'SUN, STAND THOU STILL'

(Joshua x, 12)

WHAT actually took place on this occasion? Certain moderns appear to have little doubt about the matter. 'It is hardly necessary to say that the adjuration to the sun to stand still is purely poetical and is to be compared with the words of Deborah's song "The stars in their courses fought against Sisera". The compiler of this book, however, took it as an actual prayer that was really granted, as is seen from the words "So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven".' Samuel Holmes, Comm. Joshua, in *Peake's Commentary*, p. 253. In other words, nothing unusual took place. The sun and moon are simply poetically described as acting on behalf of Josue. Now we may grant, for the sake of argument, that such a mode of expression is allowable in this context (though there are many who would not agree that it is a Semitic form of speech). But what are we to say of verses 13b–14? Here is the root of the problem. Taken in their obvious sense, it certainly looks as if 'the compiler of this book' understood the poem as recording an objective 'stopping' of the sun. In this, say our moderns, he was mistaken. He took a poetical expression as recording literal fact. But is it quite as simple as that?

THE DAYLIGHT PROLONGED?

What, in the first place, has tradition to say on the subject? Apart from the Book of Ecclesiasticus which will be considered later, the earliest evidence we have seems to be that of Josephus (*c.* A.D. 93), who is quite sure that something objective occurred. 'It happened', he says, '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' (*Antiq.* V, i, 17). Josephus then holds not merely that something objective occurred, but also that it was a lengthening of the daylight. Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, takes verse 14 quite literally, namely that the sun stopped in the midst of heaven, (i.e. at mid-day) and did not move again for the space of one whole day, i.e. until the next mid-day. This means that there was a day of thirty-six hours more or less, i.e. from dawn on the day of the battle, until sunset the following day. 'You (Jews) witnessed the sun stand still in the heavens by the order of that man whose name was Jesus (Josue) and not go down for 36 hours', *Dial. cum Tryph.* Cap. 132. In general, the Fathers understood the passage to mean a lengthening of the daylight.

The event is not *per se* a matter of faith or morals any more than, for example the question of whether all those outside the Ark perished in the Flood. Consequently, the above interpretation, even if universally accepted for centuries is not for *that* reason binding on us. 'In those

things' says Pope Leo XIII, 'which do not come under the obligation of faith, the saints were at liberty to hold divergent opinions, just as we ourselves are,' *Providentissimus Deus*. If we have good reasons for further investigation into the meaning of the passage, we are quite free to do so.

Various Theories on Prolongation of the Daylight

How in fact have commentators understood this lengthening of the daylight? At first, as we have seen already, commentators understood it as having been brought about literally by the stopping of the sun. Then, when the Copernican theory gained general acceptance, interpreters explained the event as a stoppage of the earth's revolution. This of course would involve retaining everything in position on its surface, particularly the oceans, and further the keeping in place of the vast mass which is the core of the earth. No one who believes in God, will doubt that He who made the earth—indeed the whole visible creation—could both stop the revolution of the earth and prevent any consequent dislocation. Undoubtedly, God could do so, if He wished, but it may be doubted if He did wish. It would, for example, have been a very different procedure from what we know to be normally adopted by Him. Miracles are worked not only with an end in view but also in relation to circumstances. There appears to be a certain proportion between the miracle and the end to be obtained. What was the end in this case? The battle was certainly of great importance. It has even been described as one of the decisive battles of the world. Had Israel lost, they might have been thrown back across the Jordan, and the gaining of the Promised Land might have been long delayed. However, even granting this, it still seems inadequate reason for so stupendous a miracle. That is to say, it seems improbable that God would stop the revolution of the earth merely to provide extra daylight for the Israelites to finish their battle. Moreover, it is fair to suppose that had such a thing happened there would be some mention of it in the traditions of many nations—but of this there is not the least trace.

While rejecting the suggestion that the earth stopped, many Catholics to-day retain the interpretation that there was a lengthening of the daylight so that the Israelites might complete their victory. Some appear to content themselves with asserting this, without going into any details to explain it. The references to sun and moon, they say are poetical expressions and do not have to be taken literally. Others attempt to interpret the matter scientifically. This would not of course do away with the miracle, for it remains true that it took place at Josue's prayer and on an unprecedented scale. It is suggested, for example, that we have here a case of abnormal refraction of light at sunset. At the moment of setting, the sun is often seen to be higher than it really is, when certain

atmospheric conditions obtain. The sun may indeed seem to be raised vertically as much as the length of its diameter, when close to, or on, or just below the horizon. Others again have suggested a reflection of the sun's rays from the clouds as it sinks beneath the horizon. More recently it has been suggested that the extra daylight was caused by meteorites. A shower of these in Siberia in 1908 produced a strong light which was observed as far away as Sweden from about an hour after sunset until about two o'clock in the morning, cf. *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, October 1946, p. 117. Within certain limits of course, it does not really matter very much which natural phenomenon, if any, God utilized and intensified. The important thing is the general agreement that there was some prolongation of the light.

The Battle and its Geographical Setting

Now a closer examination of the account raises a number of questions which are difficult if not impossible to answer on the theory that daylight was prolonged. At this point it will be well to give some account of the battle and of the events preceding and following it. The position before the battle was that five kings of Canaan with their armies were besieging the city of Gabaon, because its inhabitants had made a treaty with the Israelites. The latter were encamped at Gilgal by the Jordan, between between Jericho and the river. The inhabitants of Gabaon sent an urgent request to Josue for help and he answered at once. 'So Josue, going up from Gilgal all the night, came upon them suddenly' (Joshua x, 9). The modern village of El Jib has long been regarded as the site of ancient Gabaon. 'It is found some six miles to the north-north-west of Jerusalem in a small plain, wherein it occupies an imposing position upon an isolated knoll . . . To the west its level lands reach out a mile or more and then break away into a stony valley, the Wady Selman, which leads down below Beth Horon into the valley of Aijalon, near Yalo' (Garstang, *Joshua-Judges*, p. 162). What of the country between Gabaon and the Jordan? We must here recall that while Gabaon is nearly 2,500 feet above sea level, situated as it is on the backbone of Palestine, Gilgal by the Jordan is over 1,000 feet below sea level. The distance between the two places is nearly twenty miles—and the country is mountainous, barren and exceedingly rough. A night march through country of this sort involving a climb of over 3,000 feet would be no light matter. What was the time of year? There are few indications to go by. After crossing the Jordan the Israelites had celebrated the Pasch (Joshua v, 10) i.e. the 14–21st Nisan (Abib), which coincides roughly with our March–April. Since then, the Israelites had captured Jericho and Hai and had renewed the Covenant on mounts Hebal and Gerizim. Following that had come the deputation from the city of Gabaon and the treaty with them. The

siege of Gabaon must have started soon afterwards. To allow time for all these events to take place we can hardly put the siege much earlier than the month of June. If this is correct then we have one good reason for a night march—namely to avoid the heat of the day.

When did the attack take place? All we have to go on here is the statement that 'Josue came upon them suddenly for he went up from Gilgal all the night' (Joshua x, 9). This suggests a surprise attack at daybreak. No doubt the men would need time for a rest after their exhausting march, in order to regain their strength before battle, but it is difficult to see what verse 9 means if we interpose a long interval between march and battle. Moreover, the element of surprise would seem to require an attack at dawn. Indeed the whole narrative suggests this. Similar attacks have been made at other times in history without any appreciable interval for rest before battle. The surprise factor makes up for the fatigue of the troops, indeed often it more than makes up for it, and may even supply for inferiority in numbers. Further, the text itself suggests dawn. As Dr Rowley has noted,[1] if the sun were over Gabaon to the east, and the moon in the valley of Aijalon to the west (verse 12) from the standpoint of the speaker placed between the two, the time would be morning (though clearly we should not attach too exact a meaning to a fragment of an epic poem.)

The actual battle would hardly last more than a few hours, and perhaps much less. The slaughter was heavy and the enemy took to flight. Israel 'chased them by the way of the ascent of Beth Horon' (RV). This place lay to the north-west of Gabaon at a distance of about eight miles. It was situated on a low isolated hill and overlooked the Wady Selman to the south. The road to it from Gabaon ran across the rough plain for some miles, then along a projecting spur to a crest somewhat higher than the plain and descended sharply to Beth Horon, seven hundred feet below and about two miles from the crest just mentioned. In later times this was the main road from Jerusalem to Joppa. Another road led from Gabaon in a more westerly direction across the plain and straight down the Wady Selman, passing below Beth Horon.

It was while the enemy were in flight, having already sustained heavy losses, that a fresh disaster befell them. A hailstorm of unprecedented severity now burst upon them and we read with astonishment that more were slain by the hail-stones than by the swords of the Israelites (verse 11). The maximum recorded weight of a hailstone is about two pounds or one kilogramme and no one will dispute the lethal quality of an object of this weight falling from such a height. Severe hailstorms are very common, for example in the Transvaal, South Africa, where cattle are often killed by stones as large as cricket balls. In Europe

[1] *The Re-discovery of the Old Testament*, p. 68.

they are a great scourge in vine-growing countries, where stones the size of golf balls may occur. Benvenuto Cellini describes a hailstorm in which a great many shepherds were killed, *Life* (Bk IV, chap. i). But we may be pardoned for not accepting his unsupported statement. There is, however, some evidence that a man has occasionally been killed by hail. This brief investigation only shows up all the more clearly the remarkable character of the storm that burst over Israel's enemies, and we need not hesitate to regard it as miraculous.[1]

The battle then seems to have taken place in the morning, a great slaughter was made of the enemy who took to flight. As they fled they suffered even heavier casualties from the hailstorm which burst upon them. Altogether things had gone very nicely for Israel and the decision seemed already reached.

What Did Josue Ask For?

Then comes the extraordinary passage (Joshua x, 12ff) which states apparently that the sun stood still at Josue's request so that he could complete his victory over the Canaanites. We may be pardoned for asking why he should want *this* particular miracle worked for him, since (a) the victory was already won and the hail was doing greater execution among the enemy than his own men had been able to achieve; (b) it was apparently not later than mid-day,[2] so that there were many hours of daylight left in which to complete the discomfiture of the enemy. (c) taking verse 13b quite literally we must assume that there was continuous daylight for at least 36 hours, i.e. from dawn on the day of battle until sunset of the following day, cf. Justin Martyr, loc. cit. If the daylight was extended, it was presumably to allow Israel to pursue and kill the enemy. Are we therefore to suppose that they made a forced march from Galgal to Gabaon through difficult country, attacked at dawn, routed the enemy all during that day, and pursued them all that night and the following day? On this calculation, Josue's men would have been in continuous march or battle for two nights and two days or very nearly so.

At this point the supporters of the 'daylight theory' will interrupt: 'You are taking the text far too literally', they will say, 'Not only the poetic passage of 12–13a is to be understood in a wide sense, but also verse 13b. We need not suppose that the sun appeared to be still, literally, in the midst of heaven from mid-day to mid-day. It is surely only necessary to take these words as a description in rather colourful language

[1] For another occasion on which the Lord provided a storm to assist Israel against their enemies, see I Kings vii, 10.

[2] *bahᵃsi*, an exact term (verse 13b). In reckoning the time of day we rely on this and data already given and not on any calculation based on the relative position of sun and moon as mentioned in verse 12.

of a miraculous prolongation of daylight—for how long, we cannot say, nor do we really need to enquire.'

And here perhaps we are approaching the heart of the matter. The 'daylight theory' supporters say that although it is hard to explain the point of the miracle in its context, nevertheless the plain meaning of the text demands the 'daylight' interpretation and we ought to keep to it. But when asked to explain further, it would seem that they are not so ready to accept its 'plain meaning'.[1]

The Darkness Theory

Another solution appears to be at least as close to the text as the ones already mentioned and to make better sense of the whole narrative.[2]

When the hailstorm was at its height it was yet but mid-day (13b). Why should Josue be anxious about daylight? Surely if he prayed for anything at that moment it was for a continuation of the storm?

At this point it is necessary to give a full translation of the Hebrew text, and for convenience we print that of the Revised Version:

'Then spake Joshua to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel; and he said in the sight of Israel,

Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon;
And thou, moon, in the valley of Aijalon.
And the sun stood still and the moon stayed,
Until the nation had avenged themselves of their enemies.'

Is not this written in the Book of Jashar? And the sun stayed in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day. And there was no day like that before it or after it, that the Lord hearkened unto the voice of a man: for the Lord fought for Israel (Joshua x, 12-14).

The word translated 'stand still' is *damam* which means primarily 'be silent'.[3] Then, as words denoting silence came to be applied to those who abstained, not only from speech but also from action, *damam* acquired the meaning 'to be still or quiet, to rest' (cf. Lam. ii, 18; Job xxx, 27). As applied to the sun, the verb could refer either to its moving or to its shining.[4] Is it 'Stand thou still' or 'Cease' (from shining)?

1 Cf. also the clear divergence between the text of verse 13b taken literally and the views listed on p. 306.

2 The proposed view follows, in substance, that of van Hoonacker, *Expositor*, 1916, II, *art.* 'And the sun stood still', but differs from it in one or two important details.

3 Cf. Psalms iv, 5; xxx, 13; Exodus xv, 16. The word is onomatopaeic, as Gesenius points out, *Thesaurus Linguae Hebraeae et Chaldaeae*, s.v.; it conveys the idea of closed lips: cf. Greek *muo*.

4 Indeed we may find in literature the actual unequivocal word 'be silent' used of sun and moon, e.g. Cato the Censor uses the words *luna silenti* to describe the new moon when her light is not seen, *De Re Rustica*, cap. xxix. Dante at the beginning of the Inferno has 'Mi ripingeva la dov' il sol tace', Canto I, line 60.

The word *'amad* is also used in verse 13 (RV 'stayed'). It could indicate refraining from local movement or from some other action.[1] Taking the primary meaning of each word we should get the following: 'The sun was silent and the moon stayed'. On this Dr Rowley comments: 'The sun is not silent when it blazes forth from the heavens, but when it does not shine. Moreover it is common for the sun to represent the day and the moon the night, and in the poetic statement that the moon remained it is natural to see a reference to the prolongation of the night,' *The Re-Discovery of the Old Testament*, p. 68. If the description ended there we might feel satisfied with this translation. But in verse 13b we have the interpretation *in prose*, presumably by the author of Josue, of the preceding poetic passage. And he certainly appears to describe the event as a stopping of the sun's *movement*: 'And the sun stayed in the midst of heaven and hasted not to go down about a whole day'. The verb here rendered 'to go down' is, in Hebrew, *bō'*, to go in, enter, used in other passages of the setting of the sun. We have already seen that the supporters of the 'daylight theory' do not usually make any serious attempt to suggest that the sun was seen literally to stop still in the midst of heaven, i.e. at mid-day, and to stay there motionless till mid-day on the following day. Indeed it is hard to see that they give any real explanation of this passage at all. We have suggested that what Josue would surely have wanted to see continue was the hailstorm. Now if the sun disappeared behind the clouds at about mid-day when the storm broke and the clouds did not clear till the middle of the following day, it would look as if it had never moved from that position for the space of twenty-four hours and, to all appearances, it then started to move again towards its setting after being in the sky since the previous morning. This interpretation takes the whole verse literally as a description according to appearances, and it is fair to ask whether it does not do justice to the text and context better than the 'daylight theories'.[2]

1 The word usually means 'to stand' or 'to take up one's stand'. It is also used in the sense of 'to remain, survive', cf. Exodus xxi, 21; or 'persevere' (cf. IV Kings xxiii, 31; Ecclus. viii, 3; Isaiah xlvii, 12). The word may also mean 'to stay still' as opposed to going away, or 'to refrain from an action', cf. I Kings xx, 38; II Kings xiii, 18 ('He smote thrice and stayed') Lev. xiii, 5; IV Kings iv, 6.

2 In an article published recently (*De Miraculo Solari Josue*, in *Verbum Domini* 1950, p. 227), Père de Fraine, S.J. argues convincingly that the passage in verses 13c to 14 constitutes two Hebrew verses. If this is correct, it will naturally have a bearing on the interpretation of the passage. He takes the verb *'amad* to mean the obscuring of the sun, as in Hab. iii, 11, and the verb *bo'* to refer to the sun entering on its course across the heavens. The obscuring took place when the sun was 'half-way to its zenith (*bahᵃsi hasshamayim*)' and the phrase *keyom tamim* is taken to mean 'as on a (normal) day', hence 'hasted not to enter the heavens as (it would have done) on a normal day'. The storm involving the obscuring of the sun, would then have lasted but a few hours only, and there would be no question of it lasting till the following day. The explanation is attractive, though de Fraine would be the first to admit its tentative nature.

We have then a fragment of a epic poem describing the victory in vivid language and composed within a few years of the battle. At some unknown date it was inserted in the *Book of Yashar* (the Just), evidently a collection of such poems enshrining the traditions of Israel.[1]

It should be noted that the English version *so long a day* (Vulgate: *tam longa dies*) adds something (the idea of length) to the original Hebrew. But the special significance of the day was not its length, but the fact that on it 'the Lord fought for Israel' (verse 14). Now this phrase can hardly refer to extra light to fight by; on the other hand it does very exactly describe the hailstorm, in which the Lord himself, as it were, killed more by the hailstones than did the Israelites by their swords (verse 11). On this interpretation therefore every word has been taken in its natural sense and full account has been taken of the context. It is not claimed that all difficulty has been removed but it may be held that the above explanation is at least more convincing than the 'daylight theories'.

Objections to the Darkness Theory Answered

(a) It will be objected that the author of Josue clearly describes two miracles and we are trying to make them into one. Does the text bear out this contention? It is true that after the description of the storm (verse 11) we have the description of the sun. But the author does not necessarily intend to suggest that the event in verses 12–13 did actually follow that of verse 11 in point of time. When he says 'Then spake Joshua' he does not necessarily mean '*next*'. He may mean only 'on that occasion' (i.e. of the battle and the storm) Josue prayed to the Lord, without specifying the exact moment, and it may indeed have taken place before or during the initial stages of the storm. The rather disjointed nature of the narrative is due to the fact that at this point he begins the quotation from the *Book of Yashar*. Verses 12b–13a are a poetic account, on our view, of the miracle just described in verse 11.

We may go further and object against the 'daylight' theory—is it likely that the *first* mention of a new and stupendous miracle would be made by means of a quotation and a poetic quotation at that? In Numbers xxi there are no less than three examples of such quotations from epic poems. In each case the author of the book gives first a prose account of the event and then the poetical quotation describing the same thing, Numbers xxi, 11–15; 16–18; 24–30.[2] Thus on our proposed interpretation, Joshua x falls into line with other texts where similar quotations are made. First there is the prose narrative of the hailstorm (verses 10–11) and then there is the poetic quotation describing the same event (12–13).

[1] Poems were added to it from time to time, for we find that David's Lament over Saul and Jonathan was also in it.

[2] Cf. also I Kings i, 20–ii, 10; II Kings i and iii, 30–4.

(b) It will further be objected that the reference to Joshua x in the Book of Ecclesiasticus xlvi, 5–7, does not bear out our interpretation. The miracles of the sun and hail are clearly distinguished, it is said, only the order is different—first the stoppage of the sun and then the hail. Let us now see if this is the case. The Hebrew text is fragmentary but its general sense is clear enough. We give also the Greek (lxx) text which is more complete.

HT.—4. Was it not by his hand that the sun stood for one day . . .

5. Because he called upon the Most High God as (his enemies) pressed on him (all around). And God the Most High, heard him with stones of...

LXX.—5. For was not the sun impeded by his hand and one day become like two ?

6. For he called upon God the Most High, as his enemies pressed on him from all sides, and the great Lord answered him by stones of hail of mighty power.

Let us note first that this account too is poetry.

The actual description of the sun coincides with that in Joshua x and says no more than that passage. It is the rest of the description in Ecclesiasticus which is of interest. After referring to the 'stopping' of the sun, the author goes on to say that it was *because* Josue prayed to God, i.e. the 'stopping' of the sun was the answer to his prayer. And surely we might expect the sentence to stop there if the hailstorm were a separate event. But instead the author continues (without a pause): 'And God answered him with stones of hail of great power'. In other words the author seems to *identify* in some way the 'stopping' of the sun with the hailstorm, as the answer to Josue's prayer. This is surely a remarkable way of describing it if indeed two quite distinct events are meant. Is not van Hoonacker fully justified in saying 'The statement is perfectly clear: the 'stopping' of the sun was a phenomenon implied in the hailstorm' ?[1]

R. C. FULLER.

[1] Art. cit. *Expositor*, 1916, II, p. 338.