Mr. President, Mr. Provost, fellow faculty members, staff and administrators, friends, family members, and guests:

It is a great privilege to be presented and installed in such a service as this. I thank you for honoring me with your presence here today.

My talk today deals with a widely known passage in the book of Joshua: the one speaking of the sun and the moon’s stopping in the sky on the day of Israel’s battle with the Canaanites at Gibeon. My understanding of this passage is based on careful consideration of the literary genre of the passage, including the poetic nature of the critical verses that speak of these lights’ stopping (vv. 12-13).

I shall introduce the passage, including the larger context of the entire chapter, and then discuss briefly the major solutions advanced among orthodox, believing Bible scholars. I shall then present my own solution, and draw some conclusions about general hermeneutical approaches to Biblical texts.

Sometimes lost in the myriad discussions of this text is its major emphasis: that God was revealing himself to be powerful and glorious in the eyes of Israel and the Canaanites. Earlier in the book of Joshua (4:24), we read that God stopped up the waters of the Jordan River for two reasons: “[1] so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and [2] so that you might always fear the LORD your God.” God performed miracles as a testimony to his power and as a stimulus to his own people to hold Him in proper reverence. Here, too, in Joshua 10, we see these two things at work.

My solution is set within an unapologetically supernaturalistic framework: God can and does work miracles. I argue that there was a great miracle at the battle of Gibeon: a
deadly hailstorm that killed more of Israel’s foes than Israel’s swords did (v. 11). The miracle was such a matter of astonishment that the writer of Joshua pauses to reflect on the wonder of it all, by breaking into a poetic affirmation that even the sun and moon were involved in this (vv. 12b–13).

Hermeneutically, this solution places the interpretation of Joshua 10:12–13 firmly in line with two established principles of Hebrew poetry. First, poetic texts are sometimes used in Old Testament narrative books as devices to make us reflect on the wonder and awesome nature of God’s mighty acts. Second, poetic texts make freer use of figurative language than do prose texts.

I. INTRODUCTION

The larger narrative context of this passage reveals that it is part of the story of the battle of Gibeon, which is told in 10:1–27. A southern coalition of kings attacked Gibeon, which had made a treaty of peace with Israel (chap. 9), and Israel came to its defense. The chapter consists of four divisions, as follows:

1. The Southern Coalition Gathers Against Gibeon (10:1–5)
2. The Battle of Gibeon: Stage One (10:6–11)
3. The Battle of Gibeon: Stage Two (10:12–15)
4. The Southern Coalition Kings Killed (10:16–27)

II. THE BATTLE OF GIBEON: STAGE ONE (10:6–11)

Our interest in the battle account lies in the two stages recounted in vv. 6–15. The two stages are parallel to each other: vv. 6–11 and 12–15. They are not successive stages, but parallel ones: they both describe different aspects of the battle of Gibeon. The picture in both sections is of a great and complete victory, with different facets: (1) a successful ambush (vv. 9–10), (2) a deadly hailstorm (v. 11), and (3) even the involvement of the sun and the moon (vv. 12–13). When all was said and done, the wonder of God’s listening and responding to a man’s appeal stands out (v. 14), showing that God was sensitive to his people.

The first section begins with the Gibeonites appealing to Joshua under terms of the treaty made in chap. 9, and Joshua responding (vv. 6–7). God threw the coalition into a panic, and there was a great slaughter by the Israelites (v. 10). Then, in the retreat, more were killed by a hailstorm than had died in the military encounter (v. 11).

10:6–7 The Gibeonites appealed urgently to Joshua for protection, because of the impressive forces arrayed against them (v. 6). Because of the treaty that they had just concluded with the Israelites, they were able to make such an appeal, and, as such, this episode is a test of Israel’s commitment and faithfulness to its word. Joshua did just as the Gibeonites requested (v. 7), coming up from Gilgal with an elite force against the Amorite coalition. In v. 8, God encouraged Joshua with words about his presence, which echo closely the words he had spoken to Joshua at the outset of the book.

Then, Joshua and his force marched all night and took the Amorites by surprise (v. 9). However, it was God—and God alone—who took the decisive actions against the
enemies (v. 10). Every verb in this verse is singular, indicating that he alone confused, struck, pursued, and struck them.\(^1\) Certainly the fighting force with Joshua (v. 7) was actually involved in this—notice the reference in v. 11 to the Israelites’ swords killing people—but, here, the author has chosen to ignore this fact and to focus instead on God’s direct involvement as Israel’s warrior. The land and its people were God’s to give, and he did so here. He alone were to receive the credit for this.

10:11 Whereas v. 10 summarizes the victory over the Amorites in general terms, with God receiving the credit, v. 11 gives more details, and God is again credited with the victory, but now the means by which he gave the victory is specified: a great deluge of hailstones that killed more people than the Israelite swords did.

III. THE BATTLE OF GIBEON: STAGE TWO (10:12–15)

The second section describing the battle of Gibeon is introduced with the disjunctive adverb ‘az, translated “then” (meaning “at that time”). It introduces important action that took place at the same time as that of vv. 6–11, not something that happened later.\(^2\) This is the function of ‘az when it is followed by a prefixed (imperfect) verb form, as it is here.\(^3\) That is, somehow, the hailstorm of v. 11 and the phenomena of vv. 12–13 either were one and the same thing or, as I argue below, they are part of only one set of events. In either case, however, the point is that vv. 12–13 do not describe a new set of events that followed the hailstorm.

The author’s emphasis in the section comes in v. 14. He marvels, not so much at the miracle or sign of v. 13, but rather at the fact that God heard and responded to the voice of a man (v. 14), interceding dramatically for Israel because of Joshua’s petition (v. 12)! There had never been such a day, nor would there be ever again. The two previous miracles on Israel’s behalf—the stopping of the waters of the Jordan and the victory over Jericho—had been at God’s initiative; this time, it was in response to one man’s petition.

A. Preliminary Questions

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\(^{1}\) The NRSV’s and NIV’s interpretive rendering has Israel defeating the Gibeonites and pursuing them. However, the subject of the verb “pursued” is “he,” not “Israel.” There is some textual evidence for plural verbs in the second half of the verse—the Old Greek, Syriac, and a Targum all have “And they pursued…and they struck”—but the consonantal MT is singular. The Vulgate (Latin) also has singular verbs here and “the Lord” is the subject : “And he pursued by the way of the ascent of Beth–horon and he smote as far as Azekah and Makkedah.”

\(^{2}\) ζα; means “then, at that time,” but “not in the sense of ‘sequentially, next’” (DCH 1:167).

D. J. A. Clines, ed., The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew, 3 vols. to date (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993–).

\(^{3}\) “The action introduced by ζα; is to be thought of as having taken place before the completion of the preceding action and in this sense the non-perfective describes relative action” (IBHS § 31.6.3b). See further I. Rabinowitz, “< ζ Followed by Imperfect Verb-Form in Preterite Contexts: A Redactional Device in Biblical Hebrew,” Vetus Testamentum 34 (1984), 53–62. Rabinowitz states (p. 54) that “referring to the foregoing context of narrated past events, < ζ + imperfect indicates this context as approximately the time when, the time or circumstances in the course of which, or the occasion upon which the action … went forward” and he translates it as “this was when…” (see p. 60 on Josh 10:12 specifically).
Before proceeding, we must address a few preliminary questions in vv. 12–13. (1) One question concerns the nature of the Book of Jashar mentioned in v. 13 and the extent of the quote from it. The Book of Jashar was an extra-Biblical book, mentioned twice in Scripture—here and in 2 Sam 1:18—about which we know nothing else. Many proposals are advanced as to exactly what is the quotation from the book, but I would suggest that perhaps there is no direct quotation at all, merely an allusion or reference to it.

The grammatical pattern introducing this book—“Is it not written in the book of Jashar?”—is the same as that found numerous times in the books of 1–2 Kings where we read many times, “And the rest of the deeds of PN, king of Israel/Judah, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel/Judah?” No one supposes that the books of 1–2 Kings are in those instances actually quoting selections verbatim from these sources. On the contrary, the references in 1–2 Kings show that the reader may go read further in these sources of the deeds of the various kings, and that presumably what is written in 1–2 Kings can also be found there.4 So, too, here in Joshua and the Book of Jashar.

Why did the author of Joshua refer to this book? It was probably not because he was using it as his only source for the information. Rather, he was stating, in effect, “If you don’t believe it, go read about it in the book of Jashar. Even that book has a record of this event.”

(2) A second question that arises here concerns who is speaking “in the presence of Israel” (v. 12). Here, a literal translation of the beginning of the verse is necessary, because most Bible versions rearranges and obscures several words:

“At that time, Joshua spoke to the LORD, on the day of the LORD’s giving the Amorite [before] the sons of Israel, and he said [in] the eyes of Israel….”

Most interpreters understand the speaker to be Joshua, and, on the face of it, this is the most natural reading of the Hebrew. However, at least two issues should give us pause in this matter. First, the subject of the verb wayyo’mer “and he said” is not specified, and it is at least possible that the LORD, not Joshua, is the speaker; the grammar would certainly allow for this, even if it is not the first probability.5 Second, even though the text says that Joshua “spoke to the LORD,” the words spoken were actually addressed directly to the sun and the moon, not to the LORD. W should remember that the LORD is a far more appropriate subject than Joshua to have addressed the sun and moon directly with a command such as this: he created them and he was their sovereign (Gen 1:14–17; Isa 40:26; Jer 31:35). If this is the case, then we have in these verses evidence of the LORD taking the initiative and demonstrating his great power over these natural phenomena, speaking directly to them, ordering them to obey his command.

In line with this, the end of v. 14 states that “Surely the LORD was fighting for Israel,” which can shed some light on a statement in v. 13 (usually read “until the nation

4 On these sources in 1–2 Kings and 1–2 Chronicles, see Howard, Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books, 174–75, 238–42.
5 This suggestion is made by Patrick D. Miller, Jr., The Divine Warrior in Early Israel, 127–28. The Old Greek adds “Joshua” as subject of “he said,” and it is followed by the NIV and many versions and commentators, but the Hebrew and the Vulgate are indefinite.
avenged itself on its enemies”). If the LORD, in his capacity as their sovereign, commanded the sun and the moon to take their positions, and if, as we have noted in connection with vv. 10–11, the LORD was ultimately solely responsible for doing battle with the Amorites, then here too it should not surprise us if the LORD—rather than the Israelites—is described as taking vengeance upon his enemies. This is precisely what the Old Greek translation of the OT states, which reads in v. 13: “until God [ho theos] took vengeance on their enemies.” If this is correct—and I think it is—then we see a consistent approach throughout the entire text where God is solely responsible for every aspect of the victory: the LORD was the one who threw them into a panic (v. 10), who sent the hailstorm and struck down the Amorites (v. 11), who commanded the sun and the moon to obey him (v. 12), who avenged himself upon Israel’s enemies (v. 13); in short, the LORD fought for Israel (v. 14). Thus, I assume that the LORD was the one who spoke to the sun and the moon, not Joshua, and the LORD who took vengeance on His enemies, not the nation.

(3) A third question concerns the meaning of the statements about the sun and the moon standing still, and it is the question most often asked of this passage. A host of answers has been proposed, which we cannot rehearse here. These have clustered around two major understandings: (1) the passage should be read literally, and the phenomena explained naturalistically (the earth stopped rotating, there was a solar eclipse, a refraction of light, etc.), and (2) the passage is an omen text of some sort, calling for bad fortune to befall the Canaanites and/or good fortune to be with the Israelites.

**B. The Proposed Solution: A Poetic Reflection (10:12b–13)**

My own proposal moves in a different direction from any of these. I believe that the critical text in question—vv. 12b-13—is poetic in its entirety (including v. 13b), and that it is a poetic, hymnic reflection upon the events of vv. 6-11. The author of Joshua has already told us of the wonder and the marvel of the miracles of God’s involvement of the battle of Gibeon (vv. 6-11)—the sending of the hailstorm and the attendant annihilation of the Canaanites—and now he pauses, before continuing on with more details of the conquest of Canaan, to break into poetic song that magnifies these miracles again, this time in poetic form.

Almost all scholarly treatments recognize that the passage in question is poetic, although the extent of the poetry is disputed. All agree that v. 12b is poetic, and most agree that v. 13a is, as well. However, the implications of the poetic form are not usually dealt with. These implications have to do (1) with the function of poetic texts inserted into narratives, and (2) with the frequently figurative nature of poetic language.

**1. The Narrative Function of Embedded Poetic Texts**

In numerous critical spots in OT narrative texts, we find poems, often hymnic in form, imbedded in the midst of narrative stories. Examples include Genesis 49 (Jacob’s Blessing), Exodus 15 (Miriam’s Song), Judges 5 (Deborah’s Song), 1 Samuel 2 (Hannah’s Song), 2 Samuel 22 (David’s Song), and others. In all of these cases, the
inserted poem functions to comment upon, or to augment, something that has been stated in the narrative texts immediately preceding. To highlight just three of these:

(1) In Exod 15:1–18, we find in Miriam’s “Song of the Sea” a poetic description of the events of God’s deliverance of Israel from the Egyptians at the Red Sea, events that are told in a prose narrative in the preceding chapter (Exodus 14). Miriam’s Song is a hymnic reflection on these events, a hymn of praise marveling at God’s mighty deeds.

(2) In Judges 5, we find in Deborah’s Song a similar poetic reflection upon the events of the Israelites’ victory over the Canaanites in a battle at the valley of Jezreel, the full story of which is told in the preceding chapter (the prose text of Judges 4).

(3) A short example of this, similar to our own text, is to be found in Numbers 21 in the so-called “Song of the Well” (Num 21:17–18). Here, the narrative text states that the LORD gave the Israelites water from a well, and Israel then sang a short song about it, which is recorded here (NRSV):

16 From there they continued to Beer; that is the well of which the LORD said to Moses, "Gather the people together, and I will give them water." 17 Then Israel sang this song:

"Spring up, O well!--Sing to it!--
18 the well that the leaders sank,
that the nobles of the people dug,
with the scepter, with the staff."

From the wilderness to Mattanah....

Each of these examples shows a poetic text pausing to comment or reflect upon something in the prose text immediately preceding it, a situation that we see in Joshua 10, as well.

(2) The Figurative Nature of Poetic Language

A second, well-established feature of Hebrew poetry is that it frequently employs figurative language in making its point. Poetry -- in any language -- is more often the conveyor of deep emotions, and it breaks more easily into figurative expression. Three examples will show this:

(1) Compare the following two texts that describe two situations of great distress in David’s life:

David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground (2 Sam. 12:16).

Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.
I have come into deep waters;
the floods engulf me (Ps. 69:1-2 [MT 69:2-3]).

The prose passage is straightforward, telling of David's activity of mourning. The poetic text is emotive and impressionistic, conveying the psalmist's great emotion. However, we do not literally imagine the psalmist standing -- or worse, treading water -- in flood waters up to his neck, pen and parchment in hand, composing this psalm. Because of the nature of poetry, we instinctively understand the language in the psalm to be figurative.

(2) In another instance, a battle is described very differently in parallel prose and poetic contexts:

On that day God subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king, before the Israelites. And the hand of the Israelites grew stronger and stronger against Jabin, the Canaanite king, until they destroyed him (Judg. 4:23-24).

O LORD, when you went out from Seir,
when you marched from the land of Edom,
the earth shook, the heavens poured,
the clouds poured down water. The mountains quaked before the LORD, the One of Sinai, before the LORD, the God of Israel.... From the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera (Judg. 5:4-5, 20).

The prose text is more "prosaic," i.e., more straightforward, and it tells of the Israelites' victory in a matter-of-fact manner, while the poetic text reflects upon that victory, and speaks of God's involvement from the heavenly perspective, and uses language that we instinctively understand to be figurative.

(3) In a remarkable poetic text in Habakkuk, we read of an awe-inspiring appearance of the LORD in a vision, and the sun and moon are described in terms similar to what we find here in Joshua 10:

“Sun and moon stood still (dmm) in the heavens at the glint of your flying arrows, at the lightning of your flashing spear” (Hab 3:11).

No one suggests that the poets in these last two instances (Judges 5 and Habakkuk 3) were describing any extraordinary astronomical or geophysical phenomena involving the sun, moon, or stars; rather, they are easily recognized as figurative expressions in
poetic form, describing the totality of the LORD’s victory over the Canaanites (in the first case) or the awesomeness of the LORD’s appearance (in the second case).

Thus, I argue that vv. 12b–13b in Joshua 10 are simply poetic expressions of information contained in the corresponding prose assertions. The prose account of the all-night march (v. 9) is described in the poetic text as the moon’s standing still (v. 13a), since the moon’s light would have facilitated this march; likewise, the prose account of the entire battle, which was a lengthy one and which concluded “at sunset” (v. 27), is described in the poetic text as the sun’s stopping in the middle of the sky and delaying setting for a full day (v. 13b).6

Thus, you have in your hands a translation of the passage that attempts to clarify the points made above. The indented, italicized lines are poetic. Words in parenthesis are added for clarity in the process of going from one language to another. Words in brackets are additions based on textual or grammatical issues discussed above.7

12At that time, Joshua spoke to (i.e., petitioned) the LORD, on the day of the LORD’s giving the Amorites into the power of the sons of Israel. And [the LORD] said in the sight of Israel, 

“O sun, over Gibeon stop,  
O moon, over the valley of Aijalon (stop)!"

13So the sun stopped  
and the moon, it stood still  
Until [the LORD] took vengeance [against] the nation of his enemies. 

Is it not (all) written in the book of Jashar?  
And the sun stood still  
in the midst of the heavens,  
And it did not hurry to go (down)  
about a complete day. 

14And there has not been (a day) like that day before it or after it, when the LORD obeyed the voice of a man, for the LORD fought for Israel.

What, then, do vv. 12–14 tell us? In my understanding, it is as follows. First, Joshua appealed to the LORD for help (v. 12a), but his words are not recorded. (This would have happened in reality some time between vv. 7 and 8, or between 8 and 9.) Then, in response, the LORD spoke to the sun and moon, ordering them to stop, and they

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6 Sailhamer, *NIV Compact Bible Commentary*, 191.
7 There are nine poetic lines (or half-lines) here (for this terminology and the method of counting stresses here, see D. M. Howard, Jr., *The Structure of Psalms 93–100* [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997], 28–30 and n. 9). They are fairly well balanced in terms of the stresses in the Hebrew text: In the first set, we have stress patterns of 3,3,2,2,3, while in the second set, we see 2,2,2,2. We must note that v. 13b (containing the second set of poetic lines) is not generally analyzed as poetry—and this is perhaps the major weakness of this approach, because otherwise, it is difficult to deal with the assertions of v. 13b. However, the four lines here are as easily poetic as the three lines in v. 13a (including the presence of a ωαψψιθ↵λ verbal construction in both sets); virtually no one questions the poetic nature of v. 13a, and, we would argue, v. 13b is no different in kind.
“obeyed.” They maintained this obedience until the LORD took his vengeance against his enemies (vv. 12b–13b). Then, this is all placed into perspective, in the amazing fact that the LORD actually listened and responded to the request of one man (v. 14).

Being poetic and figurative, the words in vv. 12b–13b do not attempt to describe any literal astronomical or geophysical phenomena, either in reality nor in the author’s intent. That is, the author of the narrative here was not intending to describe any extraordinary event involving the sun and the moon, any more than the poet in Judges 5 was claiming this about the stars or the poet in Habakkuk 3 was claiming this about the sun and the moon.

What do the words addressed to the sun and the moon mean, then, if not that the earth stopped rotating or the sun stopped shining (or something similar)? Simply this: that the LORD was directing the sun and the moon to fight for Israel in the same way that the stars fought for Israel in Deborah’s day (Judg 5:20), or else that they were to stand amazed as he fought for Israel, just as they did in Hab 3:11. We do not imagine that any of these statements mean anything except that the LORD’s victory was total and that his majesty is awe-inspiring. Did the poet here imagine that these statements involved any universe-altering astronomical or geophysical phenomena? No, not any more than the psalmists, when they urge the rivers to clap their hands and the mountains to sing for joy (Ps 98:8) or the trees of the field to sing for joy (Ps 96:12), or when Isaiah writes that “the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands” (Isa 55:12).

The sun and the moon obeyed the LORD’s commands, and, remarkably, the LORD “obeyed” a man’s request (v. 14). The expression in v. 14 is literally, “and the LORD listened [to] the voice of a man.” The verbal construction here is one of the most common ways that Hebrew has to express obedience.8 the LORD was not bound to “obey” Joshua’s request, of course. However, the fact that he did is what was so remarkable. Thus, this correspondence between vv. 13 and 14 in terms of obedience highlights the most remarkable feature of the days’ events: it was a day on which the LORD himself “obeyed” a mere man and fought for Israel (v. 14).

D. Climax: A Prose Reflection (10:14)

This is the climax of the section, where the author leaves off describing the events and gives his own evaluation of them. The author of Joshua marvels at this fact: not that a cosmic miracle may have occurred, but that the LORD listened to the voice of one man, and fought on Israel’s behalf as a result. Just as the sun and moon obeyed the LORD’s commands, so here the LORD “obeyed” Joshua’s request.

In what way was it true that the LORD had never listened to a man before this or since? After all, Moses had spoken with the LORD and the LORD had listened to him. In the wilderness, for example, the LORD told Moses that he was going to destroy the Israelites and make a great nation out of Moses, but he was dissuaded by Moses’ prayerful intervention (Num 14:11–21). Also, Moses himself claimed that the LORD had listened to him (Deut 9:19; 10:10).

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8 See BDB, 1034, § 1.m.
The answer lies in the precise wording used here, which is *shama’ be-qol* meaning “to listen to” or “to obey” (literally, “to listen [to] the voice”). This is a much stronger way of expressing obedience than merely to say that someone listened to or heard someone else (i.e., without *be-qol* “voice”). The wording used here is only found three times in the Old Testament with “the LORD” as the subject. In the first instance, the context is very similar to that here, but the object is the nation of Israel, not an individual (Num 21:3: “the LORD listened to [ *shama’ be-qol*] Israel’s plea and gave the Canaanites over to them”). The second instance is here in Josh 10:14, the first time this precise wording is found with reference to an individual’s voice. In the third instance, the LORD did listen to the voice of a man, as he had to Joshua’s, but it was many centuries later, probably after the writing of the material here in Joshua 10. It involved another great individual, Elijah, and the LORD restored the life of a young boy on the basis of Elijah’s plea (1 Kgs 17:22).9

So, we can see that this response on the LORD’s part was indeed remarkable. He “obeyed” Joshua’s request. Not even Moses, the great leader whose shoes Joshua was attempting to fill, had received such an honor. The LORD honored Joshua in many ways throughout his tenure as Israel’s leader, but this was one of the most remarkable.

How did the LORD “obey” Joshua’s request? How did he fight for Israel? Not by stopping the earth’s rotation, but by throwing the enemy into confusion (v. 10), by sending the hailstorm (v. 11), and by commanding even the sun and the moon to fight for Israel, i.e., by declaring total war against the Amorites (vv. 12–13). The author has come at the subject of the LORD’s fighting for Israel from several different angles in this passage, and v. 14 shows that he did this at Joshua’s request. Because of this, it was a marvelous day like no other before or since! This is an excellent example of the power of one person’s influence and of the power of prayer.

**IV. CONCLUSION**

I conclude, then, that God effected a great miracle in routing the Canaanite coalition confronting the Israelites (Josh. 10:8–11). He sent confusion into their camp and sent a great hailstorm the likes of which had seldom if ever been seen before (10:10–11). The author of the book of Joshua marvels at this to such a degree that he responds in two ways: (1) he breaks into a short burst of poetic praise about God’s actions (10:12b–13) and (2) he asserts that God had never before listened to the voice of one man in this way (10:14).

Thus, in our dealings with this text, we treat it just as we would other poetic texts that praise God. In any language, poetry expresses some of the deepest emotions of the soul and the psyche, and this is certainly true of Hebrew poetry. More to the point, this is a common function of Hebrew poetic texts that are inserted into prose narrative accounts: to praise God for his wonderful, miraculous acts. So it is here in Joshua 10.

*Soli Deo Gloria.*

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9 In two other instances, the same wording is found with “God” as subject, not “the LORD”: Judg 13:9; Ps 55:19.