

Joshua 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Joshua chapter 10. As soon as Adonai Zedek, king of Jerusalem, heard how Joshua had captured Ai and had devoted it to destruction, doing to Ai and its king as he had done to Jericho and its king, and how the inhabitants of Gibeon had made peace with Israel and were among them, he feared greatly, because Gibeon was a great city, like one of the royal cities, and because it was greater than Ai and all its men were warriors. So Adonai Zedek, king of Jerusalem, sent to Hoham king of Hebron, to Piram king of Jarmuth, to Japhir king of Lachish, and to Deba king of Eglon, saying, Come up to me and help me, and let us strike Gibeon, for it has made peace with Joshua and with the people of Israel. Then the five kings of the Amorites, the king of Jerusalem, the king of Hebron, the king of Jarmuth, the king of Lachish, and the king of Eglon, gathered their forces and went up with all their armies and encamped against Gibeon and made war against it. And the men of Gibeon sent to Joshua at the camp in Gilgal, saying, Do not relax your hand from your servants. Come up to us quickly and save us and help us, for all the kings of the Amorites who dwell in the hill country are gathered against us. So Joshua went up from Gilgal, he and all the people of war with him, and all the mighty men of valour. And the Lord said to Joshua, Do not fear them, for I have given them into your hands. Not a man of them shall stand before you. So Joshua came upon them suddenly, having marched up all night from Gilgal. And the Lord threw them into a panic before Israel, who struck them with a great blow at Gibeon, and chased them by the way of the ascent to Beth

Horon, and struck them as far as Ezekiah and Makeda. And as they fled before Israel, while they were going down the ascent to Beth Horon, the Lord threw down large stones from heaven on them, as far as Ezekiah, and they died. There were more who died because of the hailstones than the sons of Israel killed with the sword. At that time Joshua spoke to the Lord in the day when the Lord gave the Amorites over to the sons of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, Son, stand still at Gibeon, and moon in the valley of Eglon. And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies. Is this not written in the book of Jasher? The sun stopped in the midst of heaven, and did not hurry to set for about a whole day. There has been no day like it before or since, when the Lord heeded the voice of a man, for the Lord fought for Israel. So Joshua returned, and all Israel with him, to the camp at Gilgal. These five kings fled and hid themselves in the cave at Makeda.

And it was told to Joshua, The five kings had been found, hidden in the cave at Makeda. And Joshua said, Roll large stones against the mouth of the cave, and set men by it to guard them. But do not stay there yourselves. Pursue your enemies, attack their rearguard. Do not let them enter their cities, for the Lord your God has given them into your hand. When Joshua and the sons of Israel had finished striking them with a great blow, until they were wiped out, and when the remnant that remained of them had entered into the fortified cities, then all the people returned safe to Joshua in the camp at Makeda. Not a man moved his tongue against any of the people of Israel. Then Joshua said, Open the mouth of the cave, and bring those five kings out to me from the cave. And they did so, and brought those five kings out to him from the cave, the king of Jerusalem, the king of Hebron, the king of Jarmuth, the king of Lachish, and the king of Eglon. And when they brought those kings out to Joshua, Joshua summoned all the men of Israel, and said to the chiefs of the men of war who had gone with him, Come near, put your feet on the necks of these kings. Then they came near, and put their feet on their necks. And Joshua said to them, Do not be afraid or dismayed, be strong and courageous, for thus the Lord will do to all your enemies against whom you fight. And afterward Joshua struck them and put them to death, and he hanged them on five trees. And they hung on the trees until evening.

But at the time of the going down of the sun, Joshua commanded, and they took them down from the trees, and threw them into the cave where they had hidden themselves. And they set large stones against the mouth of the cave, which remained this very day. As for Makeda, Joshua captured it on that day, and struck it, and its king with the edge of the sword. He devoted to destruction every person in it.

[4 : 22] He left none remaining. And he did to the king of Makeda, just as he had done to the king of Jericho. Then Joshua and all Israel with him passed on from Makeda to Libna, and fought against Libna. And the Lord gave it also and its king into the hand of Israel.

And he struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it. He left none remaining to it. And he did to its king as he had done to the king of Jericho. Then Joshua and all Israel with him passed on from Libna to Lachish, and laid siege to it, and fought against it. And the Lord gave Lachish into the hand of Israel. And he captured it on the second day, and struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it, as he had done to Libna. Then Hoream king of Giza came up to help Lachish.

And Joshua struck him and his people, until he left none remaining. Then Joshua and all Israel with him passed on from Lachish to Eglon. And they laid siege to it, and fought against it. And they captured it on that day, and struck it with the edge of the sword. And he devoted every person in it to destruction that day, as he had done to Lachish. Then Joshua and all Israel with him went up from Eglon to Hebron. And they fought against it, and captured it, and struck it with the edge of the sword, and its king, and its towns, and every person in it. He left none remaining, as he had done to Eglon, and devoted it to destruction, and every person in it. Then Joshua and all Israel with him turned back to Deba, and fought against it. And he captured it with its king, and all its towns. And they struck them with the edge of the sword, and devoted to destruction every person in it. He left none remaining, just as he had done to Hebron, and to Libna, and its king. So he did to Deba, and to its king.

So Joshua struck the whole land, the hill country, and the Negeb, and the lowland, and the slopes, and all their kings. He left none remaining, but devoted to destruction all that breathed, just as the Lord God of Israel commanded. And Joshua struck them from Kadesh Barnea, as far as Gaza, and all the country of Goshen, as far as Gibeon. And Joshua captured all these kings and their land at one time, because the Lord God of Israel fought for Israel. Then Joshua returned, and all Israel with him, to the camp at Gilgal. The Israelites had just made an unwise treaty with the Gibeonites in chapter 9, and now in chapter 10, they immediately have to come to the Gibeonites' rescue. Five kings of the Amorites, assembled by Adonai Zedek, the king of Jerusalem. His name might remind us of the name of Melchizedek, the king of Salem, in Genesis chapter 14. Adonai Zedek is alarmed because the powerful city of Gibeon has given itself over to the Israelites, and he wants to assemble a force to attack the Gibeonites as the weakest point of this new alliance. It's important to remember the commitment that the Israelites now have to protecting the Gibeonites. They were responsible to protect them. Some of us reading this might think, well this looks rather convenient for the Israelites. They can just allow the kings of the Amorites to destroy the Gibeonites without breaking the treaty directly themselves. This would solve a problem for them. However, as those devoted to the Lord, the Gibeonites' non-destruction rendered them the slaves of the Lord, and as their master, the Lord himself would fight for their protection and required his people to do so also. Presumably the Gibeonites, like Rahab, provide an example of how other Canaanites could have been saved. Had the Gibeonites openly declared their identity to Joshua in the preceding chapter, and asked to submit to the Lord as their new master, it seems likely that the Lord would have accepted them. Otherwise we have a situation where a foolish treaty of Israel's can trump the express command of the Lord. We should also notice that this is a fulfillment of the curse of Ham, from Genesis chapter 9 verses 24 to 27. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his younger son had done to him, he said, Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers. He also said, Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant. The Gibeonites are descendants of Ham's son Canaan, the son cursed on account of Ham's wicked act against his father, and in willingly becoming the servants of Israel, descendants of Shem, they are accepting their curse.

[8 : 44] However, as in the case of the Levites, the accepted curse can in some ways turn into a blessing. Like the Levites, they are claimed by the Lord as his servants. Their land is associated

with wells and with woods, and so the Lord makes them servants as woodcutters and water carriers. And the Lord protects and fights for his servants. He fights against the enemies of the Gibeonites in an astonishingly direct manner. He throws them into a panic, he bombards them with large and deadly hailstones, and even seemingly stops the sun above them. Heaven is fighting on Israel and the Gibeonites' behalf, and the great blow against the kings is struck by the Lord himself. And indeed, the text is written in a way that suggests that the Lord is the one striking and pursuing them. Israel's part in the battle is minimised. The stopping of the sun and the moon is a truly remarkable and strange event, and we might rightly puzzle over what exactly is referred to here, and what actually happened.

We can make a few remarks on this. First off, the miracles of the Exodus often fell into the category of the hypernatural rather than the supernatural. And even when the supernatural might have been involved, nothing was remotely as extreme as this particular miracle, especially if we consider what would have been involved in a literal stopping of the sun or slowing down of the sun. This might raise reasonable questions about how this miracle fits with the Lord's typical ways of working. God's world is not presented as a world within which just about anything can happen. Taking scripture as inspired and true does not mean that we need to read every single passage in the most woodenly literal fashion. It is possible to have doubts about the surface interpretation of the text that do not proceed from doubting the Lord's power, but doubts that can arise from more biblically informed questions about how consistent a particular understanding is with the ways of the Lord in general. A second point to notice is that the language is phenomenological. The sun rises and sets. It's the language of appearance. It's presented from a human vantage point, not from a detached scientific perspective. And recognising that this is the perspective, it opens the possibility that this is an appearance rather than a literal stopping of the sun or a stopping of the earth in its orbit. Neither of these two points settle anything by themselves, nor should they be used to dismiss out of hand the surface literal reading of the text. However, they do open up possible lines of inquiry for the faithful reader of scripture who has questions about the surface reading here.

[11:22] We are given two witnesses to the event, the witness of the book of Jasher and the witness of the book of Joshua, both of which confirm that the event occurred. The book of Jasher is mentioned on one other occasion in scripture, in 2 Samuel chapter 1 verse 18, where we learn that David's lament over Saul and Jonathan was within it. The event is presented as absolutely unique and unprecedented.

However, the unprecedented character of the event focuses upon the Lord's heeding of the voice of a man. Joshua commands the sun and the moon, and the Lord acts. What kind of man is this that even the sun and the moon obey him? Recognising this is important, as it suggests that the sun standing still was apparently not the most remarkable thing about the day. The most remarkable thing was that the Lord acted in response to the command of Joshua given to the sun and the moon.

A command that didn't take the obvious form of a prayer. Various proposals have been advanced for what actually took place. Some have pointed out that this might be poetic hyperbole. In Habakkuk chapter 3 verse 11, we hear the same sort of language used. The sun and moon stood still in their place, at the light of your arrows as they sped, at the flash of your glittering spear. In the Song of Deborah, in Judges chapter 5 verse 20, we read, From heaven the stars fought. From their courses they fought against Sisera. Do we believe that the stars literally fought against Sisera? Probably not. Rather, this might be a description of signs in the heavens, and the fact that the Lord was acting on behalf of Israel with his heavenly army. Some have seen it as a matter of the sun stopping working, rather than standing still, an eclipse or covering up of the sun. Others that it was a mirage, or some miraculous appearance of divine light. Many have held that the earth actually stopped moving, or slowed in its rotation. Others have suggested that maybe it was a long night, rather than a long day. Verse 13 seems to present problems for this.

Perhaps they're not insurmountable, but they are significant. One thing that does make a difference for these sorts of interpretations is our reading of the battle. Is it Joshua and the people, or primarily the Lord who is doing the fighting, is the request that the Lord continue his assault upon the kings in the conditions of darkness? Indeed, the nation doesn't seem to be fighting so much as the Lord, who is casting down hailstones upon them, and the hailstones might come from a covering up of the sun, and the prevention of its visibly rising in the heavens. The Lord would then fight as the terrible god of the storm, destroying his enemies before him. I'm not sure which interpretation of

these I would settle upon, or whether there are some other that would be better. However, what we should do with passages like this, even when we don't know the answers, is to get a sense of the array of the possible solutions, to break some of the problems down to size, and then to chip away at the problem and see what, if anything, emerges. This is one of many biblical passages where we might find ourselves wrestling with its difficulties in the darkness, until we break through to the dawn and it blesses us.

Within the context of the book of Joshua, we can draw immediate parallels with the stopping of the sun and the stopping of the river Jordan. In both of these instances, the Lord's power over natural phenomena is revealed. The kings flee and hide themselves in a cave, where Israel traps them by rolling large stones against it, just as the Lord had hurled large stones down upon them from heaven.

[14 : 54] Once they had routed the Amorites, they returned to Joshua and the cave. Removing the kings, they placed their feet on their necks. This is a psychologically powerful demonstration of the victory that the Lord has given to them. The chapter ends with an account of the conquest of a number of cities in the south of the land, and it presents these victories in a highly formulaic manner, one after another, moving from one to the next, suggesting the effectiveness and the efficiency of this military campaign, and emphasising throughout the fact that the Lord was fighting for Israel. A question to consider. What are some of the implications of the Lord's power over the elements in the theology of the Pentateuch and of Joshua?