

## *Joshua 10:12–15 and Mesopotamian Celestial Omen Texts*

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In Joshua 10 the coalition of Amorite cities in southern Palestine decided to attack the fortified town of Gibeon. The people from Gibeon had recently made a treaty with the Israelites that the Amorites considered an act of treachery. The proposed strike was probably punitive as well as being an attempt to prevent the Israelites from having access to this strategically located, fortified city. When Joshua received word that Gibeon was under siege, he gathered the Israelites for an all-night forced march in order to execute a surprise, lightning strike on the attacking Amorites. The fifteen-mile march taxed the endurance of his soldiers, and they lost a night's sleep. Joshua was desperate for divine intervention, and his daring prayer, along with its results, is recorded in vv. 12–15.

The nature of Joshua's request has been interpreted in a number of different ways. The earliest interpretation is represented in the Wisdom of Sirach. Speaking of Joshua's accomplishments, he says: "Was not the sun stayed by his hand, and one day increased to two?" (Sir 46:4). The same perspective is expressed by Josephus: "Moreover it happened that the day was lengthened, that the night might not come on too soon, and be an obstruction to the zeal of the Hebrews in pursuing their enemies" (*Ant.* 5.1.17). The belief that the length of the day was actually increased (presumably by the slowing of the earth's rotation) was maintained throughout history, being affirmed by the Septuagint translators, Augustine, Jerome, Calvin, and Luther.<sup>1</sup> The Jewish rabbinic writers likewise

1. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.8; Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, 2.15, and in the Vulgate translation; Calvin, *Commentary on Joshua* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, repr. 1949) 154; the sun was on the western horizon and was prevented from setting; Luther, *Commentary on Habakkuk* (Luther's Works, ed. H. C. Oswald, St. Louis: Concordia, 1974) 3.

agreed (see *b. Sukk.* 28a), though Maimonides argued for the interpretation that the day merely appeared to be longer.<sup>2</sup> Apparently, alternate interpretations did not become prevalent until the nineteenth century. C. F. Keil, a conservative, provided an early alternative explanation: because of the lack of ability of the Israelites to measure the length of the day, he concluded that the day appeared to be longer because of all that they were able to accomplish.<sup>3</sup> In the twentieth century, another theory that has been proposed is that the heat of the sun was diminished in order for the Israelites to be able to accomplish their task.<sup>4</sup>

Undoubtedly, some modern interpreters have found the traditional view unacceptable on scientific grounds. Either their presuppositions rule out the supernatural altogether, or they find the magnitude of such a miracle beyond comprehension and unnecessary to explain the victory recorded in the text. Yet even for some conservatives, such as Keil, the details of the text suggest that the traditional interpretation is also inadequate.

In this regard there are two observations that need to be made concerning the details of the text. The first was made as early as Keil and has been reaffirmed by numerous commentators after him, though it had been overlooked by such careful exegetes as Calvin. The text clearly identifies the sun as being over Gibeon and the moon as being over the valley of Aijalon. This description places the sun in the east and the moon in the west, thus indicating that the prayer was made in the morning.<sup>5</sup> In the traditional interpretation, it is assumed that dusk was approaching, and Joshua wanted to be able to keep the momentum that his army had gained. He thus would have desired extended light. This logic is lost if the prayer was made in the morning. An interpreter would have to ask why Joshua was requesting an extension of daylight if it was still midmorning at the latest. This interpretation suggests that he was not asking for extended daylight at all.

A second observation concerns the narrator's comment about the day in v. 14. Though the day is identified as unique in history, the reason given for its uniqueness is not an astronomical phenomenon. Rather, the day is unique because God listens to the voice of a man and fights for Israel. What does this mean? Certainly God had orchestrated supernatural

interventions in the past. The text, however, points out that the human initiation of the petition for God's intervention is the unique element. Never before had a person presumed to state what sort of supernatural strategy he wanted God to perpetrate on behalf of Israel. God granted Joshua the privilege of taking the initiative in devising the strategy. This is what the narrator identifies as the singular distinguishing feature of the day. As a result, the reader is not obliged to interpret the behavior of the sun and moon as being uniquely miraculous.

One must return to the text, then, to discover what its language and logic suggest Joshua intended when he addressed the sun and moon. If it was still morning, what could Joshua have had in mind? How could the sun and moon have any impact on the outcome of the battle?

One source of information concerning the importance of the sun and moon for battle is celestial omen texts from Mesopotamia.<sup>6</sup> Examination of these texts reveals significant relationship between the movements of the sun and the moon and military activity. Ancient societies used a lunar calendar, periodically adjusted to the solar year by the addition of an extra month. The beginning of a month was calculated by the first appearance of the new moon. The most important calculation, however, came in the middle of the month, at the full-moon phase. The first day of the full moon was identified by the fact that the moon set just minutes after sunrise. Consequently, for a few minutes the moon and sun were both fully visible on opposite horizons (the moon in the west and the sun in the east). Ideally, the first day of the full moon fell on the 14th of the month. This was a good sign because it indicated that the ancients' calculations were accurate, that the month would be the proper length, and that the new crescent would be seen on the 30th day. Consequently, one of the omens reads:

When the moon and sun are seen with one another on the 14th, there will be silence, the land will be satisfied; the gods intend Akkad for happiness. Joy in the heart of the people. The cattle of Akkad will lie down securely in the pasture-places.<sup>7</sup>

2. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, chap. 35.

3. C. F. Keil, *Joshua* (1863; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950) 110.

4. For a brief summary of the views and their supporters see John Holladay, "The Day(s) the Moon Stood Still," *JBL* 87 (1968) 166. See also K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern History Writing* (JSOTSup 98; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) 212–20.

5. Keil, *Joshua*, 108–9. Substantiation by Holladay, "Day(s) the Moon Stood Still," 70 n. 16.

6. Publication of these texts may be found in R. Campbell Thompson, *Reports of the Magicians and Astrologers of Nineveh and Babylon* (London: Luzac, 1900), with additional texts in L. Waterman, *Royal Correspondence of the Assyrian Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1930–36), vol. 4. Some of Thompson's texts have been republished by S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal* (AOAT 5/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970); too late for this article, all of these texts have been republished by Herman Hunger, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings* (State Archives of Assyria 8; Helsinki: University of Helsinki Press, 1992).

7. Thompson, *Reports of the Magicians*, 124:6–9.

On the other hand, when the opposition of moon and sun took place on one of the other days or weather conditions limited the ability to see when the opposition took place, it was considered a bad omen. For instance:

When the moon and sun are seen with each other on the 15th day a powerful enemy will raise his weapons against the land. The enemy will destroy the gate of my city.<sup>8</sup>

In the ancient Near East, great significance was attached to omens. If an army was going into battle, the omens would be consulted to see what they portended for the day. In the midsection of the month, the celestial omens were undoubtedly considered key indicators of the day on which battle should be joined. One can see, then, that the movement of the sun and moon potentially played a significant role in time of war, especially when a battle was to be enjoined in the middle of the month. The fact that Joshua 10 indicates that the sun is in the east and the moon in the west suggests that it is indeed the middle of the month. It is at the time of the full moon that this positioning occurs.

The terminology encountered in the celestial omens helps to clarify further the situation in Joshua 10. The verb 'to wait' (Akk. *qu<sup>22</sup>û*) is used in the texts to describe whether the sun and moon are seen together or not. If the moon does not 'wait' for the sun, it means that the moon sets before the sun rises. For example:

When the moon does not wait for the sun and disappears, there will be raging of lions and wolves. It was seen with the sun on the 15th.<sup>9</sup>

Some texts express the same idea with a slightly different wording. Rather than saying that the moon does not wait for the sun, they portray *both* the sun and the moon as waiting, so that they are not seen together.

When the moon and sun do not wait, but disappear, there will be raging of lions and wolves. It was seen with the sun on the 15th.<sup>10</sup>

The language of these texts demonstrates that the logic of coordinated movements of these heavenly bodies is not a major factor in the terminology. In addition to the verb 'to wait', another common verb in the omens is the verb 'to stand' (Akk. *izzuzu*). This verb generally conveys the visibility of one body in the sky, often relative to another body. When the moon 'stands', however, it is related to its 'course'. For in-

8. Ibid., 161:1-4.

9. Ibid., 140:1-3; cf. 153:1; 156:4; 158A:4.

10. Ibid., 160:1-3; cf. 157D:6; 159:5; 161:9-10; 171:1-3.

stance, when the moon is said to 'stand', it may mean that it does not move low enough on the horizon for the opposition to occur that would indicate the beginning of the full moon. This constitutes a negative omen on the 14th, when it is hoped that the two will "be seen together."

When the moon stands in its course, the market will be low. On the 15th it was seen with the sun.<sup>11</sup>

The three most frequent observations, then, are:

1. The moon (and sun) does not wait, indicating that the moon disappears over the horizon before the sun rises. This occurs on the days before opposition takes place.
2. The moon and sun are seen together, indicating that they have appeared in opposition on their respective horizons on the first day of the full moon. This could also be expressed by the moon's 'standing' or 'waiting'.
3. The moon stands, indicating that it is not on the horizon but further up in the sky when the sun rises. This would occur on the days after the opposition took place.

The significance of this type of terminology is further confirmed in the canonical omen series known as Enūma Anu Enlil. In this 70-tablet series, lunar omens make up the first 22 tablets. Most extant texts of the series date to the Neo-Assyrian period (Assurbanipal's library), but fragments are available from as early as the Old Babylonian period and are geographically well dispersed.<sup>12</sup> F. Rochberg-Halton summarizes the use of the terminology pertinent to this study:

In a lunar omen commentary the variation in the day of opposition is expressed in terms of the moon's velocity in its course, i.e., if it was slowed, opposition occurred early, or if accelerated, opposition occurred late.<sup>13</sup>

The text she refers to is 3:44-46:

If the moon is slowed down (*ut-tah-ha-as*) in its course . . . it is seen with the sun on the 13th day; if the moon is steady (*ne-eh*) in its course . . . it

11. Ibid., 153:7-8; cf. 161:7-8; 37:r.3.

12. Publication of Enūma Anu Enlil is still quite limited. See C. Virolleaud, *L'Astrologie chaldéenne: Le Livre intitulé "Enuma (Anu) Bel"* (Paris: Geuthner 1905-12), E. Weidner, "Die astrologische Serie Enuma Anu Enlil," *AfO* 14 (1941-44) 172-95, 308-18; and F. Rochberg-Halton, *Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination: The Lunar Eclipse Tablets of Enuma Anu Enlil* (AfO Beiheft 22; Horn, Austria: Berger, 1988).

13. Rochberg-Halton, *Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination*, 39.

is seen with the sun on the 14th day; If the moon is sped up (*e-zi*) in its course . . . it is seen with the sun on the 15th day.<sup>14</sup>

Apart from the texts indicating the movements of the heavenly bodies in relation to the first day of the full moon in the middle of the month, there are others that discuss the first appearance of the new moon, which served as the indicator for the first day of the month. The day previous to this appearance is referred to as the day that completes the month. When the month has 30 days, as it should, the days are spoken of as being their proper length or full length.<sup>15</sup> This most likely has reference to what modern astronomers call *lunar days*, a term that describes  $1/30$  of the mean synodic month, for which Babylonian astrologers simply used the word 'day'.<sup>16</sup>

Other astrological omens dealing with the planets and constellations provide meaning for the use of some of the other terminology that occurs in Joshua 10. One text describing the entry of Mars into the precincts of Cancer comments:

In the midst (*ina libbi*) it did not stand (*izzuzū*), it did not wait (*emēdu*), and it did not rest (*kāšū*); it went forth (*uṣṣū*) hurriedly.<sup>17</sup>

With this understanding of the Mesopotamian omen literature I now turn my attention to the text of Josh 10:12–14. The key verbs for interpreting the section are *dmm*, usually translated 'stand still' and *ʿmd*, usually rendered 'stop'. It has often been observed that the semantic range of *dmm* in Hebrew also includes the meaning 'to wait', as is evidenced in such passages as Lam 3:26 and Ps 37:7.<sup>18</sup> In both passages it is parallel to the root *yhl* with the meaning 'to wait' and in the latter context cannot easily be translated in any other way.

Though the root *ʿmd* can mean 'to stop', it is more frequently translated 'to stand'. 1 Sam 14:9, a noteworthy passage, is the only other place in the Old Testament where the two verbs are used together. There Jonathan discusses with his armor-bearer how they will respond to Philistine instruction.

Based on this brief lexical analysis, I translate the prayer of Joshua in Josh 10:12–13 as follows:

14. Ibid., 40.

15. Thompson, *Reports of the Magicians*, xx–xxi, and his note to text 1; for terminology see especially 205:3, *ūmi ša ušallimu*.

16. O. Neugebauer, *The Exact Sciences in Antiquity* (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1957) 128.

17. Thompson, *Reports of the Magicians*, 236:4–7.

18. A. Baumann, "Damah," *TDOT* 3.263. This was recognized as early as Keil, *Joshua*, 108.

O sun, wait over Gibeon and moon over the valley of Aijalon.  
So the sun waited and the moon stood, before the nation took vengeance on its enemies.

Is it not written in the book of Jashar,  
"The sun stood in the midst of the sky and did not hurry to set as on a day of full length"?

All of the descriptive terminology in Josh 10:12–13 was familiar from the omen texts and is best interpreted in that light. On the basis of celestial omens found at Boghaz-Köy, Qatna, Alalakh, Emar, Mari, and Ugarit, Rochberg-Halton concludes that even in the West there was "widespread 2nd millennium interest in celestial omens."<sup>19</sup> It is therefore quite likely that the Canaanites made extensive use of celestial omens and that the Israelites were familiar with the details of this class of divination. However, while the connection in terminology is clear enough to give the general direction of interpretation, the specifics of interpretation are still far from certain. If one assumes, then, that an omen was involved and that the request and the description of the event use astrological terminology, there are still a number of alternatives for interpreting the text.

The significance of the celestial omens to the text of Joshua 10 was first recognized by the renowned linguist, Robert Dick Wilson, in an article in the *Princeton Theological Review* in 1918.<sup>20</sup> He was inclined, however, to translate the verb *dmm* as 'to be eclipsed'.<sup>21</sup> He thought Joshua had requested and received an eclipse. As Barry Beitzel has recently pointed out, however, this poses a problem for the chronology.

We know exactly when solar eclipses that were observable in central Palestine took place between the years 1500 and 1000 B.C.—August 19, 1157 (8:35 A.M.), September 30, 1131 (12:35 P.M.) and November 23, 1041 (7:40 A.M.). None of those dates correlates even closely with the period of the conquest, no matter which of the two principal dates one assigns the Exodus from Egypt.<sup>22</sup>

It should further be noted that a solar eclipse cannot take place when the sun is in the east and the moon in the west. Solar eclipses can occur only at new moon (i.e., time of conjunction), and lunar eclipses can occur only at full moon phase (i.e., time of opposition).

19. Rochberg-Halton, *Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination*, 30.

20. Robert Dick Wilson, "Understanding 'The Sun Stood Still,'" *Princeton Theological Review* 16 (1918) 46–54; repr. in *Classical Evangelical Essays* (ed. Walter C. Kaiser; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) 61–66.

21. Based on a syllabary of synonyms (CT 19) that listed *atalū*, *adīnu*, and *daʿamu* together.

22. B. Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody, 1985) 97. It is on this basis that J. F. A. Sawyer dates Joshua 10 ("Joshua 10:12–14 and the Solar Eclipse of 30 September 1131 B.C.," *PEQ* 104 [1972] 139–46).

More recently, John Holladay explored the issue and concluded that Joshua was seeking a good omen for himself and the armies of Israel.

The first stich is a prayer (or incantation) that the sun and moon will "stand" in opposition on a day favorable to "the nation" (most probably the fourteenth of the month) rather than to her enemies. The second and third stichoi, then, simply report a favorable outcome to the prayer, "the nation" in effect gaining its ascendancy over "its enemies" during those few fateful minutes of opposition when the great lunar and solar orbs "stood" in the balance.<sup>23</sup>

But there are several difficulties with Holladay's view as well. First, it assumes that Joshua believed in omens and was seeking a favorable one for the benefit of his army. While it is not difficult to believe that many of the Israelites believed in omens and their significance, the prohibitions against divination practices make it much less likely that Joshua would have been portrayed as giving any credence to them. Second, the narrator's wording of the results suggests that Joshua was asking for a negative omen, for the text states that the conditions were not those of a "full-length day," that is to say, a favorable day.

I would like to offer the following interpretation of the text as a tentative explanation for the details given in the biblical account. Based on the use of the verbs 'wait' and 'stand' in the celestial omens and the timing of the prayer, stated as being approximately sunrise, one must conclude that the moon was moving toward the western horizon while the early rays of the sun were becoming visible on the eastern horizon. If the previous day had been cloudy, Joshua and the Israelites would not have known whether opposition had occurred already or not. Whatever day of the month it happened to be, the Amorites would be watching the sunrise very carefully to determine whether or not this would be a propitious day for battle. If it was the 14th of the month, Joshua would have known that the Amorites were hoping for the opposition of the sun and moon to occur as a favorable omen. If it was the 15th, they would have been hoping that opposition would not occur. Joshua, as a good general, would have hoped that the enemy would receive a bad omen, greatly damaging their morale. Though he himself was not swayed by omens, he knew of their great significance to the enemy and perhaps the impact they had on his own army. The terminology suggests he requested that the sun and moon wait or stand, in opposition; because of this request, I infer that it was the 15th of the month. The result reported is that the request was answered, eventuating in Israel avenging herself on the enemy. Some have objected that the text says the heavenly bodies performed

23. Holladay, "Day(s) the Moon Stood Still," 166-78.

their requested actions 'until' the battle was complete.<sup>24</sup> However, Waltke and O'Connor list the meaning 'before' for <sup>c</sup>ad in passages in which the action prior to the preposition is antecedent to and in preparation for the action in the clause introduced by <sup>c</sup>ad.<sup>25</sup> Though the account of the prayer comes after the report of the hailstorm in the text, the particle that introduces v. 12 (<sup>ʿ</sup>az) does not suggest that the prayer of Joshua was subsequent to the routing hailstorm.<sup>26</sup> Rather, the narrator's priority is to describe the part played by God's victory-producing special effects before explaining Joshua's unusual request.

The citation from the Book of Jasher in v. 13 is used to confirm the statement that "the sun stood in the midst of the sky." This wording does not demand that the event occurred at midday. Rather, the sky was viewed as having various segments, one major segment being below the horizon, others being above the horizon, and so on. One possibility is that the sun 'stood' in its half of the sky (that is, the eastern half). 'Standing' in the celestial omens refers to taking a position in relation to another body. The wording in Joshua is not significantly different from the statement in the celestial omens that the moon "stood in its course."

The movement of the sun is further explained in v. 13 by the statement that it did not hurry to set. The Hebrew verb used here regularly refers to the setting of the sun, but that does not mean that setting is imminent. From the time that the sun rises it is moving toward setting. Since the sun is in the east, this is simply to be understood as another way of saying that the sun 'waited' or 'stood'.

The description of the event ends by comparing the conditions of this day to a "full-length day." When the full moon comes on the 14th, and the month has the proper number of days, then each of the days of the month is a "full-length" day. This is what constitutes a good omen. In this text, the sun and moon do not act as they would on a "full-length" day. So, again, I assume that the day in question is the 15th of the month. If that is the case, when opposition occurred, it indicated that the month did not contain "full-length" days.

24. Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 214.

25. B. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990) §11.2.12b/p. 215; see Gen 43:25, Exod 22:25, Num 10:21, and 2 Kgs 16:11. This possibility would negate the criticisms of M. Weinfeld ("Divine Intervention in War in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East," in *History, Historiography and Interpretation* [ed. H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984] 146) and P. D. Miller (*The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973] 126).

26. Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 211.

I would like to emphasize again that in this interpretation, the omen was not requested because Joshua believed in omens. Rather, it was because he knew that his enemies did. Joshua therefore sought to use their own superstitions against them. It is of passing interest that even in the abbinic work *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer*, a similar perspective is adopted.

Joshua noticed that the heathen were using sorcery to make the heavenly hosts intercede for them in the fight against the Israelites, so Joshua invoked the name of the Lord to make them be still.<sup>27</sup>

Whether this reconstruction of the events of Joshua 10 is accurate or not is difficult to prove. But the evidence from the celestial observations does make it clear that the wording of Joshua's prayer should be understood as technical terminology used for the normal and regular movements of the heavenly bodies. Another point in favor of my view is the fact that it offers a logical reason for Joshua to focus on the sun and moon. A final piece of evidence from the incantation literature of Mesopotamia shows how common this type of language was. In a first-millennium *balag*-lamentation entitled "He Is a Storm, At the Healing," the first nine lines describe the anger of the gods. Lines ten through fifteen contain the following:

The heavens continually rumbled, the earth continually shook;  
The sun lay at the horizon  
The moon stopped still in the midst of the sky  
In the sky the great lights disappeared  
An evil storm . . . the nations  
A deluge swept over the lands.<sup>28</sup>

It is therefore a distortion of the biblical text to suggest that Joshua was requesting that the rotation of heavenly bodies actually cease. Some will complain that this interpretation makes the event far too common and ordinary. After all, the opposition might have occurred even if Joshua had not prayed. Where is the supernatural in this? In response I can only point out that even in prayers today one often prays for something to happen and when it does, considers it a marvelous answer to prayer. The role of God is not diminished just because the event prayed for might have happened without human prayers.

27. *Pirqe R. El.*, §52; cited from L. Ginzberg (ed.), *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1947) 4.11.

28. Mark Cohen, *The Canonical Lamentations of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Potomac, Md.: Capital Decisions, 1988) 2.427-39.

## Asking Historical Questions of Joshua 13-19: Recent Discussion Concerning the Date of the Boundary Lists

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### EARLY STUDY

Albrecht Alt has provided the foundation on which virtually all historical-geographical work on Joshua 13-19 is based.<sup>1</sup> He accomplished this by making two important observations. First, he recognized that the integrity of the material in these chapters was antecedent to any editorial activity. As a result, he argued that the historical issues addressed by the text of Joshua 13-19 are not dependent on the particular literary source to which they may be assigned or to the date of that source.<sup>2</sup> Of course this realization does not alter the fact that profound changes might have been introduced into the text by later editorial activity. Instead, it permits liberty in the use of archaeological and ancient Near Eastern data to identify and date this particular text. This is especially true because the text is filled with place-names that correlate (1) with archaeological sites having records of occupation and (2) with datable ancient Near Eastern texts that mention these sites.

Second, Alt distinguished two primary forms of literature in these chapters. He found town lists that describe regions comprising tribal allotments. He also noted boundary descriptions separating one tribe from

1. See especially A. Alt's "Judas Gaue unter Josia," *PJ* 21 (1925) 100-116; repr. in *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (Munich: Beck, 1953) 2.276-88. For a summary of Alt's views with bibliography, see my "Tribes, Territories of the," *ISBE* 4.907.

2. Despite the assignment of Joshua 13-19 to a Priestly source, the recognition that its content derives from earlier sources and must be evaluated on the merits of those sources is argued by F. M. Cross Jr. and G. E. Wright, "The Boundary and Province Lists of the Kingdom of Judah," *JBL* 75 (1956) 202 n. 1.