

**May 15, 2005**  
**Holy Myrrh Bearer's Sunday**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Except that it seems to have been an ancient anthology of Hebrew poetry, we do not know much about the Book of Jashar. Certain biblical writers, however, seem to have known it well. Although we regret that the book is otherwise lost to us, Holy Scripture does contain two quotations from it, both composed in a high poetic style.

It happens that in both instances, a relatively short bit of poetry is inserted into a longer story, the sort of poetic insertion of which narrative literature knows many examples.

The first of these insertions is found in Joshua 10:12-13, which describes Joshua's victory over the Amorites. I cite it here in context: "Then Joshua spoke 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 still over Gibeon;/ And Moon, in the Valley of Aijalon./ So the sun stood still, And the moon stopped,/ Till the people had revenge Upon their enemies.' Is this not written in the Book of Jashar?" One discerns in this passage that the first and last sentences are composed in prose; only the actual quotation from the Book of Jashar appears in meter.

The Bible's second insertion from the Book of Jashar is found in 2 Samuel 1:17-27, a poem containing David's lament over Saul and Jonathan. The poem is called "The Song of the Bow."

Once again, I cite the whole context: "Then David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and over Jonathan his son, and he told them to teach the children of Judah the Song of the Bow; indeed it is written in the Book of Jashar: 'The beauty of Israel is slain on your high places!/ How the mighty have fallen! / Tell it not in Gath,/ Proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon--/ Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,/ Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph./ O mountains of Gilboa,/ Let there be no dew nor rain upon you,/ Nor fields of offerings./ For the shield of the mighty is cast away there!/ The shield of Saul, not anointed with oil./ From the blood of the slain, / From the fat of the mighty,/ The bow of Jonathan did not turn back,/ And the sword of Saul did not return empty./ Saul and Jonathan were beloved and pleasant in their lives,/ And in their death they were not divided;/ They were swifter than eagles,/ They were stronger than lions./ O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,/ Who clothed you in scarlet, with luxury;/ Who put ornaments of gold on your apparel./ How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle!/ Jonathan was slain in your high places./ I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;/ You have been very pleasant to me;/ Your love to me was wonderful,/ Surpassing the love of women./ How the mighty have fallen,/ And the weapons of war perished!"

Now what I find truly remarkable about these two quotations from the Book of Jashar is how differently some Bible readers insist on treating them. Because both are poetic compositions, and both are cited from the identical literary source, it seems only reasonable to me that we should interpret them as we would interpret any other piece of imaginative poetry.

In practice, however, some Bible readers treat one of those texts, not as a line of poetic composition, but as a literal account of a solar phenomenon. They insist that the Bible actually means that the sun and moon stood still in the heavens, making the day really longer.

Now if folks stand firm on this point, I suggest that they should at least be consistent. If Joshua 10:13 must literally mean that the earth, in response to Joshua's prayer, ceased to spin, they should also conclude that Jonathan and Saul really were "swifter than eagles,/ . . . stronger than lions." The inference seems only reasonable.

Now I am no rationalist. The God I worship is completely sovereign to His Creation. If He wishes, He can cause the earth to stop spinning on its axis, just as He can also, if He wishes, make Saul and Jonathan swifter than eagles and stronger than lions. With miracles, that is to say, I have not the least problem. What I am questioning, rather, is the logic of those who recognize figurative, metaphorical language in one line of poetry but insist on finding an exact, literal description of a solar phenomenon in yet another line of poetry, both lines being extracted from the identical source. I wonder if they also imagine that the rivers literally clap their hands and the trees truly do bow down in adoration. I submit that this approach to the material, missing the poetry of it, is rather perplexing.

©2005 Patrick Henry Reardon

**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**  
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641  
Church Office: (773) 777-0749  
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**  
[phrii@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phrii@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)  
**Pastoral Ponderings:**  
[http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral\\_ponderings.php](http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php)