

The best background evidence for the non-literal (idiomatic) understanding of the "sun and moon stopping" language is a 4000-year-old Sumerian lament, which uses strikingly similar language to describe an important *storm*, and which *predates* Joshua by centuries.

Here is a translation of this Sumerian lament that Kevin Edgecomb provides (along with some helpful comments) on his scholarly blog (<http://www.bombaxo.com/blog/?p=6#comments>):

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.

In this Sumerian poem, we see that ancient near eastern people were talking about the sun and moon stopping in the middle of the sky centuries before Joshua ever prayed his famous prayer in Joshua 10. So apparently the celestials did not have to literally stop in the sky for people to speak figuratively about the celestials stopping in the sky. What's more, from this Sumerian lament, we see that the sun and moon stopping in the sky was specifically a way of talking about a huge, significant *storm*, which we also see in Joshua 10. It makes sense, then, to say that Joshua 10.12-14 is simply another version of the hailstorm narrated in 10.9-11.

Here is Edgecomb's conclusion: "It appears to me that the request for and description of the Sun and Moon to *דמע/םמד* [stand still/stop] is an ancient Hebrew idiom for a sky-covering storm, which would stretch from horizon to horizon and cover both Sun and Moon."

It seems to me that if we are going to maintain the traditional, literal reading of Joshua 10.12-14, we need to be willing to admit that God must have stopped the sun and moon on more than just this one occasion, given that the ancients were talking about the sun and moon stopping centuries before Joshua asked God to stop the sun and moon. The best explanation, however, particularly given the poetic nature of Joshua's prayer, is that Joshua was tapping into a common idiomatic expression for describing significant storms.

Of course, it is possible, perhaps, that the author of Joshua was wanting to transform this ancient idiom into a literal statement about the sun and moon. However, since the background linguistic evidence (above) seems to be pointing away from this possibility, we would need to see some exegetical reasons to conclude that the author of Joshua 10 was not intending to employ this "sun and moon stopping" idiom as a way of describing the hailstorm.

The most compelling argument for seeing this passage as literal rather than idiomatic is

Joshua 10.13b, "the sun stopped in the middle of the sky and did not hurry to go down for about a whole day." It seems the author is going out of his way to talk about the literal stopping (or not setting) of the sun "for about a whole day." Perhaps. But it could also quite legitimately be read as an extension of the idiom. We extend idioms and metaphors all the time. Idioms and metaphors create a life of their own sometimes. "Another day, another dollar" gets cynically turned into "Another day, another 50 cents after taxes," or "Another day, another 77 cents for woman compared to men in the workforce." Since the "core" of our idiom in Joshua 10 was established at least several centuries earlier (as the Sumerian lament indicates), who knows how many established "extensions" it had developed by the time Joshua 10 was written

Plus, if you're an ancient (and particularly if you have a biblical worldview, I imagine), and the sun literally stops in the sky for a good length of time, then I wonder if you would describe that length of time in terms of how much of a day had gone by ("about a whole day"), because if the sun were literally to stop, then the day would literally stop with it. Our days are marked by the sun, as Genesis 1 teaches us. It would be contradictory to say (a la the traditional reading) that "about a whole day" went by during the time in which the day/sun had stopped.

The observers of this storm knew that it had lasted "about a whole day" because after the storm cleared, they could see that the sun, during this storm, had almost finished its daily journey across the sky.

Here are four more biblical-exegetical reasons the traditional interpretation doesn't seem to make the best sense of the passage (there is some redundancy with the sermon here, but also some stuff I didn't include in the sermon as well):

1. If Joshua is praying for the sun and moon to stop in midair so that Israel would have more daylight in which to fight the Canaanite armies, then why would Joshua be worried about the moon? Even when the moon is shining during the day, it's not adding any significant daylight. More daylight just does not seem to be Joshua's motivation for making this request. Joshua is asking God to fight.
2. The emphasis in Joshua 10.9-14 is that *God* is the one fighting against Adoni-zedek and the other kings. Verses 9-11 portray God as the heroic warrior, killing more by himself than the entire army of Israel put together. Further, in verse 14, the author explicitly concludes that the stopping of the sun and moon is another way of saying "the Lord fought for Israel." If the stopping of the sun and moon meant the literal stopping of the sun and moon so that Israel could have longer to fight, then it would seem unfitting to summarize such a miracle with the statement, "the Lord fought for Israel," particularly since the passage makes it clear that way the Lord fought for Israel was by destroying the Canaanite armies with a tsunami-rivaling supernatural disaster.
3. Joshua prays for the sun and moon to stop over specific places in Canaan. In verse 12, Joshua prays, "Sun, stand still AT GIBEON, and moon, IN THE VALLEY OF AIJALON." Joshua didn't need to be this specific if he were asking for the sun and moon

to stop in their paths to provide a longer day. Apparently, Joshua wants something specific to happen at two specific places in Canaan. And while the sun and moon don't literally stop over particular cities and valleys, hailstorms do.

4. Even the traditional interpretation has to recognize a metaphor in this passage, for the sun and moon do not really have legs to "stand." And we should also remember all the other metaphors in the Bible related to the sun and moon and stars; for example, the celestials are often described as being blotted out or as falling from the sky or as turning to blood or (most notably) as fighting on behalf of God's people (Jg 5.20).

(In light of Jg 5.20, I wonder if we're supposed to see, in Joshua 10, God's appointed heavenly rulers stopping in their tracks to fight against God's enemies. You will recall, in Jg 4, that the way in which the stars fought for God on behalf of his people was through a storm--that's what the poetic language in Jg 5.20 is describing.)

So the miracle of this passage is apparently not astronomical, but rather meteorological.

[Note: The first word of verse 12 ('az) should not be translated "Then," as if Joshua's prayer for the sun and moon to stop came after the hailstorm of verses 9-11. This Hebrew adverb is indefinite, suggesting a general time period. A better translation would be "at that time," as the ESV translates it, or even better, "during that time." In other words, the author is not indicating sequence, but rather is telling about something that happened during the same time/day as the events just described--maybe before, maybe after, maybe during, maybe the same thing.]