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# THE EXPOSITOR.

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## *JOSHUA COMMANDING THE SUN AND THE MOON TO STAND STILL.*

JOSHUA X. 12-15.

THERE is probably no one passage in the Bible on which those who hold the Christian Faith to be an outworn creed pounce with more malicious delight than the verses in which we are told that Joshua bade the sun stand still over Gibeon and the moon over the Valley of Ajalon. "Here," they say, "the Bible pledges itself to an enormous and exorbitant miracle, which we can easily prove to be impossible, incredible even;" and forthwith they proceed to shew, what indeed Copernicus long since proved to be true, that in its relation to the earth the sun always stands still, or to calculate the immense and direful results that would inevitably ensue were the revolution of the earth on its axis suddenly arrested; —man, with all his works, would be flung from the surface of the globe, the earth itself would be shattered by the force of its own momentum, the moon would share its fate, the balance of the solar system would be deranged, and so on through the whole chapter of logical accidents.

All these arguments, however, have naturally produced very little effect on reasonable men, and that because, logical as they look, they are utterly illogical and absurd. For those who believe in miracles believe also that they are wrought by an almighty God. And when once we believe in the Almighty, it is a very simple inference that no miracle, however stupendous, can be beyond his power. To *Him* it can be no greater effort to impress his will on the whole physical universe than to bend an atom to his will. To acknowledge his power to be illimitable, and then to limit it by affirming that He cannot do this and cannot do that, is as illogical nonsense as any ever talked under the sun. Before any miracle can be pronounced impossible, if, at least, there be a sufficient motive for working it, it must be proved either that there is no God or that God is not almighty. Before any miracle can be pronounced incredible, it must be shewn to be unworthy of God, opposed either to his perfect wisdom or to his perfect goodness.

To those, therefore, who pronounce *this* miracle impossible, we reply, "Nothing is impossible with God." But with those who think it incredible that God should arrest the whole solar system in order to give a single race the victory over its foes, we must take a wholly different line. Of them we demand, "Where is any such miracle affirmed?" If they answer, "Why, in the very passage in the Book of Joshua to which you have referred," we respond: "No; there is no miracle recorded here." If, taken by surprise at the rejoinder, they say, "But the popular view of this passage has always

affirmed it to record a miracle, and one of the greatest of miracles!" we reply, "You object to the miracle as opposed to the teachings of science. As men of science you profess to verify your facts for yourselves, and not to be imposed upon by superficial appearances, and still less by popular views and impressions concerning them. And, therefore, before you permitted yourselves to make merry over this "enormous and exorbitant miracle," you should at least have made sure, and made sure *for yourselves*, that a miracle was affirmed. You, of all men, have the least right to ground an argument on popular and unverified impressions."

And, indeed, the main charge to which many who are now forward in disputing the facts and truths recorded in the Bible expose themselves is precisely this—that, while they are very careful to ascertain the facts and laws of science, they do not study the Bible for themselves and seek with equal care to discover what its facts and truths really are. If they would but verify these for themselves, instead of negligently accepting the popular assumptions, which everywhere else they distrust—and so much they are bound to do if they *will* speak, not only of Scripture as well as of science, but of the most difficult passages in Holy Scripture—it is very certain that they would arrive at very different conclusions to those which they now too commonly reach.

But many of those who believe in the Biblical revelation will be no less surprised than some of those who reject it, by the assertion that no miracle is affirmed in the passage before us. And, therefore, it may be well, first, to give the passage itself in full ;

then, to tell the story of which it forms part; and, last of all, to shew what it really means.

1. *The Passage* runs thus (I take it straight from the Hebrew, and try to preserve its poetic form):

“Then spake Joshua unto Jehovah,  
In the day that God gave up the Amorites to the Children of Israel;  
And he said, in the sight of Israel:  
Stand thou still, O sun, upon Gibeon,  
And thou, O moon, on the Valley of Ajalon!  
And the sun stood still,  
And the moon stayed,  
Until the nation had avenged them on their enemies.  
(Is not this written in the Book of Jasher?)  
Yea, the sun stood still in the midst of heaven,  
And hasted not to go down for a whole day.  
And there was no day like that before it or after it,  
That Jehovah heard the voice of a man;  
For Jehovah fought for Israel.  
And Joshua returned, and all Israel with him,  
Unto the camp in Gilgal.”

2. *The Story* is as follows. When the Hebrews, led by Joshua, had crossed the river and entered the valley of the Jordan, the first care of their great captain was to seize on the passes which led to the interior of Palestine. By the conquest of Ai one of these passes was secured. The tribes already in possession of the land took alarm. One of these tribes, the Gibeonites, determined, if possible, to come to terms with the invaders. By an ingenious stratagem—by coming to him in old garments and sandals, with well-worn sacks on their asses and mouldy bread in their sacks—they beguiled Joshua into the belief that they came from “a very far country,” and induced him to make peace with them and to promise that he would “let them live.” The compact, obtained dishonourably, was honourably maintained by Joshua and the princes of the Con-

gregation. And, indeed, there was a sufficient military reason for treating the wily but submissive Gibeonites leniently; for they held the head of another pass, the pass of Beth-horon, and by their submission a new road into the land was laid open to the Israelites.

When, however, the kings of southern Palestine heard in their mountain fastnesses that Gibeon had gone over to the enemy, they determined to take vengeance on their former allies, and to close the pass which they had opened to the common foe. Five of these kings—the kings of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon—gathered themselves together, and encamped against Gibeon. The terrified Gibeonites sent an urgent summons to Joshua, their new ally, for their peril was great: “Slack not thy hand from thy servants; come up to us quickly, and save us, and help us!” Nothing loth, Joshua seized the opportunity of encountering the hostile kings. As the need was sharp and pressing, he made a forced march, traversing in a single night the space between Gilgal and Gibeon, a distance which on a previous occasion it had taken him three days to cover,—so bent was he on striking a sudden blow which might break the hostile confederation to pieces before it gathered its full strength.

The five kings of the Amorites, and their combined host, taken at unawares, were unable to stand the onset of Joshua’s “mighty men of valour.” They broke, and fled up the western pass, “the way that *goeth up* to Beth-horon.” Up the weary length of this steep difficult pass the flying host had to toil,

chased by their eager foes, and suffering a great slaughter, till they reached the hamlet of Upper Beth-horon, at the crown of the pass.

When the pursuing army of Israel reached this point, the summit of the pass, a broad and noble scene would open before them, extending even to the blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea. But, doubtless, they would cast but a rapid glance on the *distant* scene. That which would most attract their eyes would be the rough steep road, heavy with loose stones and shale, broken at intervals with sharp upturned edges, and again by smooth slippery sheets of rock, which led down to Lower Beth-horon, and over which their discomfited enemies were flying in wild disorder, amid the horrors of a tropical storm. For it was as the Amorites turned the crest of the pass, "in the *going down* to Beth-horon," that they met a fierce tempest driving up from the sea; thunder, lightning, and a deluge of hail storming down on their broken ranks, the Lord casting down great stones upon them, so that "they were more that died of the hailstones than they whom the children of Israel slew with the sword."

It must have been a weird and marvellous spectacle which burst on the panting warriors of Israel as they topped the pass. Behind them lay the hills which hid Gibeon from view, while from high above those hills the sun shone hotly on their backs. Beneath them the steep mountain-path sloped sharply into the valley, all thick with their scattered and disheartened foes; while, before them, black clouds of tempest rolled up from the sea, and the faint crescent moon glimmered through a rift in the clouds

over the distant Valley of Ajalon. To Joshua and his captains the scene would be as unwelcome as it was strange. For here were their foes utterly at their mercy, and, if the daylight would but last, sure to be well-nigh exterminated by a terrible slaughter. But here, too, was the tempest driving up the valley from the sea, threatening to blot out the light of the sun, and, by bringing the day to a premature close, to give their foes an opportunity of escape.

At such a conjuncture as this, the natural thought of Joshua, his wish, perhaps his prayer, would be, "O that the daylight would last, that the darkening tempest might be dispersed, and that we might *see* our foes till the victory be complete!" If this was his wish, his prayer—and we shall soon see that the Sacred Record implies no more than this—his prayer would be answered as the storm blew by and the sun shone out through the clouds. In some way it *was* answered; for the Israelites did chase the Amorites down the pass and through the valley, smiting them with a very great slaughter. So vehement was the chase that, even when tidings were brought to Joshua that the five hostile kings had hid themselves in a great cave past which the flight swept, he refused to pause in the pursuit, save to roll great rocks against the entrance to the cave. It was not till they had made an end of slaying, when at last the light of this memorable day failed them, that, on their return, the weary victors hanged the five kings on five trees of the grove which overshadowed the cave, and buried them in the very cavern in which they had taken refuge.



3. *The Problem* suggested by this story is a very simple one, and is capable of a simple and easy solution by any man who will be at the pains of studying the Sacred Narrative for himself. This problem is started of course by the words which represent the sun as *standing still* on, or over, the hills of Gibeon, and the moon over the Valley of Ajalon, at the command or prayer of Joshua. But the verses in which these words are found have peculiarities about them so marked as even to obtrude themselves on our attention.

(1) Mark, first of all, how the passage is inserted into the Narrative. It is *thrust*, as it were, into the very middle of the story, just as Joshua has reached the summit of the pass of Beth-horon, and before the pursuit down the pass and through the valley commences. The first part of the story has been told in the previous verses of the Chapter; and yet this passage, instead of taking for granted what has already been said, opens with a formal declaration that we are now to hear what Joshua said to the Lord "*in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites into the hand of Israel.*" The latter part of the story has still to be told in the closing verses of the Chapter, and yet this passage forestalls the end of the day by its final words: "*And Joshua returned, and all Israel with him, unto the camp in Gilgal.*" Indeed, if we read the Chapter with any attention, we are somewhat amazed and confused to come, in verse 15, on the statement that at the close of the day Joshua and his host returned to Gilgal, and then to be taken back, by the verses which immediately follow it, to the

middle of the day and the pursuit down the pass. No unprejudiced student can read the whole Chapter, and consider the significance of the manner in which this singular passage is inserted into it, without reaching the conclusion that he is reading, not one document, but two; that the whole story of the battle is told *twice*—once, with some fulness in the Chapter in general, and once, but much more briefly, in verses 12–15. He will naturally infer that the sacred historian has paused in the very midst of his narrative, to cite an ancient and well-known document which gave the story of the battle in a more succinct, yet more impassioned, form.

(2) If he then set himself to inquire what the character of this more ancient document is, he will soon discover that it is an antique poem; for the form and rhythm of the passage is, in the Original, distinctly poetic. And, moreover, even from our English version, it is quite obvious that we are intended to read it with the imagination—poetically, and not literally, not attaching an exact and scientific meaning to every term the Poet employs. For, if in one line he says “the sun *stood still*,” in another he says “it *hasted not* to go down,” *i.e.*, it did *not* stand still, but went down slowly, and, as it were, reluctantly.

(3) Both these natural and instinctive conclusions—that it is *poetry* we are reading, and poetry *cited from an ancient document*—are confirmed by the parenthetical question of verse 13: “*Is not this written in the Book of Jasher?*” For the *Sepher Jasher*, or Book of Jasher, was, as the best authorities assure us, a collection of songs, dating from the most ancient times, but extending at least to

the time of David, in which the famous deeds of the great heroes of Hebrew story were recounted in glowing verse. David's elegy on Saul and Jonathan, for example, is quoted from the Book of Jasher,<sup>1</sup> and quoted in precisely the same informal and parenthetical way in which the song of the battle of Beth-horon is quoted in the Book of Joshua. So that we have the fullest reason for concluding both that verses 12-15 are a citation from an earlier work, and that they give us a poetical version of the battle which the historian describes in prose.

(4) But what do we gain by learning that it is ancient poetry that we are reading, and not ancient history? We gain this—that we know *how* to read it; we know that we must read it, not as an exact and literal description, but as an imaginative and poetically-embellished version of the battle of Beth-horon; we know that we must read it in the same way, and with the same allowance, that we read other Hebrew poems. As we read those other poems we see *the heavens rend* under the throne of Jehovah, *the hills and the mountains skip*, *the waters flee*, *the trees of the field clap their hands*, at the presence of the Lord. But we are in no danger of insisting, or of hearing sceptical men of science insist, that these figures must be taken in a literal sense. Neither we nor they for a moment suppose that a material throne descended through the clouds, that the hills and mountains joined in a mad reel, that the rivers ran away upon their feet, or that the trees, wild with joy, put forth leafy hands and clapped them together with a loud noise.

<sup>1</sup> 2 Samuel i. 17-27.

So, again, when, in that other citation from the Book of Jasher, David's "Song of the Bow," we read of Saul and Jonathan,—

"They were swifter than eagles,  
They were stronger than lions,"

even though this also be an historical song, we are in no danger of affirming, or of supposing the Psalmist to affirm, that Saul and his son could literally outstrip the eagle in his homeward flight, or that they outdid the lion in sheer muscular force. If we have any sense at all, we have sense enough to read poetry as poetry, and not to impute to it the exactness and precision of scientific prose.

When, for example, David says,<sup>1</sup> "In my distress I cried unto the Lord, and he heard my voice; *he bowed the heaven and came down; he stretched his hand out of the height, took me, and drew me out of many waters,*" we do not even pause to ask in what sense we are to understand his words; we instinctively remember that we are reading a Psalm, and make the requisite allowance for the imaginative and impassioned tone of his language. We do not for an instant suppose that God stretched a physical arm down through a physical heaven, and plucked David out of a boiling flood in which he was in imminent danger of being drowned. Nor do we for an instant deny either that David prayed to God from the depth of some great trouble, or that he received or thought he received an answer to his prayer. We at once understand that, in answer to his cry for help, God delivered his servant from a peril as dreadful and overwhelming as a flood, by

<sup>1</sup> Psalm xviii.

an act of grace as marvellous as though He had stretched down a hand out of heaven. In short, we admit a basis of historical fact in the Psalmist's words, and we allow for and admire the beauty of the form in which he clothed the fact.

But we may find a still closer illustration than any we have yet adduced. In Chapter iv. of the Book of Judges we have a perfectly simple and prosaic account of the great battle in which Barak, with his ten thousand men, discomfited the vast host of Sisera. In the very next Chapter we have a second description of the battle couched in poetic forms; for this battle is the theme of the ancient poem known as "The Song of Deborah;" a poem which many competent critics pronounce the finest battle-song in the literature of the world. In the historical account of the battle there is no mention of any celestial or supernatural aid vouchsafed to Barak beyond the usual reference to the fact that the Lord was on the side of Israel. But in the poetical version, in the Song of Deborah, we are told that "*the stars out of their courses fought against Sisera.*" Are we then to suppose—has any sane man ever supposed—that the stars shot madly from their spheres to contend against the foes of Israel? No such miracle as this has ever been imagined. As we have read this noble figure of speech, we have understood Deborah's meaning to be that all the forces of the universe are leagued against the enemies of God up to the very stars that shine in the sky.

Why, then, when once we discover that in this tenth Chapter of Joshua we have two documents, one an historical account of the battle of Beth-horon,

which gives us no hint of any supernatural arrest of the sun and the moon, and the other a poetic version of that battle, which depicts the sun as standing still on Gibeon and the moon as staying over the Valley of Ajalon, — why are we to take *this* poetic version literally any more than Deborah's poetic version of the battle of Kishon, and to infer that a stupendous miracle was wrought in order that Joshua's victory over the host of the five kings might be complete? We are not bound to take it so; nay, we are bound *not* to take it so unless we mean to take all the poetry in the Bible literally, and to imagine the Word of God full of grotesque and impossible miracles—the trees clapping their hands, and the hills skipping like rams, and the stars leaving their orbits to engage in conflict with men.

What the exact basis of historical fact was which the sacred poet quoted by Joshua had in view when he sang of the sun and the moon as coming to the help of Israel, we cannot determine with precision. It may be that, as he stood on the summit of the Beth-horon pass, and saw the dark tempest driving up the valley from the sea, Joshua prayed that the light of day might not be obscured, *that the tempest might be dispersed*; and to this simple incident, if the prayer were uttered and answered, the Poet may have given the imaginative and hyperbolic expression we find in his verses. Or it may be that he only had in view *the astonishing greatness of the victory*, and meant to imply that so vast an achievement demanded more than the ordinary length of an ordinary day. Or, just as Deborah,

when singing of the stars that fought against Sisera, probably intended to imply that all the forces of Nature are arrayed against the enemies of God; so our Poet, in singing of the arrest of the sun and the moon, may only have intended to imply, *that all the forces of Nature are for the servants and friends of God*, that when we do his will the whole universe is on our side.

We are not responsible for defining the exact shade of meaning he had in his mind. What we are responsible for is that we rightly conceive, that at least we do not wilfully or carelessly misconceive, his general intention. If, in the teeth of analogy and common sense, we take his poetry as prose, or if we are not at the pains to discover that it is a poet who is speaking to us; if, by our negligent misconceptions, we first saddle the Bible with "an enormous and exorbitant miracle," and then reject the Bible because of the miracle we have thrust into it, shall we not, at least in our better moods, be the first to condemn ourselves?

If they are not negligent students of the Bible, assuredly the interpretation of this passage which is given here will not be new to any who read it. The evidences of its truth lie on the very surface of the Chapter; one has not to dig for them. Jewish rabbi and Christian father have insisted on it for centuries. Almost every modern Commentator of any vogue has accepted it. So that they are without excuse who have been misled by the popular misconception, and have ventured to make merry or to wax sarcastic over a miracle which they and their like have themselves created out of a poetic figure of speech.

Any honest critic, who had committed himself to a similar blunder in dealing with a figurative passage quoted from the Greek tragedians or the English poets, would be terribly ashamed of himself when his blunder was exposed. Let us hope that the sceptical critics of the Bible may have the grace to blush when they find how childish a blunder they have made in taking the verses of a poem, not simply for a prose description of an actual event, but for a grave record of a stupendous and incredible miracle.

S. COX.

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*THE SEPTUAGINT TRANSLATION.*

I.

I PURPOSE in the following paper to make a few remarks on the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which is called the Septuagint, and after briefly glancing at its history, to give one or two illustrations of its interest and importance. It is unfortunate, but, amid the conflicting claims of so many great branches of study, it is perhaps inevitable, that Hebrew should, with rare exceptions, form no part of ordinary school training, and that, in consequence of this, the large majority even of the clergy of various denominations are unacquainted with the language in which were enshrined the oracles of God. When the period of training is over, most men find themselves plunged in the pressing occupations of daily duty, and are simply unable to secure any adequate leisure for special studies, even if the heavy labours of life leave them