

the earth by water (Gen. 6:3, 5-7, 13-17). After the flood **“all mankind”** except Noah and his family are said to have **“perished”** (Gen. 7:21). How is it then that centuries later, the Israelites encounter people in Canaan whom they call the *nephilim*? It is because they shared characteristics with these people who lived before the flood. Was it their size? Perhaps. Was it their violent tendencies? They certainly inspired fear. Whatever the case they were not survivors of the flood or supernatural creatures.

Third, the text does not explicitly identify the *nephilim* as the offspring of the marriages between **“the sons of God”** and **“the daughters of men.”** The text says they were on the earth **“when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore children to them”** (Gen. 6:4b). In other words, there were already people called *nephilim* before these marriages and the children born from these marriages. Were some of the children born to these marriages also considered *nephilim*? Perhaps, but the *nephilim* were said to exist even before these marriages.

### Conclusion

Scripture does not explicitly identify those called **“sons of God”** or the **“Nephilim”** before the flood, but not all ancient writers made such fanciful interpretations of their identity. The fourth century theologian Chrysostom argued that **“sons of God”** referred to those descended from Seth and Enoch, of whom it was said that they **“began to call on the name of the LORD”** (Gen. 4:26) (*Homilies on Genesis* 22.3). He argued that **“daughters of men”** referred to daughters born to the ungodly descendents of Cain (*ibid.*). If he is correct this intermarriage between the spiritually minded Sethites and the worldly Cainites contributed to the wickedness, which led God to bring the flood.

We noted above that the phrase **“sons of God”** can apply to leaders or judges. Scripture seems to include the marriages of the **“sons of God”** with the **“daughters of men”** together with the existence and behavior of the *nephilim*— **“the mighty men of old”** as both contributing to the conditions that led God to bring on the flood. This behavior included: **“wickedness”** said to be **“great in the earth”** (Gen. 6:5a); thoughts that were **“evil continually”** (Gen. 6:5b); behavior that made the earth **“corrupt”** filling it **“with violence”** (Gen. 6:11); and as a result of their influence **“all flesh had corrupted their way”** (Gen. 6:12). Clearly, those in authority before the flood did not discourage such conduct, but they actually advanced this wickedness.

We may conclude, therefore, that the *nephilim* were notable men of the pre-flood world who, rather than leading their generation in godly behavior contributed to its moral downfall. In spite of their prominence or size, their wickedness, violence, and corrupt behavior led to their ultimate destruction in the flood. The *nephilim* encountered by the Israelites in Canaan were men of similar character, size, and violent behavior. They were not monsters, but great men who were also ultimately brought down.



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BULLETIN OF  
THE OLSEN  
PARK CHURCH  
OF CHRIST

# Faithful Sayings

September 21,  
2014

## Services

Sunday: 9:30 AM

10:20 AM

6:00 PM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

## Elders:

Pat Ledbetter

Jeff Nunn

Kyle Pope

## Deacons:

Eddie Cook

Steve Dixon

Jack Langley

Neil Ledbetter

Brady McAlister

Walker McAnear

Lance Purcell

Rusty Scott

## Evangelists:

Kyle Pope

Andrew Dow



## Who Were the Nephilim?

By Kyle Pope

In speaking of the world before the flood, Genesis 6:4 records **“There were giants in the earth in those days”** (KJV, cf. NKJV). Most translations since the American Standard Version of 1901 have chosen not to translate the Hebrew word used in this verse and have simply transliterated it to read **“The Nephilim were in the earth in those days”** (ASV, cf. RSV, NASB, NIV, ESV). Who were these **“giants”** or **“Nephilim”** and how are we to understand this reference to their presence on the earth before the flood?

### Word Meaning

The word *nephilim* comes from the Hebrew verb *nephal* meaning “to fall,” leading some to take it as a reference to those who *subdue* and *cause others to fall*. James Strong defined it to mean *“a feller; i.e. a bully or tyrant”* (H5303). Two second century Greek translators understood it in this sense of “those falling upon” others or “the violent ones.”<sup>1</sup> The second century Jewish teacher Eliezer ben Simeon claimed that they were called *nephilim* because they “hurled the world down” and “they fell from the world” (*Genesis Rabban* 26.7). The form *nephilim* is found in Scripture in only two texts: Genesis 6:4 and Numbers 13:33, but the similar word *nophelim* is found in a number of passages of “fallen” livestock (Deut. 22:4) or those “fallen” in battle (1 Sam. 31:8; 1 Chron. 10:8; 2 Chron. 20:24,

<sup>1</sup> Aquila used the Greek word *epiptontes* meaning, “fall upon, or over” (LSJ) and Symmachus used the word *biaioi* meaning “forcible, violent” (*ibid.*).

Ezek. 32:23, 27).<sup>2</sup> If this sense carries over *nephilim* may carry the idea of “those fallen” (in either a moral or literal sense). Young’s literal translation calls them **“the fallen ones.”**

### The Giants

The translation “giant” became associated with this word as early as the production of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament made before the time of Christ. It translated *nephilim* with the Greek word *gigantes* from which our English word “giant” is derived. The Latin Vulgate, translated in the fourth century, used the same Greek word. This should not be understood to refer to “giants” in the fairy tale sense of Jack-and-the-Beanstalk-like monsters. In ancient usage *gigas* could refer to “the mighty” as well as to mythical creatures (LSJ). We use this word in the same sense today when we speak of one who is a “giant of industry.” It is clear, however, that the term could apply to those of great height. In the second example of its use it is applied to the inhabitants of Canaan when the spies returned to report, **“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”** (Num. 13:33, NASB).<sup>3</sup> Anak was a descendant of Arba, the founder of the city of Hebron, first called Kirjath Arba (Josh. 14:15; 15:13; 21:11). The children of Anak were said to have been **“great and tall”** (Deut. 9:2). Deuteronomy 2:11 calls them *rephaim*, the word most frequently translated **“giants.”** The family of Goliath was also described as *rephaim* (2 Sam. 21:16-22). Goliath was six cubits and a span in height, which would have been about ten feet tall (1 Sam. 17:4).<sup>4</sup> He was not a fairy-tale monster, but he was one of great height. The Bible preserves a number of terms that were used to describe people of such height. The Moabites called them **“Emim”** (Deut. 2:11). The Ammonites called them **“Zamzummin”** (Deut. 2:20). It is likely that *nephilim* came to be used as a similar description of those of great stature or prominence. The *Bible in Basic English* calls them **“men of great strength and size”** (Gen. 6:4).

### Fanciful Notions

Sometime during the period between the Old and New Testaments the fanciful idea developed that the *nephilim* were children born from a sexual union between angels and human women.<sup>5</sup> This was likely the

<sup>2</sup> It is important to remember that ancient Hebrew was first written without vowels. It was not until sometime between 500-900 AD that a system of vowel pointing was applied to the text to preserve pronunciation. As such it must be recognized that in the original text one would read *nphlm* and determine from the context the proper vocalization. This seems unusual to English speakers but even in Israel today Modern Hebrew is generally written without vowels.

<sup>3</sup> The King James Version puts this **“which come of the giants (*nephilim*)”** as if this they are descended from a family or species known as *nephilim*. Many other translations communicate this same sense but don’t italicize the words **“come from”** to indicate that it is an editorial addition (NKJV, cf. ASV, RSV, NIV, ESV). While the Hebrew preposition *min*, used in this text, often means, “from” it is translated most frequently “among” or “with” in the King James Version. That sense would be more fitting here, in the fact that this describes something about these people, not their ancestry or race.

<sup>4</sup> This was certainly a remarkable height, but even in modern times, according to Guinness World Records, in 1940 a man named Robert Wadlow was measured at a height of 8’, 11”.

<sup>5</sup> Two pseudepigraphical works written during this period popularized this notion: *The Book of Enoch*, and the *Book of Jubilees*. To these writers of religious fiction the “giants” were not just humans of great height, but monsters 3000 cubits (or 5000 feet) tall (*Enoch* 7.2; cf. 4Q201, 202)! The first century Jewish writers Philo and Josephus accepted this view, but believed that the offspring of angels and women were demons (Philo, *On*

result of blending pagan mythology about the sexual exploits of their false gods with biblical teaching, but those who accepted this idea based it on statements in Genesis chapter six. After declaring that mankind had spread over the face of the earth and produced daughters, the text states, **“the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves of all whom they chose”** (Gen. 6:2, NKJV). This is referenced again in the verse that speaks of the *nephilim*. It records, **“The Nephilim were in the earth in those days, and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them: the same were the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown”** (Gen. 6:4, ASV).

The basis for this fanciful interpretation rests on we are to understand the words **“sons of God.”** Scripture occasionally uses this phrase of angels. In the book of Job it is used of the heavenly host that came before the throne of God **“when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD”** (Job 1:6; 2:1).<sup>6</sup> Leroy Birney points out, however, that while the word *elohim* is usually translated **“God”**—“The magistrates or administrators of justice are called *elohim* in Exodus 21:6; 22:8, 9, 28” (“An Exegetical Study of Genesis 6:1-4” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31.1 (Winter 1970) 47). Birney notes that *elohim* is also used in Psalm 82:1-8 in the stirring rebuke of the judges of Israel whom the Lord calls **“gods (*elohim*)”** and **“children of the Most High”** (Psa. 82:6)(*ibid.*). This makes it clear that the phrase **“sons of God”** doesn’t necessarily refer to angels. The second century Jewish teacher Simeon ben Yohai took Genesis 6:2 to mean “sons of the nobles” (*Genesis Rabban* 26.5).

*the Giants* 6-7; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.3.1). The second century Christian apologist Justin Martyr believed the same thing but argued that the demons supposedly born from such unions actually did the legendary deeds the Greeks and Romans attributed to their false gods (*Second Apology* 5.3-6).

<sup>6</sup> The Alexandrian manuscript of the Septuagint actually reads “angels of God” in Genesis 6:2, although most Septuagint manuscripts read “sons of God.”

<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel 32:27 uses wording very similar to this, referring to **“the mighty (*gibborim*) that are fallen (*nophelim*)”** (ASV).

### Analysis of the Text

What can the wording of the text tell us about the identity of the *nephilim*? First, it is clear that they too were human beings. The last part of the verse further describes them, saying **“Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown”** (Gen. 6:4c, NASB). The first words, **“mighty men,”** translate the Hebrew adjective *gibborim* meaning “mighty.”<sup>7</sup> While the word “men” is inferred, it literally means only “the mighty ones.” The second phrase **“men of renown,”** however, contains the Hebrew word *ish*, meaning “man.” We must note that it is the wickedness of these **“men”** that ultimately leads to the flood, not the sin of angels or demons. It is clear, therefore, that the *nephilim* were not angelic (or demonic beings)—they were humans.

Second, it is also clear that *nephilim* does not refer to a family or species, but to some characteristic shared by people of different ancestral backgrounds. The first part of the verse says the *nephilim* were on the earth **“in those days, and also afterward”** (Gen. 6:4a, NASB). We must ask, *after what?* This chapter begins the account of the flood. Before and after this verse God declares His intention to destroy