

# Timothy Tests Theistic Evolutionism

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## ABSTRACT

*An article in this journal<sup>1</sup> criticises a principle which is very important to creationists: the straightforward interpretation of the Bible, a principle which I have made more explicit recently by an illustration I called the ‘Timothy test’.<sup>2</sup> I examine one of the examples that article uses, Joshua’s long day, in order to expose the dangers of departing from a straightforward understanding of Scripture.*

## INTRODUCTION

Perry G. Phillips’ criticism of my proposed ‘Timothy test’ (illustrating straightforward interpretation of Scripture) shows he has presuppositions quite different from those of most of the readers of this journal. He believes that the Big Bang theory is correct, that the universe is billions of years old, and that events of natural history followed the general sequence assumed by evolutionist scientists. I call such a view ‘theistic evolutionism’,<sup>3</sup> but some of its proponents, such as Hugh N. Ross, call it less alarming names, such as ‘progressive creationism’.

Theistic evolutionists base their presuppositions on one central assumption: that evolutionist scientists are correct. Therefore, they claim, we must ‘re-interpret’ Scripture to conform to whatever such scientists are presently claiming is the truth. In other words, theistic evolutionists depart from the basic Reformation principle *Sola Scriptura*, ‘Scripture alone’, which is the idea that Scripture alone is sufficient to interpret itself, without any admixture from whatever is currently accepted as ‘science’.

Phillips uses several examples to try to show how application of the ‘Timothy test’ could lead readers of the Bible into a misunderstanding of science. His first example deals with the interpretation of Joshua 10:13, which mentions the long day Joshua asked God to cause. In the next three sections, I intend to show that Phillips’ presuppositions have led him into a serious misunderstanding of that very example. In a section after those, I will briefly point out some of Phillips’ other misunderstandings.

## TIMOTHY’S VIEW OF JOSHUA’S LONG DAY

Phillips cites Joshua 10:12, 13 as his first example against the ‘Timothy test’:

‘Then Joshua spoke to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the sons of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, “O sun, stand still at Gibeon, and O moon in the valley of Aijalon”. So the sun stood still and the moon stopped, until the nation avenged themselves of their enemies. Is it not written in the book of Jashar? And the sun stopped in the middle of the sky, and did not hasten to go down for about a whole day.’ (NASB)

Phillips correctly points out that by interpreting verse 13 straightforwardly, the Timothy of my illustration would conclude ‘*that the sun moved around the Earth*’. Phillips then **incorrectly** assumes I would reject that conclusion. On the contrary, I say that Timothy’s conclusion is scientifically correct! **In the Earth’s reference frame**, the Sun does indeed move around the Earth.<sup>4</sup>

## WHAT IS THE BIBLICAL REFERENCE FRAME?

The key point is the ‘reference frame’ I mention. Reference frames are all-important in discussions like these. By their very nature, velocities are tied to some frame of reference, either explicitly or implicitly. Usually our **implicit** frame of reference is the Earth. For example, if the traffic policeman tells me I was going 70 mph in a 60 mph zone, both of us have the same reference frame in mind, namely, the ground under our feet. The Earth is the

frame of reference all of us refer to naturally without even thinking about it.

So what is the reference frame of Joshua 10:13? As I pointed out on page 74 of my book, the Bible gives times as they would be measured in the **Earth's** reference frame. The same is true of distances and velocities; Scripture evidence exists that the reference frame the Bible uses for such quantities is the Earth. That is to be expected in a book which God intended to be understood by people throughout the ages, most of whom thought in terms of no other reference frame than the Earth. To be specific, the implicit reference frame of Joshua 10:13 is the Earth. In that reference frame, the Sun moves around the Earth.

According to Einstein's general theory of relativity,<sup>5</sup> all physical phenomena can be described from **any** frame of reference. Some reference frames lead to simpler descriptions than others — but all give equally correct results. Thus Timothy's straightforward understanding of the motion of the Sun relative to the Earth is perfectly accurate in the strictest scientific sense. Phillips and many theologians call the language of Joshua 10:13 'phenomenological'. That is misleading, because it implies that the words are not strictly correct. On the contrary, the language of the verse is straightforward and accurate. The 'Timothy test' leads to a scientifically correct conclusion. This completely reverses the point Phillips was trying to make!

### HOW GALILEO CONFUSED THE ISSUE

In his zeal to be scientifically correct, why didn't Phillips perceive the relativistic implications above? His preconceptions misled him. If a Scripture appears to be wrong, Phillips does not try to find a way it could be straightforwardly true. Instead, he tries to say it is merely a figure of speech. In Phillips' defence, it was not he who popularised this approach to Joshua 10:13. Regrettably, it was the Renaissance physicist Galileo Galilei, who nearly four centuries ago gave some seemingly scientific sanction to seeing this verse as a figure of speech.

Galileo may have understood the principle of the relativity of motion.<sup>6</sup> But if he did, he failed to apply that principle to Joshua 10:13. When churchmen asked him about that verse and if he thought the Earth was moving, he should have asked, 'With respect to what?' Instead, he fell back to suggesting that Scripture was speaking figuratively on that point.<sup>7</sup> Thus he transmitted a wrong attitude toward Scripture which has come down to us today in the form of Phillips' preconceptions. In Galileo's defence, he probably got his hermeneutical preconceptions from some churchmen favouring allegorical interpretations of Scripture. Perhaps that is also the source of Phillips' attitude.

### OTHER CONFUSION TO CLEAR UP

Here I would like to briefly comment on some of

Phillips' other misunderstandings:

- (1) My 'presumption' about Timothy's understanding of Exodus 20:11 has its roots in a detailed study I have done of **all** the Scriptures I can find which seem relevant to the age of the Earth issue. There are dozens of passages which either directly declare or strongly imply the Earth is young. I have found **none** which do the same (directly declare or strongly imply) for the idea of an old Earth. Phillips' reference 3 is not even in the 'strongly imply' class, because he makes many unwarranted assumptions about what Adam could or could not do on the sixth day, assumptions which creationists have found wanting. If that is the best Phillips can do, he has lost the debate! Where is the theistic evolutionist equivalent, say, of Exodus 20:11, positively declaring in explicit words that 'In six long ages of time, God made the universe'? There is no such verse, and Phillips knows it!
- (2) I do not advocate ignoring the '2000-year history of Biblical interpretation' Phillips cites. It is always valuable to investigate what various believers have thought about Scripture down through the millennia. The exposure to various viewpoints can stimulate our minds into considering good possibilities we hadn't thought of before. However, the 'Timothy test' is valuable here, too. If I find that a particular human tradition is based on a less-than-straightforward understanding of Scripture, I am immediately suspicious of it. That is why I reject theistic evolution.
- (3) Phillips doesn't seem to realise that I advocate applying the 'Timothy test' to **all** the Scriptures which can be brought to bear on a given issue, not just to isolated passages. I didn't think it was necessary to spell it out (evidently I was wrong!), but I illustrated the principle with my exegesis of many Scriptures related to the 'waters above'. To 'Timothy test' all related Scriptures means, for example, we should seek for the most straightforward harmonisation of **all** passages related to the chronologies of Genesis, Judges and Kings. Thus the 'Timothy test' is precisely in line with the harmonisation which conservative Biblical chronologists are constructing. This simple correction of Phillips' misunderstanding disposes of the three examples following the one on Joshua's long day.
- (4) Phillips' fifth example, about lists of cities in the book of Joshua, is full of seemingly unconscious assumptions, not the least of which are:
  - (a) that liberal dates (based on an incorrect interpretation of carbon-14 data) for the time of Joshua are correct, and
  - (b) that archaeology in Palestine is now complete and all small village sites have been unearthed.

I would hope that he can see the fallacies in such assumptions once the assumptions are pointed out. This sufficiently answers Phillips' last example.

## CONCLUSION

In a way, I am glad that Phillips has attacked the ‘Timothy test’, because I suspect it makes him uncomfortable. I designed the test to illustrate the principles of straightforward interpretation and *Sola Scriptura* so clearly that theistic evolutionists (such as Hugh Ross) would not be comfortable in their claims to be following those principles. It seems that I have succeeded in producing such discomfort.

I am disappointed that Phillips chose to attack the ‘Timothy test’ rather than accepting it. If he were to coin a Latin watchword for his point of view, which seeks to reconcile Scripture with accepted evolutionist science, it could well be *Scriptura et Scientia*, ‘Scripture and Science’. However, to paraphrase Ken Ham, in any contest between Scripture and science, guess which one the theistic evolutionists always declare the winner! Science! A more accurate epithet for theistic evolutionism would be *Scriptura sub Scientia*, ‘Scripture under Science’.

*Scriptura sub Scientia* is an attitude which eviscerates (disembowels) the usefulness and authority of Scripture. Of what use would Scripture be if its meaning were really as elastic as theistic evolutionists would like it to be? As I pointed out,<sup>8</sup> with their method of ‘interpretation’, one could never learn anything new from Scripture; one would always try to squeeze puzzling verses into the mould of our present scientific understanding.

Even more important, one could use such elasticity to escape the authority of clear Biblical commands. That may explain why theistic evolutionism is so attractive to some ‘evangelical’ leaders today. *Scriptura sub Scientia* sets a precedent for cloaking one’s own ideas with the appearance of Biblical sanction. It would be far more honest for theistic evolutionists to throw out the Bible completely and concoct their own religious texts. But it would be even better if they would abandon their compromise with evolutionism and embrace the Word of God without reservation!

## REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Phillips, P. G., 1997. D. Russell Humphreys’s cosmology and the ‘Timothy test’. *CEN Tech. J.*, 11(2):
2. Humphreys, D. R., 1994. **Starlight and Time: Solving the Puzzle of Distant Starlight in a Young Universe**, Master Books, Green Forest, Arkansas, pp. 55–57.
3. By ‘theistic evolution’ I mean any view which seeks to combine billions of years of evolutionary progression with theism, because I am convinced that the essence of evolutionism is a long time-scale. This broad definition includes many sub-varieties such as ‘progressive creation’, ‘day-age’ theories, and most ‘gap’ theories.
4. No, I am not a geocentrist, at least not in the classical sense, which claims the Earth is at rest (with respect to something unspecified or unobservable) and that all else rotates around it. In my book, **Starlight and Time**, Ref. 2, pp. 71–72, I do assert that the Earth is near, on a cosmological scale of distances, the centre of the cosmos. However, I make no claim as to whether the Sun or the Earth is presently closer to that centre. Moreover, I pointed out that both bodies are probably moving with respect to the centre.
5. As readers of my book, **Starlight and Time**, Ref. 2, pp. 11, 84, 89–91, will know, I think general relativity is probably a good approximation of the truth.
6. Galilei, G., 1967. **Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems**, translated by S. Drake, Second revised edition, University of California Press, Berkeley, p. 116. (First Italian edition, 1632, Landini, Florence.) In the dialogue of the second day, Galileo has Salviati, who is the spokesman for his own views, saying the following in the context of moving ships and their cargo: ‘. . . motion which is in common to many moving things . . . is operative only in the relation that they have with other bodies lacking that motion . . .’.
7. Galilei, G., 1613. **Letter to Castelli**. Outlined by G. de Santillana in: **The Crime of Galileo**, 1955, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 39.
8. Humphreys, Ref. 2, p. 56.

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