

HAS NASA DISCOVERED JOSHUA'S "LOST DAY"?

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In the tenth chapter of the Old Testament book of Joshua, it is recorded that the Sun “stood still.” The story often circulates that NASA scientists, using computers to calculate orbits for the Earth and Sun, discovered that there was a “lost day.” Upon further examination, so the story goes, these scientists used their computers to find this missing day, proving the biblical record to be accurate. Is this story true?

From time to time stories such as the one described above appear—in church bulletins and religious publications, and especially on the Internet—as factual and true. No doubt those who propagate such information mean well, and have as their ultimate goal a defense of the Bible against the slings and arrows of infidelity. However, the story is completely untrue. An investigation reveals the following details.

Similar stories have been around for more than half a century. In his 1936 book, *The Harmony of Science and Scripture*, Harry Rimmer devoted the entire last chapter to “Modern Science and the Long Day of Joshua.” In his discussion, Rimmer recounted the biblical story of how God made the Sun stand still (Joshua 10), and then made the following statement concerning this miracle: “The final testimony of science is that such a day left its record for all time. As long as time shall be, the record of this day must remain. The fact is attested by eminent men of science, two of whom I quote here” (1936, p. 280). Dr. Rimmer then mentioned two scientists—Sir Edwin Ball, a British astronomer, and Charles A.L. Totten, a Yale professor. He credited Ball with being the first to notice that “twenty-four hours had been lost out of solar time.” Rimmer then asked the questions: “Where did that go, what was the cause of this strange lapse, and how did it happen” (p. 280)? In the next paragraph, he wrote: “There is a place, however, where the answer is found. And this place is attested by a scientist of standing. There is a book by Prof. C.A. Totten of Yale, written in 1890, which establishes the case beyond the shadow of a doubt” (p. 281). Rimmer then offered what he termed a “summary” of Totten’s book where, he said, information could be found to prove exactly how the “lost day” had been discovered. Rimmer even gave the exact day and month on which Joshua’s battle was fought—Tuesday, July 22 (p. 266).

Before responding to the question about NASA scientists allegedly having found the “lost day” of Joshua, let me make several observations about this older version (from which the newer one obviously has been fashioned—with considerable embellishment). First, Rimmer specifically stated that he intended to “quote from” Ball and Totten, yet none of the statements he offered was placed in quotation marks. Second, the 1890 book that Totten wrote (*Joshua’s Long Day and the Dial of Ahaz*) never was named by Rimmer, which seems a bit odd considering that Rimmer devoted an entire chapter to this subject in his own book. Third, no bibliographic references were provided by Rimmer to the works of either Ball or Totten—

again, quite unusual, seeing as how Rimmer based his entire argument on the validity of their respective cases. Fourth, numerous other writers have made serious efforts to determine the validity of Rimmer’s claims, as well as those of Ball and Totten, but with no success. For example, Bernard Ramm, in *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, discussed Dr. Rimmer’s viewpoint and his reference to Totten. Ramm couched his personal conclusion regarding the documentation offered by Rimmer, Totten, and Ball in extremely well-chosen terminology. He observed: “This I have not been able to verify to my own satisfaction. ...Dr. Kulp has tried to check this theory at Yale [Totten’s employer—BT] and in England [Sir Edwin Ball’s home—BT], and has found nothing to verify it” (1954, pp. 109,117).

No doubt Rimmer himself believed the story to be true. But the documentation that should have provided the proof was seriously and obviously lacking. How such stories **originate** is far more difficult to ascertain than how they **circulate**. When a story has been “corroborated” with what appear to be credible names and relevant facts, people often do not go to the trouble of investigating it any further. Once accepted, it then is used in what the Bible believer sees as a reasoned defense of God’s Word. From all evidence now available, the story of Ball, Totten, and Rimmer simply is not true, and should not be used in defending the Bible as the Word of God.

The same can be said about the modern-day version of the story. Again, some historical background is necessary. When the account, as told by Dr. Rimmer, first was published, apparently it caused quite a bit of excitement, and was accepted uncritically by those anxious to show how science “proved” the Bible true. After the initial excitement subsided, the story was forgotten, or overlooked, and eventually relegated to the relic heaps of history. Its stay there, however, was brief. Someone (to this day, no one knows exactly who) rediscovered the story, “dusted it off,” gave it some embellishment (no doubt to make it more appealing to the modern scientific mind), provided names (of individuals, companies, and cities), and then, for good measure, threw in a reference to a popular government agency that was/is very much in the public eye (the National Aeronautic and Space Administration—NASA). With this “remake” of the story now complete, it had built-in credibility that few thought to doubt or question.

The modern version of the story suggests that NASA scientists at the Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland were using sophisticated computers to plot positions of the Sun, Moon, and other planets 100, and 1000, years in the future in order to calculate spacecraft trajectories. Suddenly the computers ground to a halt. As it turns out, the computers had discovered a “lost day” in time. Repairmen did not know how to correct the problem. But one of the scientists present had attended Sunday school as a boy, and recalled a story in which God made the Sun stand still for about a

day. When he suggested this as a possible solution, the other scientists ridiculed him. However, the scientist turned to Joshua 10 and read the account. The repairmen then fed the new data into the computers (carefully factoring in the "lost day" of Joshua), and the machines once more whirred along perfectly—almost. The computers suddenly stopped again because they had not discovered a **whole** day; something still was missing. Apparently (so the story goes) the computers found only 23 hours and 20 minutes. In other words, 40 minutes still were unaccounted for. But the Sunday-school-going scientist suggested the answer to this conundrum. He remembered 2 Kings 20, which indicates that King Hezekiah, upon being promised a reprieve from imminent death, had requested a sign from Heaven. God then made the Sun move backwards ten degrees—or exactly 40 minutes! This information was fed into the computers, and they once again worked perfectly.

This tale became widely circulated in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a result of the efforts of Harold Hill, then-president of the Curtis Engine Company in Halethorpe (Baltimore), Maryland. In his 1974 book, *How to Live Like a King's Kid*, Mr. Hill devoted an entire chapter to the story (pp. 65-77), and explained how it became so widespread. He stated that on occasion he spoke to high school and college students regarding Bible/science matters, and that the story of NASAs "missing day" was one he "told often" (pp. 65-66). Somehow (even Mr. Hill never knew how), Mary Kathryn Bryan, a columnist for the *Evening World* of Spencer, Indiana, received a written account of Mr. Hill's story and ran it in her column. Afterwards, Hill noted, "Various news services picked up the story and it appeared in **hundreds** of places" (p. 69, emp. in orig.). The account no doubt was afforded a certain amount of built-in credibility when Mr. Hill suggested regarding the space program at Goddard: "I was involved from the start, through contractual arrangements with my company" (1974, p. 65). [As it turns out, Mr. Hill's connection to NASA was tenuous at best; his company had a contract to service some of the government agency's electrical generators. He never was connected in any way with mission operations or planning.]

All efforts to confirm the origin of the story have failed. After an article about it appeared in the April 1970 *Bible-Science Newsletter*, several readers of that magazine wrote Mr. Hill. A subsequent article in the July 1989 *Bible-Science Newsletter* made mention of the fact that after the 1970 article, some readers finally received a form letter from Mr. Hill in which he stated that he did not originate the tale. In his 1974 book, he acknowledged that he did not witness the incident at NASA personally, and said that he could not remember where he first heard it, but insisted that "my inability to furnish documentation of the 'missing day' incident in no way detracts from its authenticity" (p. 71).

The July 1989 *Bible-Science Newsletter* article went on to report that

Dr. Bolton Davidheiser wrote the NASA office at Greenbelt, Maryland, where all of this was supposed to have happened. They replied that they knew nothing of Mr. Harold Hill and could not corroborate the "lost day" reference.... The concluding paragraph of NASAs letter read, "Although we make use of planetary positions as necessary in the determination of space-craft orbits on our computers, I have not found that any 'astronauts and space scientists at Greenbelt' were involved in the 'lost day' story attributed to Mr. Hill" (Bartz, 1989, p. 12).

The story's origin is dubious at best (and spurious at worst). The facts, where verifiable, are incorrect. And those allegedly involved in finding the "lost day" of Joshua admit to knowing nothing

about such events. Furthermore, anyone claiming that computers somehow could "find" a lost day fails to understand how computers work. As Paul Bartz has commented:

Computers are not magic machines which can figure out things which are hidden from normal people. As wonderful as they are, they are limited by the knowledge which we give them. Computers depend on us for knowledge. While a computer could be used to generate a calendar from today back into the far distant past, which is not an uncommon practice, a computer could not tell us if any time was missing or not. In fact, the computer would have to be programmed with all sorts of adjustments to account for several changes in the western calendar over the past couple of thousand years. In short, the story is technically impossible, no matter how sophisticated your computer (1989, p. 12).

The only conclusion one can draw, respecting the available facts, is that this story is false and should not be circulated. We do a disservice to God's Word when we attempt to "defend" it with stories such as these that, with a bit of common sense and a small amount of research, can be shown to have no factual foundation.

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