

hailstorm and struck down the Amorites (v. 11), who commanded the sun and the moon to obey him (v. 12), who avenged himself upon Israel's enemies (v. 13); in short, the LORD fought for Israel (v. 14). Even if we do not add the word "God" to the text (v. 12), we can still see him as the subject of the verb "take vengeance" by postulating that the consonant *m* dropped out of the text just after the verb, which ends with an *m* (*nqm*). Then, the Hebrew would read "until he [i.e., the LORD] took vengeance against the nation of his enemies."¹³ Thus, we assume that the LORD was the one who spoke to the sun and the moon, not Joshua.

(3) A third question concerns the meaning of the statements about the sun and the moon standing still, and it is the question most often asked of this passage. A host of answers has been proposed, which we cannot rehearse here. These have clustered around two major understandings: (1) the passage should be read literally, and the phenomena explained naturalistically (the earth stopped rotating, there was a solar eclipse, a refraction of light, etc.), and (2) the passage is an omen text of some sort, calling for bad fortune to befall the Canaanites and/or good fortune to be with the Israelites.

B. Previous Proposals

Proposal 1: The Earth Stopped Rotating. Traditionally, it has been assumed that a miracle of colossal magnitude took place, that the sun actually stopped in its course across the sky (as well as the moon)—or, since the rise of modern science, that the earth's rotation stopped. The apocryphal book called *The Wisdom of Sirach* (*Ecclesiasticus*) states that "Was it not through [Joshua] that the sun stood still and one day became as long as two?" (*Sir* 46:4; NRSV),¹⁴ and Josephus likewise claimed that this day was lengthened; it was longer than the ordinary day (*Ant.* 5.1.17). This interpretation has been supported by a long line of Christian and Jewish interpreters, including Augustine, Jerome, Luther, and Calvin, and various rabbinical commentators.¹⁵

In modern times, Bible students in popular circles have attempted to verify this by reference to supposed astronomical calculations showing that precisely one day is missing from astronomers' calculations and that this missing day is accounted for by the extra "day" in Joshua 10 and the ten steps (degrees?) that the sun went backwards in Hezekiah's time (2 Kgs 20:9–11). In one such account, it is claimed that Professor Pickering of the Harvard Observatory traced this missing day back to Joshua's time, and

¹³ This is the proposal of Patrick Miller, and it had been advanced earlier by Friedrich Delitzsch and Martin Noth (see Miller, *The Divine Warrior*, 127–28). Miller notes that "with the single exception of this verse, the verb *nāqam* when it takes an object always takes a preposition" (Miller, *The Divine Warrior*, 128).

¹⁴ In v. 5, Sirach mentions the hailstorm of Josh 10:11: "He called upon the Most High, the Mighty One, when enemies pressed him on every side, and the great Lord answered him with hailstones of mighty power."

¹⁵ See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 153–54. For others, see Walton, "Joshua 10:12–15," 181–82, 190, and nn. 1, 27. In the modern day, Goslinga is one who follows this literal interpretation (*Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, 99–100, 189–93). See also Soggin, *Joshua*, 123: "it seems more prudent to regard the phenomenon as one of the numerous miracles of which the Bible tells us (such as are found elsewhere in the ancient world), remembering that in the biblical message a miracle is always a 'sign' of an extraordinary divine intervention which imparts a grace unmerited by man and inconceivable in any other way." Soggin does not claim to believe that this actually happened, but only that this is what the text affirms did happen.

the ten “degrees” in Hezekiah’s time were verified by astronomers from Greenwich and Yale. However, such claims have not been verified; they only exist in popular-level works on the Bible and science.¹⁶ Another, more recent story makes the same claims—that 23 hours and 20 minutes are missing, to be ascribed to Joshua’s long day, and the remaining 40 minutes are due to the event in Hezekiah’s day—but it ascribes this to “our astronauts and space scientists at Green Belt Maryland,” who stumbled across the missing day in the course of “checking the position of the sun, moon and planets out in space where they would be 100 and 1,000 years from now.” It is claimed that the computer running the measurements came to a halt, until one scientist recalled stories from his Sunday School days that might explain this; following a quick check of the Bible, the calculations verified Joshua’s long day and the ten degrees of Hezekiah, and the project was able to proceed.¹⁷ It is difficult to regard such unverified accounts as belonging to anything but a variety of the “urban legend” genre. Nevertheless, the traditional interpretation cannot be ruled out merely because it involves a phenomenon of colossal magnitude that modern science would dismiss out of hand, because that phenomenon cannot be verified, or because attempts to verify it have no credibility.

Proposal 2: The Sun’s Light Lingered. Many scholars have sought explanations in various natural phenomena. It is objected that, while God certainly is capable of performing a miracle on such a grand scale as stopping the earth on its axis, this is out of proportion to his normal ways of working, and so other, naturalizing, explanations are advanced. Thus, some have proposed a refraction of light that allowed for more light in order that the battle might be completed.¹⁸ Another proposal is that light was diffused due to a rain of meteorites.¹⁹

Proposal 3: The Sun’s Light Was Blocked. Others argue that there was *less* light, not more, and that a solar eclipse is in view here, basing their argument in part on understanding the verb *dmm* (in vv. 12b and 13a)—which is usually translated as “to cease” or “to be quiet”—as “to be dark,” i.e., the sun was to cease from shining, not from moving in its course across the sky.²⁰ A related proposal states that Joshua’s request was for relief from the heat of the sun, in order that the battle might be fought to its conclusion. Thus, the sun “ceased” from shining due to the cloud cover associated with the hailstorm (v. 11), which at the same time killed many of the enemy and gave

¹⁶ See Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 107–10.

¹⁷ The source for this is the “Evening Star” a newspaper located in Spencer, IN,” according to *The Bone Yard*, a Christian newsletter for the poultry industry circulated from Oakwood, Georgia (*The Bone Yard* 3.4 [April 1998], 1). I thank my secretary, Carl Kelley, for alerting me to this source. We have since discovered this same story in various permutations on the Internet, some propounding it as fact and others debunking it.

¹⁸ Gruenthaner, “Two Sun Miracles.” For citations of older proposals, see Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, 108–9.

¹⁹ W. Pythian-Adams, “A Meteorite of the Fourteenth Century B.C.,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 78 (1946), 116–24.

²⁰ Robert Dick Wilson, “Understanding ‘The Sun Stood Still,’” *Princeton Theological Review* 16 (1918), 46–54 (=Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., ed., *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972], 61–65). A more recent argument for this is J. Sawyer, “Joshua 10:12–14 and the Solar Eclipse of 30 September 1131 B.C.,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 104 (1972), 139–46.

welcome relief from the sun's heat to the Israelites.²¹ However, these views do not explain how the cloud cover would not have refreshed the Amorites as well as the Israelites. Furthermore, they do not adequately account for the parallelism for the verbs in these two verses, *dmm* and 𐤁𐤓𐤌 (see below).

Proposal 4: A Special Sign was Involved. Another set of approaches sees in Joshua's words a request for an omen involving astrological signs. These approaches consider the episode here in the context of the ancient Near East, where the movements of the sun, moon, stars, and planets were watched carefully as signs of good or ill fortune. In these interpretations, there was no extraordinary interruption of the sun's, moon's, or earth's movement, only an alignment that could be taken as a good or evil omen. Thus, one scholar first proposed that Joshua's request was for a favorable sign for Israel, one in which both the sun and moon would be visible at the same time: the sun rising and standing in the sky in the east before the moon had set in the west.²² The sun would "stop" or "wait" in opposition to the moon, which "stood" or "waited" for the sun. This typically was the 14th day of the month in ancient Near Eastern omen texts. A slight variation on this argues that, since the Canaanites would likely have seen such an opposition as a sign favorable to them, as well (not as an evil omen), Joshua's request was uttered as a polemic, in order to demonstrate to the Canaanites that he could control these elements of nature simply by praying to his God.²³ Another variation suggests that Joshua's request was that the sun and moon stand in opposition, not on the 14th day of the month, which the Canaanites would have seen as propitious for them, but rather on the 15th, which they would have interpreted as an evil omen for them. Joshua himself need not have believed in such omens, but he asked for this knowing that his enemies would have, thus using their own beliefs against them.²⁴

These approaches have the advantage that such omens were clearly part of the cultural and religious environment of the ancient Near East, and it is possible that such a practice was followed here. They have the disadvantage, however, that the text itself gives no indication at all that omens or signs (for good or for evil) were in view here. If what occurred was such a radical event as an omen that the Gibeonites would have interpreted as having been a message to them from Israel's God, then we should expect some sort of indication that they indeed feared the Israelites or their God and that the omen or sign was effective.²⁵

Evaluation. The extraordinary attention devoted to this passage, and the myriad attempts to interpret it, should give us pause in declaring with too much certainty what the passage signifies in its every detail.²⁶ Many plausible elements can be found in

²¹ E. W. Maunder, "A Misinterpreted Miracle," *The Expositor* 10 (1910), 359–72; *idem*, "Beth-Horon, The Battle of," *ISBE* 1:469–71; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *More Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 123–26.

²² John S. Holladay, Jr., "The Day(s) the Moon Stood Still," *JBL* 87 (1968), 166–78.

²³ Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 212–20, especially p. 215.

²⁴ Walton, "Joshua 10:12–15."

²⁵ Among the omen interpretations, Walton's view is the most plausible, since he understands the request to have been for the sun and the moon to align in a such way as to be interpreted as an unfavorable sign to the enemy (not one that the enemy might interpret as favorable). However, Walton's solution involves a number of interpretive assumptions that stretch the limits of normal usage, which makes it less plausible.

²⁶ The options surveyed above represent the major approaches to this passage, but they by no means exhaust the proposals made. Good surveys of the abundant literature on this topic include the following

almost every solution. Furthermore, almost no solution can be regarded as a test of orthodoxy. Almost every solution reviewed above has proponents among believing Christians with a very high regard for the Bible's accuracy. Nevertheless, the following points can be made against a number of the proposals.

In the first place, the reference to the sun's position over Gibeon and the moon's over the Valley of Aijalon is significant. The town of Aijalon was 7–10 miles west of Gibeon,²⁷ so the reference points here are to the east and to the west: the sun was to “stand/cease” over Gibeon,²⁸ to the east, and the moon over Aijalon, to the west. If a naturalistic phenomenon is in view here, then the time of day referred to was the early morning, as the sun was rising in the east and before the moon had set in the west.²⁹ This would make a request for prolonging the daylight so that the battle could be finished seem rather strange, since the time of day was in the morning; most interpretations that see the miracle as one of prolonging the daylight—whether by stopping the earth's rotation or by a refraction of light—argue that this request came toward the end of the day, when it would have been obvious that more time was needed to finish the battle. Thus, this observation argues against the traditional interpretations that see a monumental stopping of the sun (i.e., the earth's rotation) in its tracks.³⁰

Second, the proposals that consider the verb *dmm* as meaning “to cease from shining”—and thus speak of the sky darkening, due to a solar eclipse, the hailstorm, or some other means—do not adequately account for the parallel verb *‘md* “to stand,” which describes the moon's action in v. 13a and which is used of the sun itself in v. 13b. The poetic parallelism in v. 13a, and the narrative fleshing-out of the details in v. 13b, argue that what is in view here is the movement or positioning of the sun, not a darkening. The postulate of a solar eclipse has the further difficulty that astronomers know exactly when solar eclipses took place in Central Palestine between 1500 and 1000 B.C.: August 19, 1157 (8:35 a.m.), September 30, 1131 (12:53 p.m.), and November 23, 1041 (7:40 a.m.). None of these fits the dates assigned to Joshua, whether one adopts an early or a late date for the Exodus.³¹

(although each one emphasizes different aspects of it): Ramm, *Christian View of Science and Scripture*, 107–10, 116–17; Gruenthaner, “Two Sun Miracles”; Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, 98–101, 189–93; Holladay, “The Day(s) the Moon Stood Still,” 166; Boling, *Joshua*, 282–85; Nelson, *Joshua*, 141–45.

²⁷ See Rasmussen, *NIV Atlas of the Bible*, 94.

²⁸ Even such a seemingly simple matter of translating “over Gibeon” is not without its problems, because the preposition here is ׀ which is normally translated “in, with, by.” While prepositions are exceptionally flexible in their meanings, no major lexicon gives a meaning of “over” for ׀ (see BDB, *HALOT*, *DCH*, s.vv.); the normal preposition for this is ׀ at ׀ as “in” here, we must understand it to mean that the sun and moon were to be considered from vantage points *in* Gibeon and *in* the Valley of Aijalon. Perhaps ׀ was chosen here, rather than ׀, for poetic reasons.

²⁹ See Keil, *Book of Joshua*, 108–9; B. Margalit, “The Day the Sun Did Not Stand Still: A New Look at Joshua X 8–15,” *VT* 42 (1992), 466–91 (observation on pp. 479–80); Walton, “Joshua 10:12–14,” 182.

³⁰ If the sun's position at the time that these words were spoken can be shown to have been of no consequence, then the likelihood that these verses speak of an actual stoppage of the sun (or the earth's rotation) is increased. Goslinga, who believes that the day was lengthened by the sun stopping still, does understand that “It must have still been morning when Joshua spoke his famous words” (*Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, 100), but he does not explain why Joshua should have made this request at this time of the day.

³¹ See Barry J. Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 97 on this point.

C. The Proposed Solution: A Poetic Reflection (10:12b–13)

Almost all treatments recognize that the passage in question is poetic, although the extent of the poetry is disputed. All agree that v. 12b is poetic, and most agree that v. 13a is, as well. However, the implications of the poetic form are not usually dealt with. These implications have to do with the figurative nature of poetic language, and with the function of poetic texts inserted into narratives.

A few scholars have taken the poetic nature of this passage seriously. Richard Nelson, for example, proposes that the words spoken to the sun and moon in vv. 12b originated with the poet, not with Joshua or the LORD, and they were a command to these heavenly bodies to “be speechless with terror, be stunned into motionless rigidity,” i.e., that they should have “a stunned reaction in the face of a startling catastrophe or astonishing revelation.”³² This proposal has support in that *dmm* “to be quiet” does indeed indicate on occasion “silence in the face of an impending catastrophe or one that has already struck, or in preparation for a revelation.”³³ It rests on the analogy of such poetic passages as Exod 15:16, where the Moabites, Edomites, and Canaanites are terrified of Israel: “terror and dread will fall upon them. // By the power of your arm they *will be as still as (dmm)* [i.e., dumbstruck, silent, in awe] a stone // —until your people pass by, O LORD,” or Hab 3:11, which states that “Sun and moon *stood still (‘md)* [i.e., were dumbstruck, silent, in awe] in the heavens // at the glint of your flying arrows, at the lightning of your flashing spears.” This is an attractive option, since it deals with the language of the text on its own terms, but it has difficulty integrating v. 13b into the scheme.³⁴

Others have argued more intentionally that the passage never was intended to be taken literally, that the author himself was using the poetic form in order to comment on the narrative events.³⁵ He describes the battle in cosmic terms, in the same way that Judg 5:20 speaks of the stars’ involvement in the Israelites’ battle against Sisera and his army:

“From the heavens the stars fought,
from their courses they fought against Sisera.” (Judges 5:20)

We can also cite the afore-mentioned passage from Habakkuk, where an awe-inspiring appearance of the LORD in a vision is described, and the sun and moon are described in terms similar to what we find here in Joshua 10:

³² Nelson, *Joshua*, 144–45.

³³ A. Baumann, “דָּמָה *dāmāh* II,” *TDOT* 3:260–65 (the quote is from p. 261).

³⁴ Richard Nelson, who proposes this option, agrees that v. 13b speaks of the movement or position of the sun and moon (*Joshua*, 145), but he argues that the poetic fragment of vv. 12b–13a was supplemented by another author in v. 13b, in “an act of demythologizing, of making orthodox a problematic bit of tradition.” According to Nelson, this author was troubled by the direct address to the sun and moon, and so he wrote v. 13b in order to salvage the orthodoxy of the passage, transforming what had been “mythopoetic rhetoric” into an account of a long day. Nelson’s approach sees irreconcilable differences between vv. 12b–13a, on the one hand, and v. 13b on the other.

³⁵ E.g., Roland deVaux, *The Early History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 634–35; John Sailhamer, *NIV Compact Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 191.

“Sun and moon *stood still* (*ʿmd*) in the heavens
at the glint of your flying arrows,
at the lightning of your flashing spear” (Hab 3:11).

No one suggests that the poets in these instances were describing any extraordinary astronomical or geophysical phenomena involving the sun, moon, or stars; rather, they are easily recognized as figurative expressions in poetic form, describing the totality of the LORD’s victory over the Canaanites (in the first case) or the awesomeness of the LORD’s appearance (in the second case).

Thus, it may be that vv. 12b–13b are simply poetic expressions of information contained in the corresponding prose assertions. The prose account of the all-night march (v. 9) is described in the poetic text as the moon’s standing still (v. 13a), since the moon’s light would have facilitated this march; likewise, the prose account of the entire battle, which was a lengthy one and which concluded “at sunset” (*lěʿēt bôʾ haššemeš*; v. 27), is described in the poetic text as the sun’s stopping in the middle of the sky and delaying setting for a full day (v. 13b).³⁶

Similar relationships between poetic and prose texts can be found elsewhere, most notably, as we have already mentioned, in Exod 15:1–18, which is a poetic description of the events that are told in a prose narrative in Exodus 14, and Judges 5, which is a poetic reflection upon the prose text in Judges 4 (see also Hannah’s Song in 1 Samuel 2). A short example of this, similar to our own text, is to be found in Numbers 21 in the so-called “Song of the Well” (Num 21:17–18). Here, the narrative text states that the LORD gave the Israelites water from a well, and Israel then sang a short song about it, which is recorded here (NRSV):

³⁶ Sailhamer, *NIV Compact Bible Commentary*, 191.

16 From there they continued to Beer; that is the well of which the LORD said to Moses, "Gather the people together, and I will give them water." 17 Then Israel sang this song:

*"Spring up, O well!--Sing to it!--
18 the well that the leaders sank,
that the nobles of the people dug,
with the scepter, with the staff."*

From the wilderness to Mattanah....

Given the fact that poetic texts are indeed frequently figurative in their expression,³⁷ this possibility is the most plausible.

Thus, we present a translation of the passage that attempts to clarify the points made above. The indented, italicized lines are poetic. Words in parenthesis are added for clarity in the process of going from one language to another. Words in brackets are additions based on textual or grammatical issues discussed above.³⁸

¹²At that time, Joshua spoke to (i.e., petitioned) the LORD, on the day of the LORD's giving the Amorites into the power of the sons of Israel. And [the LORD] said in the sight of Israel,

*"O sun, over Gibeon stop,
O moon, over the valley of Aijalon (stop)!"*

¹³*So the sun stopped
and the moon, it stood still
Until [the LORD] took vengeance [against] the nation of his enemies.*

Is it not (all) written in the book of Jashar?

*And the sun stood still
in the midst of the heavens,
And it did not hurry to go (down)
about a complete day.*

¹⁴And there has not been (a day) like that day before it or after it, when the LORD obeyed the voice of a man, for the LORD fought for Israel.

What, then, do vv. 12–14 tell us? In the understanding here, it is as follows. First, Joshua appealed to the LORD for help (v. 12a), but his words are not recorded. Then, in response, the LORD spoke to the sun and moon, ordering them to stop, and they

³⁷ See Howard, *Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*, 27–28.

³⁸ There are nine poetic lines (or half-lines) here (for this terminology and the method of counting stresses here, see D. M. Howard, Jr., *The Structure of Psalms 93–100* [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997], 28–30 and n. 9). They are fairly well balanced in terms of the stresses in the Hebrew text: In the first set, we have stress patterns of 3,3,2,2,3, while in the second set, we see 2,2,2,2. We must note that v. 13b (containing the second set of poetic lines) is not generally analyzed as poetry—and this is perhaps the major weakness of this approach, because otherwise, it is difficult to deal with the assertions of v. 13b. However, the four lines here are as easily poetic as the three lines in v. 13a (including the presence of a *wayyiqtol* verbal construction in both sets); virtually no one questions the poetic nature of v. 13a, and, we would argue, v. 13b is no different in kind.

“obeyed.” They maintained this obedience until the LORD took his vengeance against his enemies (vv. 12b–13b). Then, this is all placed into perspective, in the amazing fact that the LORD actually listened and responded to the request of one man. (v. 14).

Being poetic and figurative, the words in vv. 12b–13b do not attempt to describe any literal astronomical or geophysical phenomena, either in reality nor in the author’s intent. That is, the author of the narrative here was not intending to describe any extraordinary event involving the sun and the moon, any more than the poet in Judges 5 was claiming this about the stars or the poet in Habakkuk 3 was claiming this about the sun and the moon.

Verses 12b-13 do, however, tie in with the prose account of the day’s events by means of a few key-word or associative connections. In the first instance, the words about the sun’s stopping, standing still, and not hurrying to go down simply describe the entire day’s battle, which ended when the sun did go down (v. 27). The key words here are “sun” (*šemeš*) and “go (down)” (*bôʾ*), found in both the prose and poetic parts of the passage. Perhaps the day’s events simply seemed especially long.³⁹ The words about the moon’s stopping and standing still are linked with the all-night march (v. 9). Here there are no key-word links, but the connections between the moon and such a march are obvious. The second set of poetic lines reiterates what was said in the first set, adding the words about the sun’s not hurrying to go down, which reinforces the picture of the sun’s obeying the LORD’s words.

What do the words addressed to the sun and the moon mean, then, if not that the earth stopped rotating or the sun stopped shining (or something similar)? Simply this: that the LORD was directing the sun and the moon to fight for Israel in the same way that the stars fought for Israel in Deborah’s day (Judg 5:20), or else that they were to stand amazed as he fought for Israel, just as they did in Hab 3:11. We do not imagine that these statements mean anything except that the LORD’s victory was total and that his majesty is awe-inspiring. Did the poet here imagine that these statements involved any universe-altering astronomical or geophysical phenomena? No, not any more than the psalmists, when they urge the rivers to clap their hands and the mountains to sing for joy (Ps 98:8) or the trees of the field to sing for joy (Ps 96:12), or when Isaiah writes that “the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands” (Isa 55:12).

The sun and the moon obeyed the LORD’s commands, and, remarkably, the LORD “obeyed” a man’s request (v. 14). The expression in v. 14 is literally, “and the LORD listened [to] the voice of a man.” The verbal construction here is one of the most common ways that Hebrew has to express obedience.⁴⁰ the LORD was not bound to “obey” Joshua’s request, of course. However, the fact that he did is what was so remarkable. Thus, this correspondence between vv. 13 and 14 in terms of obedience

³⁹ This is suggested by Keil (*Book of Joshua*, 109–12), who understands the day to have been lengthened either in reality or in the Israelites’ perception. Younger quotes a Confederate soldier’s words in a letter about the battle of Antietam to illustrate the latter point; the soldier, commenting on the ferocity of the fighting, wrote “The sun seemed almost to go backwards, and it appeared as if night would never come!” (Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 314, n. 55).

⁴⁰ See BDB, 1034, § 1.m.

highlights the most remarkable feature of the days' events: it was a day on which the LORD himself "obeyed" a mere man and fought for Israel (see also on v. 14).

D. Climax: A Prose Reflection (10:14)

This is the climax of the section, where the author leaves off describing the events and gives his own evaluation of them. The author of Joshua marvels at this fact: not that a cosmic miracle may have occurred, but that the LORD listened to the voice of one man, and fought on Israel's behalf as a result. Just as the sun and moon obeyed the LORD's commands, so here the LORD "obeyed" Joshua's request.

In what way was it true that the LORD had never listened to a man before this or since? After all, Moses had spoken with the LORD and the LORD had listened to him. In the wilderness, for example, the LORD told Moses that he was going to destroy the Israelites and make a great nation out of Moses, but he was dissuaded by Moses' prayerful intervention (Num 14:11–21). Also, Moses himself claimed that the LORD had listened to him (Deut 9:19; 10:10).

The answer lies in the precise wording used here, which is *šāma^c bēqôl*, meaning "to listen to" or "to obey" (literally, "to listen [to] the voice"). This is a much stronger way of expressing obedience than merely to say that someone listened to or heard someone else (i.e., without *qôl* "voice"). The wording used here is only found three times in the Old Testament with "the LORD" as the subject. In the first instance, the context is very similar to that here, but the object is the nation of Israel, not an individual (Num 21:3: "the LORD listened to [*šāma^c bēqôl*] Israel's plea and gave the Canaanites over to them"). The second instance is here in Josh 10:14, the first time this precise wording is found with reference to an individual's voice. In the third instance, the LORD did listen to the voice of a man, as he had to Joshua's, but it was many centuries later, probably after the writing of the material here in Joshua 10. It involved another great individual, Elijah, and the LORD restored the life of a young boy on the basis of Elijah's plea (1 Kgs 17:22).⁴¹

So, we can see that this response on the LORD's part was indeed remarkable. He "obeyed" Joshua's request. Not even Moses, the great leader whose shoes Joshua was attempting to fill, had received such an honor. The LORD honored Joshua in many ways throughout his tenure as Israel's leader, but this was one of the most remarkable.

How did the LORD obey Joshua's request? How did he fight for Israel? Not by stopping the earth's rotation, but by throwing the enemy into confusion (v. 10), by sending the hailstorm (v. 11), and by commanding even the sun and the moon to fight for Israel, i.e., by declaring total war against the Amorites (vv. 12–13). The author has come at the subject of the LORD's fighting for Israel from several different angles in this passage, and v. 14 shows that he did this at Joshua's request. Because of this, it was a marvelous day like no other before or since! This is an excellent example of the power of one person's influence and of the power of prayer. It also is one more brush stroke in the picture painted in the book concerning Joshua's God-anointed leadership and his position as a worthy successor to Moses.

⁴¹ In two other instances, the same wording is found with "God" as subject, not "the LORD": Judg 13:9; Ps 55:19.

IV. CONCLUSION

We conclude, then, that God effected a great miracle in routing the Canaanite coalition confronting the Israelites (Josh. 10:8–11). He sent confusion into their camp and sent a great hailstorm the likes of which had seldom if ever been seen before (10:10–11). The author of the book of Joshua marvels at this to such a degree that he responds in two ways: (1) he breaks into a short burst of poetic praise about God's actions (10:12b–13) and (2) he asserts that God had never before listened to the voice of one man in this way (10:14).

Thus, in our dealings with this text, we treat it just as we would other poetic texts that praise God. In any language, poetry expresses some of the deepest emotions of the soul and the psyche, and this is certainly true of Hebrew poetry. More to the point, this is a common function of Hebrew poetic texts that are inserted into prose narrative accounts: to praise God for his wonderful, miraculous acts. So it is here in Joshua 10.

Soli Deo Gloria.

Before leaving this section, we must justify our attempt to read v. 13b as poetry, since it is not usually considered to be poetry. However, it is every bit as “poetry-like” as v. 13a, which the majority of Bible versions and commentators render as poetic.

There are nine poetic lines (or half-lines) here.⁴² If we measure the length of the poetic lines in vv. 12b–13a, we find that the most unbalanced ones in terms of syllable counts are those that no one disputes are poetic:

v. 12b 5 (6)
v. 12b 9 (10)

v. 13a 5 (6)
v. 13a 5 (6)
v. 13a 7

v. 13b 5 (7)
v. 13b 5 (7)
v. 13b 5
v. 13b 4

In terms of stresses, the nine lines are fairly well balanced. In the first set (vv. 12b–13a), we have stress patterns of 3,3,2,2,3, while in the second set, we see 2,2,2,2.

If we analyze these lines in terms of O’Connor’s syntactical constraints, we find the following:

v. 12b 5 (6)
v. 12b 8 (10)

v. 13a 5 (6)
v. 13a 4 (6)
v. 13a 7 [8]

v. 13b 5 (7)
v. 13b 5 (7)
v. 13b 5
v. 13b 4

Thus, far from being a narrative summary of the events, v. 13b is a further poetic statement about them, a further reflection on them.

(including the presence of a *wayyiqṭōl* verbal construction in both sets); virtually no one questions the poetic nature of v. 13a, and, I would argue, v. 13b is no different in kind.

⁴² For this terminology and the method of counting stresses here, see D. M. Howard, Jr., *The Structure of Psalms 93–100* [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997], 28–30 and n. 9.