

TOPIC XX

THE NEPHILIM

Introduction:

This study is in response to a question I received from a friend, "Who or what are the Nephilim?" It is more informal, and the word "Nephilim" is highlighted in red for easier identification.

Dear friend,

This is going to be far more extensive than you expected as every nuance of the passage in Genesis 6:1-4 ff. bears on giving you the best answer possible to your question.

The word "**Nephilim**" is used in two places in the Bible as reproduced below. There are no other translations of the Hebrew "**Nephilim**" in the Bible. This Hebrew word is only used in these two references. I will use the NASB as a base reference translation although it, like all translations, has problems.

Genesis 6:4, "The **Nephilim** were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore *children* to them. Those were the mighty men who *were* of old, men of renown."

In Numbers 13:30-33 we read,

"Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, "We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will surely overcome it." 31: But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us." 32: So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of *great* size. 33: "There also we saw the **Nephilim** (the sons of Anak are part of the **Nephilim**); and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."

There are a few clues as to what and who these folks are. We will look at the etymology of the word and what it connotes. We will look at its relationship to “the sons of Anak”. We will look at another Hebrew word “raphah” which is translated “giant” and see what else we can discover.

Also note that these “folks” existed both before and after the flood. Yes, I know how do we figure that out? This actually doesn’t bother me at all, but some radical conservative literalists would be shocked, I’m sure. As far as the flood goes and survivors not on the Ark, this of course could become a sticky issue and arguing over it would produce nothing of value. It is actually irrelevant and moot in terms of the point of the book. There is no mention as to how this came to be so speculation may be interesting, but confidence is unavailable. Genesis 6:4 could easily read, “The **Nephilim** were on the earth in those days, and sometime after the flood they were also found to exist.” Another topic for another day, although I hint at it in this paper. These people were the offspring of, “the sons of God and the daughters of men.” We will comment on that in a moment.

Notice first that most translations do not use the word “giant” with the exception of the KJV and a few very old versions - 16th century - as well as a few odd versions. Any translation worth its salt will leave it **Nephilim**. Here’s why. The exact identity of these people is somewhat sketchy, including their size. We will explain. That was the “editorial” we.

First, the meaning and origin of the word used to describe these peoples, **Nephilim**. The word comes from the root “nah-phal”. This root has nuances that include: “To fall”; “falling”; “fallen”; “causing someone to fall” (depending on the stem), “throw down”; “cast down”; “lie down or prostrate” (as in prayer even) “ruin”; “overthrow”; “cause to lie down”, which transitions into “slay”; “kill”; “bring to destruction”; and so on. In the “im” ending of the word, we have a plural. Thus, the root idea in applying this to people is that they are formidable warriors. In the Numbers reference, for example, we have phrases like “too strong”, “devouring inhabitants”, “*great* size”. The word “great” is italicized in the NASB indicating it was supplied but not in the original. They cause people to be downtrodden, enslaved, dead, etc.

Some think the word means that they were “fallen” people, extreme sinners etc., but this is a weak position. In other words, “who isn’t”? It makes no sense unless you add some theological explanation as to the origin of these people as being

some sort of demonic or heavenly creature having intercourse with women. This gets really goofed up, especially when Jesus makes it clear that “angels” (and such) do not marry and cannot reproduce. There are some passages to pretty much eliminate that interpretation about these “sons of God”. We will continue to examine this more later.

The Hebrew word “**Nephilim**” describes “stature” or “formidability”, but it may or may not indicate “size”. But since the whining spies called themselves “grasshoppers” by comparison, we can glean that these **Nephilim** (or sons of Anak) were larger than average. Other passages bear that out. The average size for Israelites, or any mid-eastern or Egyptian man in those days was about five foot two. I know this for a fact. A six-footer would be quite big and both Saul and David approached that size. Goliath was even larger.

Yes, contrary to popular belief, David was a big man when he slew Goliath (to whom we will return) probably between 26 and 30 years of age, bearded, arrogant and a very skilled killer already. This is quite easily demonstrated from a careful examination of the book of I Samuel, chapter 17 and onward. He also liked the idea of a reward, a woman, and tax-free family land holdings.

Anyway, it is quite possible, even probable that the spies exaggerated the circumstances in Canaan to avoid conflict. “Devours its inhabitants” ...please. Hyperbole I think. Speaking of Goliath as a descendant of these “**Nephilim**”, he was likely close to seven feet tall give or take. Personally, I think a tall six to mid-seven footer. A “cubit”, though often thought of as 18”, is smaller when one takes into consideration the actual size of the people then and there. We are not talking 20th century Americans here. A cubit is more like 12-14 inches at best in ancient perspective. So Goliath at six cubits and a span would be roughly six and a half to seven feet tall. Could he have approached eight feet? At the very outside, but I doubt it. Nine? Please. But I digress.

Anyway, we also have these peoples in Numbers, called “The sons of Anak”. We will get a closer look at these people and then go back to Genesis. Anak is a Canaanite word meaning “neck” or “neck chain”. These were people “of the neck”. They were also called “Emim” (“a terror”) and Rephaim” (from the same root [raphah] as “giant”). Apparently, these people “of the neck” were known for binding a chain around the necks of a prisoners and dragging them into slavery. The neck chain is a mark of slavery. Perhaps the idea of “devouring the people” comes from this. The plural is “Anakim” and also found in Deuteronomy 1:28;

2:10, 11, 21; 9:2; and Joshua 11:21-22; 14:12-15. Anak is further referenced in: Numbers 13:22, 28, 33; Joshua 15:13-14; 21:11; and Judges 1:20. You might add any references to Rephaim and Emim if you wish but I think I got most of them. Reading these references will begin to give you a better idea about these people.

Please do so at your convenience.

Their habitat was primarily the Gaza strip (or territory) extending to Hebron. The Philistines (from whom we get the word “Palestine”) seemed to have come from Greece or one of the Greek islands and were in Palestine by the time of Abraham (c. 2000 B.C.). The Anakim may also be related to these people as they also were in the land by then. They are mentioned as enemies of Egypt in the general Abrahamic era. (Note: Numbers 13:22) Othniel, the son of Caleb (and the first judge) drove these people out of the land. They retreated to Gaza, Gath and Ashdod. Goliath was from Gath (a “Gittite”). His whole family was big. But it seems that everyone who battled them won. “The bigger they are ...” The Bible describes them as “great, numerous and tall” repeatedly.

There is reference to the “**Nephilim**” prior to the flood, and after wards, and references to the “Anakim” during the time of Abraham onward, and even several hundreds of years during and after Israel conquered Palestine. So aligning the “**Niphilim**” with “Anak” is a probable conclusion. Interestingly, there is a tie in the names given to these two peoples. The Anakim were also called “Rephaim” as we saw above. The root of this word is the same as for “giant” and the word “**Nephilim**” is used to describe the “Anakim” in Numbers 13.

The actual word for “giant” or “giants” is the word “raphah”. It is translated “giant” only in II Samuel 21:16,18,20,22; and “giants” only in I Chronicles 20:4,6,8. These references are worth reading! Note the relationship to the past and to Goliath. Both accounts relate the same events, but the references are interesting as they differ, one referencing “the giant” - Goliath and the other the “giants”.

Now, the Genesis reference.

Genesis 6:4, “The **Nephilim** were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore *children* to them. Those were the mighty men who *were* of old, men of renown.” I reproduced the Hebrew of Genesis 6:4 below for a reference.

תנפלים היו בארץ בימים ההם וגם אחרי־כן אשר יבאו בני האלהים אל־בנות
האדם וילדו להם המה הגברים אשר מעולם אנשי השם

Now, “The mighty men of old, men of renown” are now described in terms of their descendants – the “Anakim”. We know quite a bit about them now, their probable origins, size, reputation, lineage, habitat, why they were called “**Nephilim**”, and so on. Also that they were “men” (ish) and not freaks.

It is also noteworthy that what we have is a later editorial comment indicated by the words of explanation to the reader, “Those were the mighty men who *were* of old, men of renown.” There seems to be some need to explain the origin of these “**Nephilim**”. My research draws the conclusion (and I might tread on toes here, but here it is) that the Torah and subsequent books were actually formalized and compiled into written documents (complete scrolls) during the time of the kings of Judah after David, i.e. during the first temple era. Within these documents is ample evidence of this (not necessarily the time frame - which take more work to establish - but later editorializing) easily spotted if one simply begins to look up phrases in Genesis and other books such as “to this day” and the like. Quick examples – Genesis 19:37-38; 22:14 etc. These are dozens of these types of phrases in the O.T. .

Just spotting this alone can help in pinning down dates of Biblical events such as the Exodus, conquest of Canaan and so on. So these editorial “intrusions” were to help the current reader understand the “what’s” of the past. So if one accepts the “Temple” era compiling scenario, our text (6:4) makes a whole lot of sense. But enough on that. However, let’s make a further observation. Genesis 6:1-4 could be totally left out of the narrative and there would be no interruption in the narrative. The chapter could simply pick up in verse 5 and go on and we would be none the wiser. So the reason for this inclusion is interesting. You can think on it. Moving on...

These “**Nephilim**” were, “on the earth in those days and also afterward”. “...those days” suggest the time prior to the flood, and “afterward” seems to indicate the time following the flood. The entire contextual passage needs to be involved and so here it is.

Genesis 6:1-8, 1: Now it came about, when men began to multiply on the face of

the land, and daughters were born to them, 2: that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose. 3: Then the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years." 4: The **Nephilim** were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore *children* to them. Those were the mighty men who *were* of old, men of renown. 5: Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. 6: The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. 7: The LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them." 8: But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

Does the inclusion of this explanation (verses 1-4) add any reason for the decision for the flood? It could be argued both ways effectively. The key comment is found in verses 5 and 6. The word "then" is not a good translation (in fact it is not even close) as it suggests that this verse is based on the previous passages. The Hebrew is, "The Lord (Yahweh) "saw"¹ the wickedness...". There is no need to suggest it was due to this event that the flood occurred. Evil has already infected mankind. (chapter 4). But we now have an explanation of where the "**Nephilim**" came from.

Let's also note that the "daughters of men" is introduced in verse one. These are women born of "Adam" . The use of the word "Adam" here is differentiated from the normal word for "man" or "men" which is "ish" (eesh). Adam always signifies those who are of God's creation, in His "own image", and involved in His redemptive purpose.

There is quite a wonderful experience when one studies the word "Adam". It is a plural collective noun. Ezekiel was called "Son of man" (Adam) and Jesus called Himself, "the son of man (Adam). This is an eye opening study and I will make a point or two later on about this.

Anyway, the significance of this is that there are references to two groups of men; "men" (Adam) who bore beautiful daughters, and "sons of God" (bene Elohim) who took wives from among these women. These are "sons of Elohim", not listed

¹ Nearly all if not all other translations translate it this way.

as “sons of Yahweh” even though “Yahweh” (Lord) is used in verses 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

I find this significant in that as “Yahweh” (Lord) is the covenant name of God and shows relationship with those in that context (Adam) and “Elohim”, God’s title, is not a relational name. So these “sons of God” (Elohim) are not a part of His covenant people as are the folks mentioned in chapter 5 and Noah and his descendants of course. This is not an accident, but I believe a deliberate, intended point. Thus, the “sons of God” are outsiders, men from outside the redemptive lineage of those we have to date in the texts prior to this chapter. They are “men” however, and I would postulate descendants of those going before such as is mentioned in chapter four and five as “other sons and daughters” or, even as is mentioned in 10:8-12 about “Nimrod”, that he was “mighty”, the Hebrew “gibbor” the identical term used to describe Goliath. These same kind of descendants of the early families could have existed prior to the flood. I say more about this later. Still, we will look at this title (sons of God) in other places a little later so as to not fail to be thorough.

Anyway, they (in verse 2) took wives from among the daughters of men. So what? Well, the point is made that these unions brought forth the “**Nephilim**”. There is no negative connotation to any of this at this point. It’s just stated as a factual explanation. No judgment, either good or bad is suggested in the immediate text.

BUT, there is the possible focus on the contamination of the line of “Adam”. The reason I say this (and the more I think about it, it intrigues me) is that it is (in Judaism) through the woman that the genetic line is maintained. In other words to be “Jewish” you must have a Jewish mother, regardless of your father’s heritage. A Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother negates the genetic lineage claim. That is why Jesus’ birth legitimizes His claim to the throne of David even though God cursed the line of Davidic kings with His curse upon Jehoiachin. (Quite a study focusing on the necessity of the virgin birth of Christ and why it was necessary – available upon request).² But again, I digress. There is a lot of connected stuff to all this however, isn’t there?

So verse three may be a result of this situation. So let’s look at verse three a little more carefully. Though verses one and two tell the story of the origins of the

² See this author’s work entitled, “The Miracle of The Virgin Birth” in this web-site.

“**Nephilim**”, these people are not mentioned until after verse three which says, “Then the LORD (Yahweh) said, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years." This may be a reflection of the fact that the “men” (Adam) did not defend their daughters or prevent the marriages to these so called “sons of God”. Sort of like the Sodom and Gomorrah scene, perhaps. Plus, add to that a contaminated line in which redemption was promised and we have a serious deterioration of God’s redemptive plan. But...this verse is sort of out of left field. Again, we might be able to jump from verse 2 to 4 without a hitch except that my little excursus could make sense.

Well, anyway, verse three needs to be figured out also. Without going into detail (which I have just done before writing this), I will present a summary rather than an exegesis. It seems fair to state that man’s (Adam’s) wickedness caused the Lord great sorrow and He realized that a redemptive work could not be completed through the existing population. Man, whose life is sustained by God’s breath - (“ruah” or spirit – Genesis 2:7) - but of the flesh nevertheless, must be destroyed. The 120 years is not necessarily the span of a man’s life, but more likely the amount of time God will give man until the destruction of the flood, presumably to repent.

Frankly, this passage, the longer I study and read it, looks to be the blending of at least two documents or traditions. There is no question that this happened in the Book of Genesis, in fact in much of the Pentateuch, as Genesis 1:1-2:3 to 2:4 ff. demonstrates clearly in the Hebrew. You might not like this idea, but there it is anyway. Regardless, after the announcement of 120 years, the “**Nephilim**” are introduced and a reprise of verses 1 and 2 occurs. Following this comes verse 5, a reflection of 3, and then we have a consistent document from then on.

The debate about all this is fervent of course, but I really don’t care. It is what it is. I am not one to introduce stuff as fact when it is speculation. The passage does not seem to care a whit about the origins of these “sons of God” but only introduces them to explain to the reader the existence of these “mighty men of old”. And they, apparently, are not “supernatural” or “extraordinary” as later, a golf to hardball sized rock flung at high speed out of a shepherd’s sling can take them down. They are just tall, mighty and numerous men.

Now, to the phrase, “the sons of God” itself. I have presented an observation or hypothesis about these people. However, there are other places where this phrase

is used, namely: Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Matthew 5:9; Luke 20:36; Romans 8:14, 19; and Galatians 3:26. Most commentators draw the conclusion that these are some created beings, angels, or some other entity that enjoyed existence before the Genesis 1:1. They muster as much Biblical support as possible and present a case that seems to be acceptable to some if not convincing. However, nearly every one of them who has done independent research comes up with different conclusions. Others just quote someone else. But in reality, the assumptions made are just opinions and conjectures stated as facts. Still, there is no clear cut and final determination about these “beings”. I think we can do better. Let’s look further.

In Job, there is no clear cut statement as to who these beings are and just because they “present themselves before the Lord and Satan is with them” doesn’t necessarily mean they are in some heavenly realm at all. The phrase, “before the Lord” occurs dozens of times if not hundreds in the Bible to describe earthly happenings. Take, for example, Genesis 18:22, “Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing *before the LORD.*”

Exodus 16:9, “Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, 'Come near *before the LORD*, for He has heard your grumblings.'”

Exodus 27:21, "In the tent of meeting, outside the veil which is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall keep it in order from evening to morning *before the LORD*; *it shall be* a perpetual statute throughout their generations for the sons of Israel.” (Colored italics mine) The examples are endless.

On the other hand, we have 38:7, speaking of the time of creation and, “When the morning stars sang together, And all the sons of God shouted for joy?” One can assume the nature of these “sons” but it cannot be done with exactitude. Job is in full poetry here and the phrase, “sons of God” may not even connect in meaning to the phrase in Genesis. In this case, it could reflect some angelic host. Considering that the word “Adam” is plural (note: Genesis 5:2 for example) it could still speak of created people. Remember this is a fun and eye opening study? Who can say for sure? They might be some “non-human” beings, or maybe not.

Okay, here we go. My strong field is hermeneutics – the interpretation of literature - and the literature in Genesis, - i.e. the fact that a collective noun “Adam” is used and not the singular “ish” as God’s (Elohim’s) creation in His own image, and that Adam is really a personification of all mankind of all time (easily demonstrated)

and that it is not simply an account of a past event but intended to be your story and mine and that of every person (the reader is to see him/herself in the narrative – also easily demonstrated) easily leaves room for a lot of people early in the creation and helps answer a pile of questions...like this one and, of course, where Cain got his wife. Of course, now I have offended most of you.

Anyway, Matthew 5:9, Luke 20:36, Romans 8:14 and Galatians 3:26 all speak of believers. Romans 8:19 can be debated and is - but in the context the argument favors believers.

So there is little in the New Testament to help us. These references point to the believing faithful. The reference in Job 38:7 might lead us to a pre-creation entity, but it is not cut and dried. Even so, if these are the same beings as in Genesis 6, how is it that they can have children by women? Everything in Scripture resists this idea unless one gets to speculation and then we have a science fiction novel or horror story. The other possibility is that this term is used loosely in Genesis 6, that is, it could be a generic designation for people outside of the redemptive line and that's it. I tend to go with the last statement more than anything due to lack of real support for any other explanation, regardless of how hard commentators want to make it work. Secondly, the story is just a way of telling the reader where these mighty and big people that brought dread to so many in "days of old" came from.

Maybe they were melded with the Masai tribe in Africa some where along the line. These Masai are tall people! Warriors!

As far as "angelic" beings being able to marry and procreate, here are a few verses to consider:

"But Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven." Matthew 22:29-30

Luke 20:33-44, 33: "In the resurrection therefore, which one's wife will she be? For all seven had married her." 34: Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, 35: but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; 36: for they cannot even die anymore, because they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. 37: "But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the *passage about the burning bush*, where he calls the

Lord THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB. 38: "Now He is not the God of the dead but of the living; for all live to Him." 39: Some of the scribes answered and said, "Teacher, You have spoken well." (Caps in the NASB)

Note verse 34. Look at it. Jewish eschatology is extremely simple. There is "this age" (or "this present age") and "the age to come". That's it. The present age is the age of human rule and the age to come "Messianic" rule. Period. All the rest is from John Nelson Darby and Dallas Theological Seminary, etc. Nothing much scriptural in any of it. Okay, I'm getting off track. Anyway, it is the "sons of this age" who marry. Does this apply in any way to Genesis 6? You can figure that out. Let's continue.

Regarding the ability of marriage and procreation to take place by "heavenly" beings, these (and the same account repeated in Mark) are all I can find in scripture. The only heavenly being that can procreate is God Himself. I can't find where he gave any other heavenly entity that ability. But he did give it to us. Part of the "image".

So brother, that's about it. I did my best in a short time. Hope it is food for thought. Write if you have more thoughts, questions etc. Always great to hear from you.