

Joshua

Lesson #5

The Sun Stands Still

(9: 1– 10: 43)

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Review

After conquering Jericho and putting it under the ban—killing every living thing in it and burning the city to ashes—the Israelites moved north-west, into the central mountain range to attack Ai. Once again, Joshua sent spies to gather intel, and when they came back they reported: *“Do not send all the people up; if only about two or three thousand go up, they can attack and overcome Ai”* (7: 3).

The Israelites seriously underestimate the men of Ai, and they got their butts kicked.

Joshua needed a new strategy—and he got one.

Preview

In the wake of Joshua's victories, five Amorite tribal warlords gather for a war council: Adoni-Zedek, king of Jerusalem; Hoham, king of Hebron; Piram, king of Jarmuth; Japhia, king of Lachish; and Debir, king of Eglon. They join forces and position their troops to attack Joshua and the Israelites.

Meanwhile, Joshua gets word of their troop movements, and after a blistering all-night forced-march, Joshua attacks in the dead of night, in the midst of a furious storm.

Desperately needing more time to defeat the enemy, Joshua prays to God and we read: *"The sun halted halfway across the heavens; not for an entire day did it press on. Never before or since was there a day like this when the Lord obeyed the voice of a man."* (10: 13).



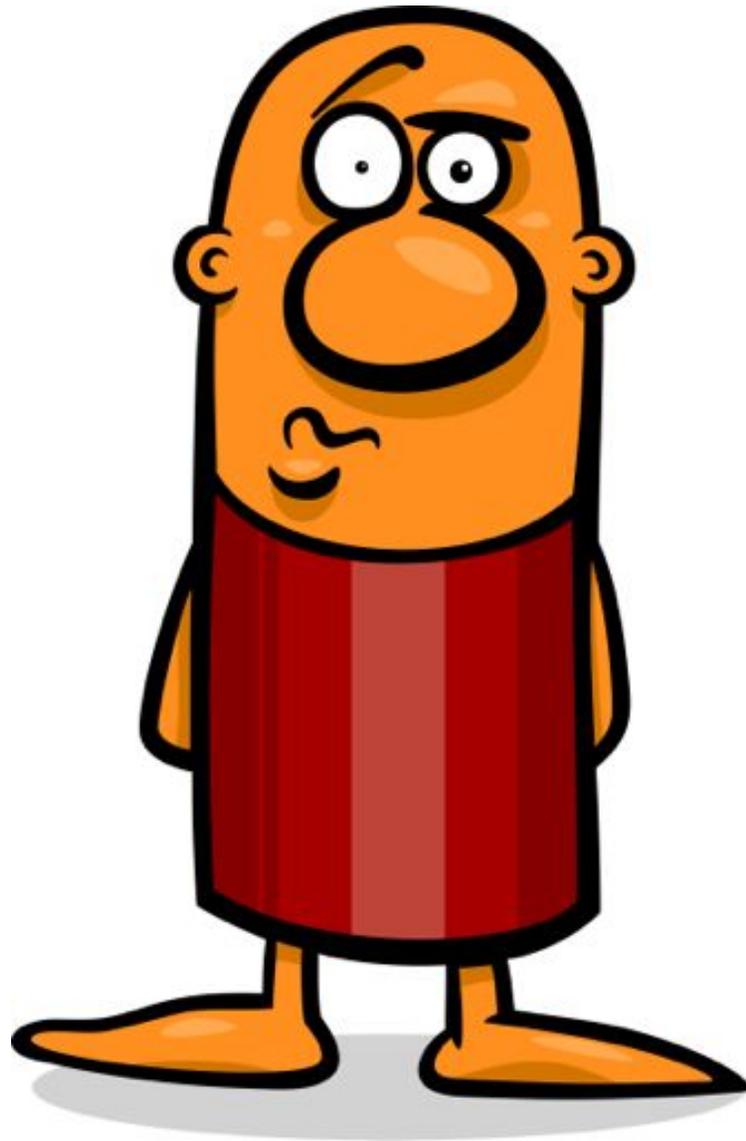
**Holy cow!
The sun stood
still!**

Preview

What happened? We know that the sun doesn't move across the sky; rather, the earth rotates, creating the appearance of the sun moving across the sky. The earth rotates at 1,100 mph at the equator, so if the earth suddenly stopped spinning, the earth's atmosphere and everything not attached to bedrock (including water in the oceans, lakes and rivers) would suddenly be moving sideways at 1,100 mph! All of earth's land masses would be violently stripped clean of everything: you, me, our professor and his student, the dog, buildings, rocks, topsoil, trees and so on.

So . . . what *really* happened?

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I can't wait to see
how we solve this
one!

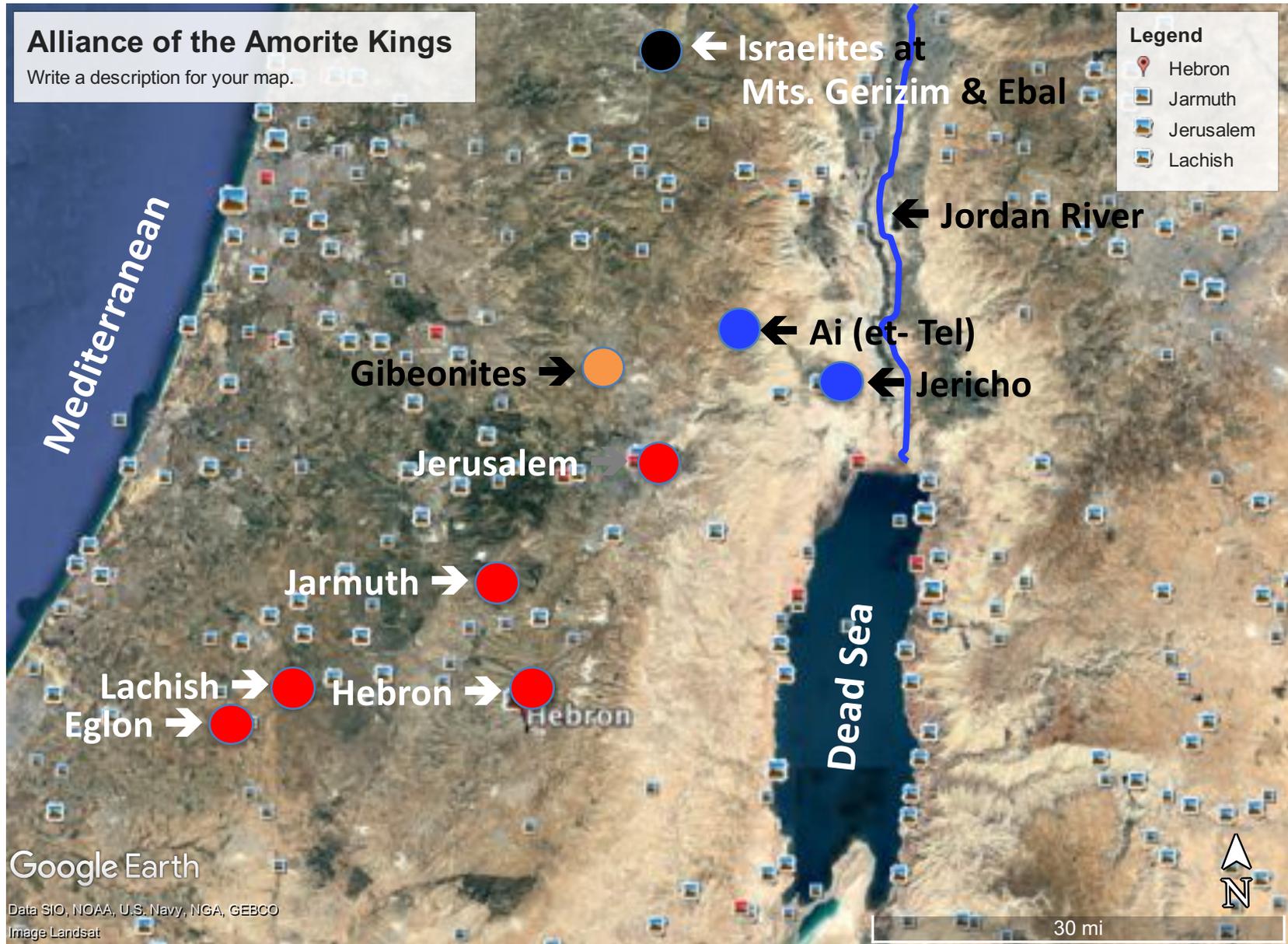


With Joshua’s brutal victories at Jericho and Ai—placing the cities “under the ban” and killing every living soul in them—the other tribal warlords of the central mountain range and coastal plain call a war council, forming an alliance to fight the Israelites.

Adoni-Zedek, king of Jerusalem; Hoham, king of Hebron; Piram, king of Jarmuth; Japhia, king of Lachish; and Debir, king of Eglon marshal all their resources to defend their cities and to stop the Israelite genocide.

Alliance of the Amorite Kings

Write a description for your map.



Google Earth

Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO
Image Landsat

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“When the news reached all the kings west of the Jordan, in the mountain regions and in the Shephelah, and all along the coast of the Great Sea as far as the Lebanon: Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, they gathered together to launch a common attack against Joshua and Israel.”

(9: 1-2)



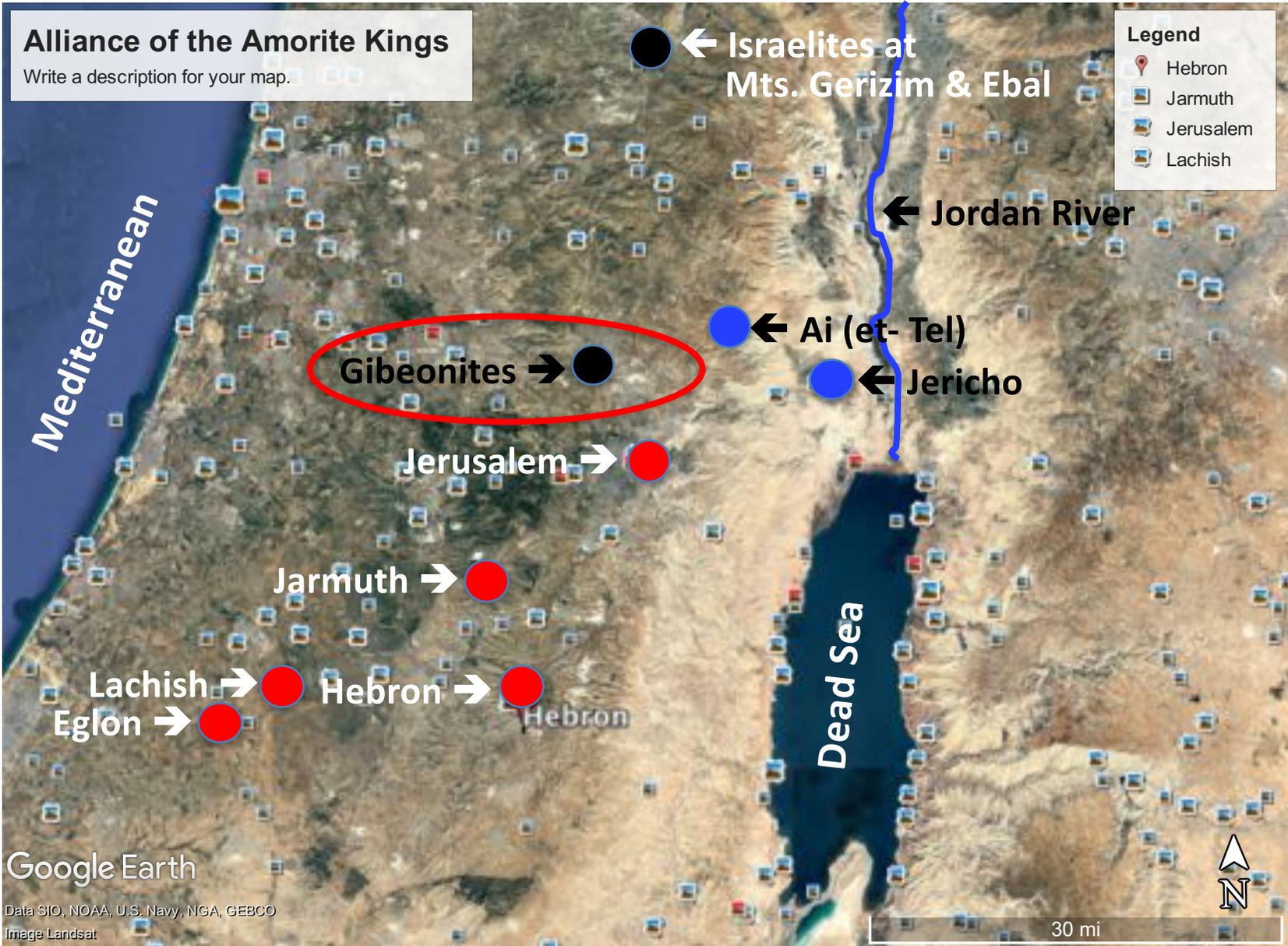
Even though the kings of the west form an alliance to fight the Israelites, it is a daunting task, given what the locals know about the Israelites. To many, the Israelites and their God are an unstoppable force, a war machine unlike any other. Some have great doubt that the alliance will succeed, and if they fail it means *total* destruction.

One group of people has another plan.

“On hearing what Joshua had done to Jericho and Ai, the inhabitants of Gibeon formed their own scheme. They chose provisions for a journey, making use of old sacks for their donkeys, and old wineskins, torn and mended. They wore old, patched sandals and shabby garments; and all the bread they took was dry and crumbly. Thus they journeyed to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal, where they said to him and to the Israelites, ‘We have come from a far-off land; now, make a covenant with us.’”

(9: 3-6)

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That is very clever! The Israelites were to put “under the ban” all people living west of the Jordan, killing every living soul, but they were allowed to make treaties with people living outside the Promised Land.

So the Gibeonites pretend to be from very far away, and they ask for a peace treaty. That is clever! But will the Israelites fall for it?



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“But the Israelites replied to the Hivites, ‘You may be living in land that is ours. How, then, can we make a covenant with you?’ But they answered Joshua, ‘We are your servants.’ Then Joshua asked them, ‘Who are you? Where do you come from? They answered him, ‘Your servants have come from a far-off land, because of the fame of the Lord, your God. For we have heard reports of all that he did in Egypt and all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites beyond the Jordan, Sihon, king of Heshbon, and Og, king of Bashan, who lived in Ashtaroth. So our elders and all the inhabitants of our land said to us, ‘Take along provisions for the journey and go to meet them. Say to them: ‘We are your servants; now make a covenant with us’ . . .

. . . 'This bread of ours was still warm when we brought it from home as provisions the day we left to come to you, but now it is dry and crumbly. Here are our wineskins, which were new when we filled them, but now they are torn. Look at our garments and sandals; they are worn out from the very long journey.' Then the Israelite leaders partook of their provisions, without inquiring of the Lord. So Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant to let them live, which the leaders of the community sealed with an oath."

(9: 7-15)



“The Gibeonite Deception,” *Joshua Roll* (illumination on parchment, Palat. Gr. 431, sheet 12), A.D. c. 900-1000. Vatican Library, Vatican City.

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**“The Gibeonite Deception,” panel from an ivory casket, A.D. c. 900-1000.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.**

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Ha, ha! The ruse worked! After inspecting the Gibeonite's worn garments, sandals and wine skins, and after tasting their stale, crumbly bread, Joshua makes a treaty with the Gibeonites, believing they came from a long way off!

But notice that the Israelites jumped to this conclusion *"without inquiring of the Lord"* (9: 14). Big mistake!

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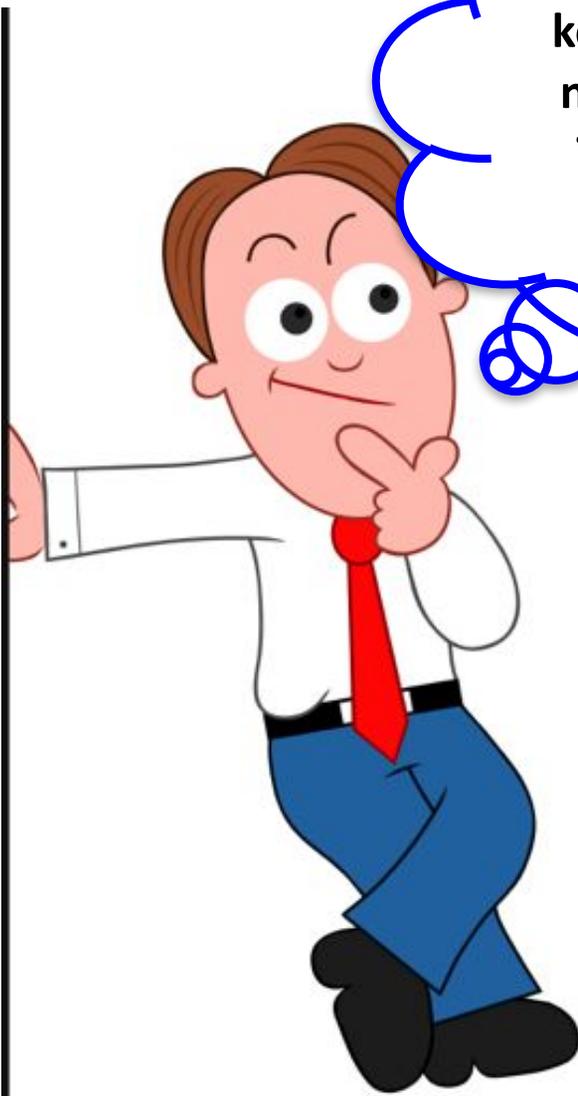
“Three days after the covenant was made, the Israelites heard that these people were from nearby, and would be living in Israel. The third day on the road, the Israelites came to their cities of Gibeon, Chephirah, Beeroth, and Kiriath-jearim, but did not attack them, because the leaders of the community had sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel. When the entire community grumbled against the leaders, these all remonstrated with the community, ‘We have sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel, and so we cannot harm them. Let us therefore let them live, and so deal with them that no wrath fall upon us because of the oath we have sworn to them.’ Thus the leaders said to them, ‘Let them live, and become hewers of wood and drawers of water for the entire community.’ So the community did as the leaders advised them.”

(9: 16-21)

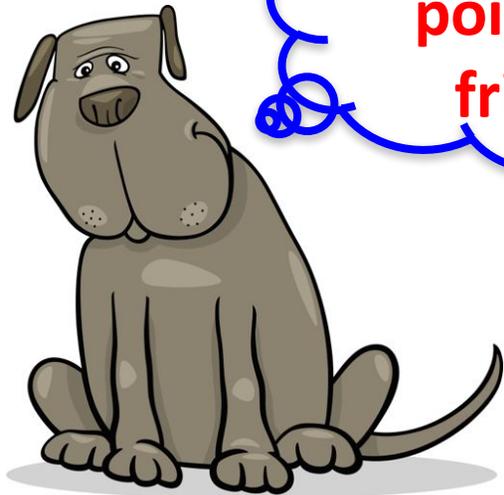
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As your legal counsel, Joshua, I must advise that you are not obligated to honor your agreement since the Gibeonites based their appeal on blatant deception. You may, thus, place them under the ban.



I suppose the judge has a point, but the very definition of integrity is keeping your word, even when it is no longer required that you do so. The Gibeonites deceived Joshua: shame on them; but if Joshua brakes his word: shame on him!



That's a good point, my friend.

“Joshua summoned the Gibeonites and said to them, ‘Why did you deceive us and say, ‘We live far off from you’?—You live among us! Now are you accursed: every one of you shall always be a slave, hewers of wood and drawers of water, for the house of my God.’ They answered Joshua, ‘Your servants were fully informed of how the Lord, your God, commanded Moses his servant that you be given the entire land and that all its inhabitants be destroyed before you. Since, therefore, at your advance, we were in great fear for our lives, we acted as we did. And now that we are in your power, do with us what is good and right in your eyes.’ Joshua did what he had decided: while he saved them from being killed by the Israelites, on that day he made them, as they still are, hewers of wood and drawers of water for the community and for the altar of the Lord, in the place the Lord would choose.”

(9: 22-27)

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With the Gibeonite deception resolved, we turn our attention back to the five kings, who have now learned that the Gibeonites have allied themselves with the Israelites.

Since Gibeon is a powerful city in the central mountain range, the five kings must act swiftly, if they and their people are to survive!

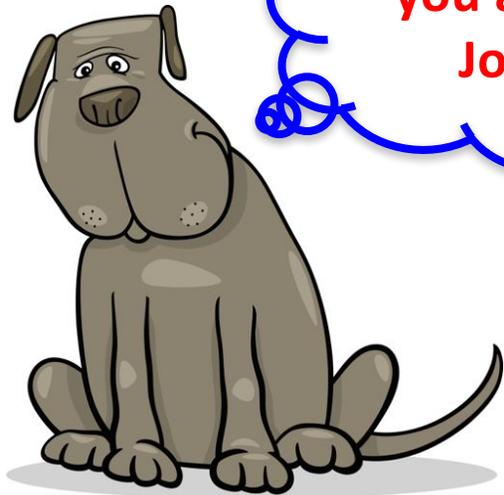
“Now when Adonizedek, king of Jerusalem, heard that Joshua had captured Ai and put it under the ban, and had done to that city and its king as he had done to Jericho and its king, and that the inhabitants of Gibeon had made their peace with Israel, remaining among them, there was great fear abroad, because Gibeon was a great city, like one of the royal cities, greater even than Ai, and all its men were warriors. So Adonizedek, king of Jerusalem, sent to Hoham, king of Hebron, Piram, king of Jarmuth, Japhia, king of Lachish, and Debir, king of Eglon, with this message: ‘Come and help me attack Gibeon, for it has made peace with Joshua and the Israelites’ . . .

. . . The five Amorite kings, of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon, gathered with all their forces, and marched against Gibeon to make war on it. Thereupon, the Gibeonites sent an appeal to Joshua in his camp at Gilgal: 'Do not abandon your servants. Come up here quickly and save us. Help us, because all the Amorite kings of the mountain country have joined together against us.'

(10: 1-6)



When Joshua entered a covenant, suzerain/vassal relationship with the Gibeonites, he agreed to defend the Gibeonites if they are attacked; conversely, if the Israelites are attacked the Gibeonites are obligated to defend them, as well.



Be careful what you agree to, Joshua!

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“So Joshua marched up from Gilgal with all his army and all his warriors. The Lord said to Joshua: Do not fear them, for I have delivered them into your power. Not one of them will be able to withstand you. After an all-night march from Gilgal, Joshua made a surprise attack upon them, and the Lord threw them into disorder before Israel. The Israelites inflicted a great slaughter on them at Gibeon and pursued them down the Beth-horon slope, attacking them as far as Azekah and Makkedah. While they fled before Israel along the descent of Beth-horon, the Lord hurled great stones from the heavens above them all the way to Azekah, killing many. More died from these hailstones than the Israelites killed with the sword.”

(10: 7-11)

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“It was then, when the Lord delivered up the Amorites to the Israelites, that Joshua prayed to the Lord, and said in the presence of Israel:

Sun, stand still at Gibeon,
Moon, in the valley of Aijalon!
The sun stood still,
the moon stayed,
while the nation took vengeance on its foes.

This is recorded in the Book of Jashar. The sun halted halfway across the heavens; not for an entire day did it press on. Never before or since was there a day like this, when the Lord obeyed the voice of a man; for the Lord fought for Israel. Then Joshua and all Israel returned to the camp at Gilgal.” (10: 12-15)



“The Gibeonite Deception,” *Joshua Roll* (illumination on parchment, Palat. Gr. 431, sheet 12), A.D. c. 900-1000. Vatican Library, Vatican City.

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**John Martin. *Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still* (oil on canvas), c. 1840.
Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.**

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**James Tissot. *The Valiant of Gibeon* (gouache on board), c. 1896-1902.
Jewish Museum, New York.**

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**What just
happened here?**



As we noted at the beginning of this lesson, we know that the sun doesn't move across the sky; rather, the earth rotates, creating the appearance of the sun moving across the sky. The earth rotates at 1,100 mph at the equator, so if the earth suddenly stopped spinning, the earth's atmosphere and everything not attached to bedrock (including water in the oceans, lakes and rivers) would suddenly be moving sideways at 1,100 mph! All of earth's land masses would be violently stripped clean of everything: you, me, our professor and his student, the dog, buildings, rocks, topsoil, trees and so on.

So . . . what *really* happened?



Of course, we could read this story as simply an example of *deus ex machina*, a literary plot device in which a seemingly unsolvable problem is abruptly resolved by the miraculous intervention of an event, character, ability or object, as when Paris is about to be slain by Menalaus in the *Iliad* and Aphrodite swoops down from Olympus, scoops him up and drops him in bed with Helen of Troy—or when in Euripides’ *Medea*, Apollo sends a dragon-drawn chariot from heaven to rescue Medea, who has just committed murder and infanticide, and takes her to the safety of Athens, hiding her from her husband, Jason.



But many have sought miraculous explanations. Consider the case floating around the Internet for many years now of Mr. Harold Hill, President of the Curtis Engine Company of Baltimore, Maryland and a consultant to NASA, who claims that in the early days of the space program NASA was developing a computer model for space exploration when it discovered a missing 23 hours and 20 minutes in earth's time. After a great deal of research, claims Mr. Hill, NASA concluded that the "missing day" was the day the sun stood still in Joshua 10, thereby proving the literal truth of Scripture: that the earth stopped rotation for a full day, halting the sun's movement for nearly 24 hours.



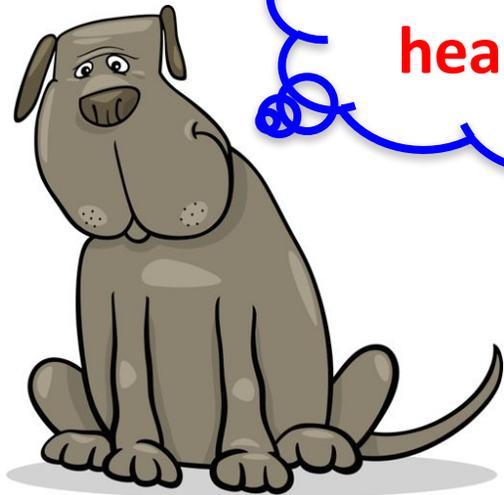
Well, Mr Harold Hill was, indeed, a real person; he was president of the Curtis Engine Company; and his company did have a contract with NASA, but only for the maintenance of some diesel engines— he had nothing whatsoever to do with NASA’s space research. It seems Mr. Hill was a popular speaker among local evangelical Christian groups in the 1960s, and apparently he just made the story up to embellish his talks, probably drawing on Dr. Harry Rimmer’s 1936 book, *The Harmony of Science and Scripture!*

Since October 1969, when an article about Mr. Hill’s claim appeared in the *Spencer Evening World* newspaper in Spencer, Indiana, until Harold Hill’s death in 1989, NASA repeatedly denied Mr. Hill’s claims, and Mr. Hill repeatedly failed to produce any evidence to support his claim, saying he had “misplaced the documents.”

In the end, the whole story is nothing more than an “urban legend.”



So, if a person dismisses the use of a literary *deus ex machina*, and the “lost day” is just an urban legend, how might we best understand the story of the sun standing still?



I can't wait to hear this!

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Ok, here we go!

The Israelites' all-night march to Gibeon is a 15-mile, up hill, forced march from their camp at Gilgal, a steep ascent of nearly 2,000 feet. Most commentaries see the forced march as taking place at night and Joshua, after allowing his troops to rest, attacking the Amorite forces at daybreak.

From a tactical point of view, though, that doesn't make much sense. Gibeon was built on a low rise in a pleasant mountain dale, overlooked by heavily forested surrounding ridges. The Amorites are camped at night in the dale, doubtless near several springs that dot the terrain. Joshua's troops arrive in the dark of night, concealed at a higher elevation in the forested ridges.



This is not a time to stop and rest!

Having the tactical advantage of surprise and concealment, Joshua attacks in the dark of night with surprise, speed and overwhelming violence as the enemy sleeps. The resulting chaos and confusion give Joshua the upper hand, which is amplified by a massive storm breaking out, with thunder, lightening and huge hailstones.

Picture the scene: deafening claps of thunder shake the ground; lightening bolts rip the sky; hailstones the size of golf balls pelt the enemy; and thousands of fierce Israelite warriors emerge shouting from the dark and chaos. No wonder the enemy flees, dropping their weapons, dashing half-mad from the camp, running in stark terror down the road toward Beth Horon, with the Israelites in hot pursuit.

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Such a tactical advantage should never be wasted! The last thing Joshua wants is for daylight to break, the sun to shine, a clear blue sky to appear and the battle to be prolonged!

No.

When Joshua prays, *“Sun, stand still at Gibeon; Moon, in the Valley of Aijalon,”* he prays for the current conditions to be prolonged, for the sun to stop and not to rise, for the darkness and storm to continue, prolonging his tactical advantage!

And that’s precisely what happens in Joshua 10: 13—

“So, the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies.”



If we understand our geography, it is clear that Joshua attacks *prior* to daybreak, when the moon is over the Valley of Aijalon in the west and the sun is just beginning to lighten the sky over Gibeon in the east.

When Joshua prays for the sun to “stand still,” the Hebrew word is *daw-mam’*, literally, “to be dumb,” “to tarry,” or “to wait.” And when we read that the moon “stopped,” the word is *aw-mad’*, literally “to cease.”

Both words apply to the sun and moon’s *present position*, as Joshua prays – maintaining his tactical advantage.



In any military engagement, a simple plan executed with surprise, speed and overwhelming violence produces an enormous tactical advantage.

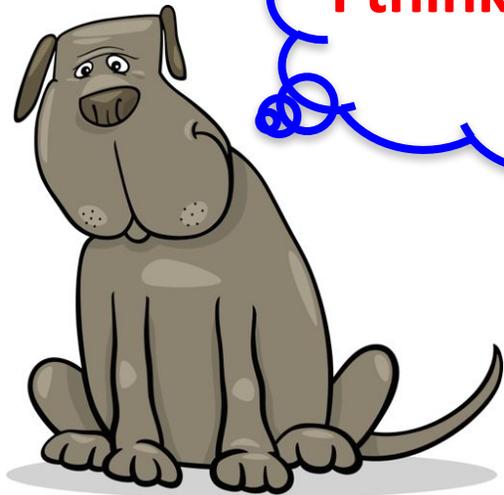
And time works against that advantage: the longer the engagement lasts, the less advantage you have.

Joshua does not want the day to be prolonged; he wants the current conditions to be prolonged, allowing him to defeat the Amorites quickly and definitively.

And that's exactly what he does.



Well done, Joshua! Obviously, the earth doesn't stop rotating, the sun hanging still in the sky, so that option is out. The prolonged storm is clever, but it seems rather forced. For me, the literary device of *deus ex machina* seems the best literary option.



I think I agree.

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Now, back to our text!

“The five kings who had fled hid in the cave at Makkedah. When Joshua was told, ‘The five kings have been found, hiding in the cave at Makkedah,’ he said, ‘Roll large stones to the mouth of the cave and post guards over it. But do not remain there yourselves. Pursue your enemies, and harry them in the rear. Do not allow them to reach their cities, for the Lord, your God, has delivered them into your power.’”

(10: 16-19)

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“Once Joshua and the Israelites had finally inflicted the last blows in this very great slaughter, and the survivors had escaped from them into the fortified cities, all the army returned to Joshua and the camp at Makkedah in victory; no one uttered a sound against the Israelites. Then Joshua said, ‘Open the mouth of the cave and bring me those five kings from the cave.’ They did so; they brought out to him from the cave the five kings, of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon. When they brought the five kings out to Joshua, he summoned all the army of Israel and said to the commanders of the soldiers who had marched with him, ‘Come forward and put your feet on the necks of these kings.’ They came forward and put their feet upon their necks . . .

. . . Then Joshua said to them, 'Do not be afraid or dismayed, be firm and steadfast. This is what the Lord will do to all the enemies against whom you fight.' Thereupon Joshua struck and killed the kings, and hanged them on five trees, where they remained hanging until evening. At sunset Joshua commanded that they be taken down from the trees and be thrown into the cave where they had hidden; over the mouth of the cave large stones were placed, which remain until this very day."

(10: 20-27)

Upper Register:

Joshua defends Gibeon →



Lower Left Register:

Five kings hiding in a cave →

Lower Center Register:

← Joshua's men with their feet on the kings' necks.

Lower Right Register:

← Joshua encourages the men, reminding them that a similar fate awaits those who oppose God.

“Israel’s Enemies Humiliated,” *The Crusader Bible* (illumination on parchment, Ms. M.638, fol. 11r), c. 1240s.
The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

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We then read in 10: 28-43 that Joshua and the Israelites continue their conquest, sweeping through the central mountain range like a prairie fire, defeating and putting under the ban:

- **Makkedah**
- **Libnah**
- **Lachish**
- **Gezer**
- **Eglon**
- **Hebron**
- **Debir**

So, we read in conclusion:

“Joshua conquered the entire land; the mountain regions, the Negeb, the Shephelah, and the mountain slopes, with all their kings. He left no survivors, but put under the ban every living being, just as the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded. Joshua conquered them from Kadesh-barnea to Gaza, and all the land of Goshen to Gibeon. All these kings and their lands Joshua captured all at once, for the Lord, the God of Israel, fought for Israel. Thereupon Joshua with all Israel returned to the camp at Gilgal.”

(10: 20-27)

Questions for discussion and thought

1. With Jericho and Ai in ashes and not a single soul left alive in either city, how do the tribal warlords of the central mountain range respond?
2. Why do the men of Gibeon resort to a ruse?
3. Why does the ruse work?
4. How do you explain the sun standing still in the Valley of Aijalon??
5. What does Joshua do to the five kings once he conquers them?

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