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Who Were the Nephilim?

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Genesis 6:4 refers to a mysterious class of people called Nephilim, mentioned also in Numbers 13:33. These are the only two references to these people in the Bible. Their identity is especially puzzling due to their apparent association with the “sons of God” in the Genesis passage and with the descendants of Anak in the Numbers passage. Who were the Nephilim? In order to gain a better understanding of this ancient class of people, we need to answer several other questions along the way.

What does the word “Nephilim” mean?

“Nephilim” is a transliteration of a Hebrew word used in both Genesis 6:4 and Numbers 13:33. Since it is used only twice in the Old Testament, its derivation isn’t certain. Most commentators identify the term *nephilim* as coming from the Hebrew verb *naphal*, which means “to fall.”¹ In a limited sense, this verb can refer to birth, the idea of being “dropped” as a description of the birth process, with the possible inference of a miscarriage (compare Job 3:16; Psalm 58:8; Ecclesiastes 6:3).² In this sense, the Nephilim were a class of beings that had an unusual birth probably based on unusual parentage. “Various meanings have been suggested for the root *npl*. One is ‘to be aborted,’ that it, to be unnaturally begotten by angels.”³ In more general terms, *naphal* means to fall, and *nephilim*

could refer to fallen beings of any kind. “Thus, it refers to angels who have fallen from heaven, or to tyrants or invaders who fall upon others.”⁴ Therefore, based on the meaning of the root word the Nephilim could be any class of beings who have in some way fallen, including people who have fallen away from God and His commands.

Were the Nephilim offspring of the sons of God?

One consideration in attempting to identify the Nephilim is their relationship to the sons of God (possibly fallen angels, despotic rulers, descendants of Seth, or some combination of these views) in Genesis 6:1-4. Genesis 6:4 says, “The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown.” Based on this verse, some commentators see the Nephilim as the offspring of the union between the sons of God and daughters of men. For example, C. Fred Dickason says, “The Hebrew term *nephilim* means ‘fallen ones’ and designates the unusual offspring of the unholy union.”⁵ However, Genesis 6:4 seems to be saying that the Nephilim were present concurrently with and subsequent to the sons of God—“in those days” and “also afterward.”⁶ In this case, the Nephilim were unrelated to the sons of God other than by being one other class of beings present in the antediluvian world. It is possible to see the “heroes of old, men of renown” in Genesis 6:4 as either a description of the descendants of the sons of God,⁷ or, more preferably, another description of the Nephilim.⁸ As a further description of the Nephilim, it would make sense to understand the Nephilim as fearsome, godless warriors (“mighty men”) who had built a dreaded reputation (“men of name”) for destruction and domination. “The former expression is commonly used for military men; the latter is broader, extending to those well known for wealth or political power.”⁹ However, even if the heroes of old were the descendants of the sons of God, this does not necessitate identifying the Nephilim as those descendants of the sons of God.

Were the Nephilim giants?

The ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the

Septuagint, used the word *gigantes* to translate the Hebrew term *nephilim* in both Genesis 6:4 and Genesis 13:33. The King James Version translated this verse, “There were giants in the earth in those days.” However, *gigantes* does not imply great size as would the English word “giant.” *Gigantes* literally means “earth-born” and refers to the rugged, powerful nature of this class of beings. “The Septuagint translate [sic] the original word by γίγαντες, which literally signifies *earth-born*, and which we, following them, term *giants*, without having any reference to the meaning of the word, which we generally conceive to signify persons of *enormous stature*.”¹⁰ The idea behind the Greek word is that the *gigantes* were men “with the animal and devilish mind”¹¹ and the Hebrew term *nephilim* “implies not so much the idea of great stature as of reckless ferocity, impious and daring characters, who spread devastation and carnage far and wide.”¹² Rather than viewing the Nephilim as giants, large in stature and limited in intelligence, it’s more fitting to view them as powerful, albeit ungodly, warriors and rulers.

Were the Nephilim in Numbers 13:33 descendants of the Nephilim of Genesis 6:4?

Numbers 13:33 refers to the Nephilim in the context of Israel’s anticipated conquest of the Promised Land. Ten of the spies who had scouted out the land reported that the people inhabiting Canaan were of “great size” (Numbers 13:32), and that there were Nephilim in the land. An editorial note in verse 33 says that “the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim.” Anak and his descendants had a reputation for being fierce warriors (Numbers 13:22, 28), but Joshua and Caleb were able to defeat the Anakites (Joshua 11:21-22; 15:13-14) at the time of Israel’s conquest of Canaan. Anak and his descendants were themselves descendants of earlier Nephilim, and both the Nephilim and the Anakites were present in Canaan when Moses sent the spies into the land (Numbers 13:33). But the Nephilim of Moses’ and Joshua’s day could not have been descendants of the Nephilim of Genesis 6:4, since every human being on earth was destroyed in the Flood except for Noah and his family (Genesis 7:21). For this reason, it makes sense to view the Nephilim as a warrior class from numerous family lines rather than a race of people related to one another. The fact that some Nephilim

became the progenitors of the Anakites indicates that the Nephilim were not themselves a race, but a class of warriors from various races. Numbers 13:33 indicates that there were fearsome warriors in Canaan just as there had been fearsome warriors prior to the Flood, but the Nephilim of these two distinct eras were not related by blood. They were related only by occupation and reputation.

Are there Nephilim today?

If the Nephilim were a fearsome class of ruthless, godless warriors, there is every reason to understand that Nephilim have existed throughout history. Every century has witnessed the rise of both demonically driven despotic rulers (sons of God?) and rapacious military leaders (Nephilim?). Based on the limited description of the Nephilim in the Bible, it’s appropriate to conclude that there are Nephilim—godless warrior class individuals—alive and active on today’s world scene. Only by God’s restraining power and grace are such evil men prevented from even greater destruction and dominion.

¹ Clarke, Adam. *Clarke’s Commentary*, Vol. 1. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n.d., p. 68.

² Koehler, Ludwig and Baumgartner, Walter. *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958, pp. 624-626.

³ Davis, John J. *Paradise to Prison: Studies in Genesis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975, p. 115.

⁴ Davis, p. 115.

⁵ Dickason, C. Fred. *Angels: Elect and Evil*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1975, p. 224.

⁶ Sailhamer, John H. “Genesis” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 2. Frank E. Gaebel, editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990, p. 79.

⁷ Vos, Howard F. *Genesis*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1982, p. 37; Dickason, p. 224; Davis, p. 115.

⁸ Sailhamer, p. 78.

⁹ Davis, p. 115.

¹⁰ Clarke, p. 68.

¹¹ Clarke, p. 69.

¹² Jamieson, Robert. “Genesis” in *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, Vol. 1. Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, editors. Hartford, CT: S. S. Scranton & Company, 1871, p. 21.