

2015

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## Recommended Citation

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# The Embarrassing and Alluring Biblical Giant

Brian R. Doak

## ***A Giant Conspiracy***

Biblical scholars may shy away from discussing the Bible's giants in polite company for a variety of reasons—one being that, for those of us who teach, giants are a topic of obsession for many of our most inquisitive students (especially the putatively giant Nephilim and “heroes of old” in Genesis 6:1–4). *How tall were the ancient giants?...you know, the real giants? Do we have fossils of giants?...I heard that we do, and I've seen pictures...* As one colleague in the field recently put it to me in an email: “...sometimes it's difficult to move past the discussion of the Nephilim in Genesis; it is literally the only thing that interests the students, the only thing they want to talk about.” If you have not yet viewed any of the badly photoshopped YouTube videos, often set to ominous, mystical music, featuring 50-foot skeletons next to hapless shovel-wielding desert workers and heavy machinery, then you should treat yourself to that spectacle (Try [this](#) one, or [this](#) one). Conspiracy theories abound.

Needless to say, apart from a few isolated and unusually-tall-but-certainly-not-supernatural skeletons recovered in excavations,<sup>[2]</sup> archaeologists have not yet uncovered a race of giant bodies littering the land of Canaan. Straightforward attempts to document the existence of ancient communities of superhuman giants outside of YouTube videos or the internet more broadly do exist, though they are rare; more serious attempts to explain the biblical giants take the guise of “medicalizing” interpretations, bent on diagnosing, for example, Goliath with some physical ailment. In his recent popular book, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*, Malcom Gladwell claims that “many medical experts now believe” (?) that “Goliath had a serious medical condition” (p. 14)—a claim that has all of the veracity and explanatory power of a whimsical anecdote (= none). Though the isolated medical explanations have advantages over attempts to historically validate the literal existence of giant races, both interpretive strategies rely on a type of historicizing that assumes the biblical giants on the page had some “real” origin in the bodies of humans in history.

Even more promising, yet not totally escaping some pitfalls of the historicizing tendency, are explanations rooted in *ancient* historical or archaeological speculation—the “fossils and ruins”

theory. Adrienne Mayor's learned volume *The First Fossil Hunters: Paleontology in Greek and Roman Times* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2000) documents what might be called the "ancient folk science" of discovering monstrous creatures of the past already in the past, based on the visible fossils of dinosaurs, mammoths, and so on. Obviously, only in part but in a very real sense, the ancient archaeologists were correct, as they were indeed seeing fantastic creatures of the distant past. Along these lines, the towering ruins of the Late Bronze Age Levant were observable during the Biblical period, and no doubt prompted traditions about the inhabitants of those ruins.<sup>[3]</sup>

However the traditions originated, they took on a life of their own. The Qumran community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls treasured stories of giants,<sup>[4]</sup> working with texts inherited from the Hebrew Bible's giant ruminations (mainly inspired by Genesis 6:1–4, but also texts like Numbers 13 and Deuteronomy 3). In his *Jewish Antiquities* (XVIII.103) first-century CE Jewish author Josephus speaks of a roughly ten-foot-tall Jewish man named Eleazar, and the Church Father Augustine of Hippo, at several points in his fifth-century CE *City of God*, speculates about the reality of ancient giant races based on his own paleontological discoveries.<sup>[5]</sup>

The basic allure of these giants remained strong in the medieval period,<sup>[6]</sup> and the acceptance of the reality of ancient giants, with plentiful romantic extrapolation, continued well into the 19th and 20th centuries. Travellers to the holy land, such as the Irish Presbyterian missionary Josias Porter (1823–1889), for example, expressed wonder at the "memorials of...primeval giants" that he saw "in always every section of Palestine," including what he thought were enormous graves and towering giant-built architecture. Porter mused on the "wild and wondrous panorama" before him, ideating about giants roaming the countryside, certain that what he beheld were "the very cities erected and inhabited by the Rephaim."<sup>[7]</sup>

Whatever their value in specific circumstances of interpretation, the "medicalizing" and "fossils and ruins" approaches, at their best, can only take us so far—though they could account for the initial spark of origins for the giants, they cannot explain why these traditions *continued* to attract readers for such a long period of time. The medicalizing and fossil/ruins approaches could become sadly reductionist, dismissing these stories as silly exaggerations by naïve ancient authors or simply reducing the entire meaning of these narratives to the situation of their origin (as misunderstood bodily conditions mediated down through centuries or mysterious monumental architecture).

### ***Five Other Giant Explanations***

All of this raises the question: If we are not satisfied to stop at either the medicalizing or fossil-ruins explanations for giants in the Bible, and we are not duped by YouTube conspiracy theory videos, how then do we address the question: *What are they doing there in the text?* Here are five avenues for thinking about giants in the Hebrew Bible, each of which briefly charts out a way of considering these creatures in terms of their literary value, their capital as actors in

biblical myth and epic, and their symbolic potential as markers of political values and historical change.<sup>[8]</sup>

(1) *The giant as divine or semi-divine figure.* On the level of the theological narrative, giants can function as “antigod” or “rival god” characters, along the lines of “other gods” elsewhere in the text. Genesis 6:1–4 remains the parade example; even though the exact size of the “Nephilim” or “divine beings” or “heroes of old” does not appear in the passage, the assumption has almost always been that these beings are giant (even within the Bible itself—note the comment in Numbers 13:33). The text in Genesis reads:

When humans began to increase upon the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, certain divine beings saw how beautiful the human women were, and so they took wives for themselves from among them, whomever they chose. YHWH said, “My spirit will not remain with humans forever, for they are but flesh; their lifetime will be 120 years.” The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the divine beings procreated with human women. They bore children to them; they were the heroes of old, famous men.

The exact nature of the conflict between Israel’s God and these characters in the drama of Genesis 1–11 is not obvious. Apparently, the “divine beings” were not supposed to mate with the human women, prompting the declaration of limited lifespan. The “punishment” here, though, is at least a little ambiguous—and the tone of the last two sentences, with its evocation of “the heroes of old, famous men,” encodes a distinct sense of awe. The relationship among the “divine beings,” the “Nephilim,” and the “heroes of old” has never been completely clear, and modern interpreters have lined up to declare the passage a failure on levels of coherence, redaction, and meaning. Apparently not impressed with its pedigree as a truly Israelite story, Brevard Childs called this scene “a mutilated and half-digested particle.”<sup>[9]</sup> Whatever the case, the passage does set the tone for all of the Bible’s giant interactions (as well as many postbiblical traditions): God is against the giants, and they must be cut off for God to reign. Indeed, when the Israelites reach the land to spy it out in Numbers 13:31–33, they encounter huge descendants of the Nephilim, and these giants must be completely wiped out (again!?) for Israel to settle the land.

(2) *The giant as anti-law and anti-king.* Try as they might—in the primeval history or in the conquest narratives—God and Israel seem never to be rid of the giants. The battle with Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 contains many classic giant themes that reverberated through medieval literature and on into contemporary story and film. Goliath is arrogant, his people the quintessential political and social “Other” to Israel; his foreign (non-Semitic) name and heavy armament mark him as an opponent in every way to Saul’s army. David’s slingshot-stone-to-the-face and decapitation of the ogre mark the passage with comic grotesquery, a quality reflected in the macabre and even bathetic artistic depictions of the scene (particularly in the 17th century). Consider, for example, [Caravaggio’s “David with the Head of Goliath”](#) (1607) or [Sebastiano Ricci’s “The Victory of David Over Goliath,”](#) as well as the more recent photograph of [Charlie White, “Champion”](#) (*Everything is American series, 2006*).

In the Hebrew Bible, with echoes in many other literatures both ancient and modern, the legitimation of monarchy comes after the climactic defeat of chaos. David's victory over the giant serves as a kind of human *Chaoskampf*. The king becomes a counter-giant, re-enacting God's own victory in Genesis 6:1–4 and also in other primordial situations of monstrous confrontation (e.g., Psalm 74:12–17). Here one sees the potency of [the frontispiece to Hobbes' Leviathan \(1651\)](#), in which the entire political theory is revealed in a single image. Just as he defeats the giant, David will establish order for the whole nation, and in this sense David's victory is something of a final and official solution to Israel's giant problems (but note 2 Sam 21:15–22 // 1 Chr 20:4–8). The discovery of 4QSam(a), in concert with the ancient Greek versions, diminishes the otherworldly sense of the scene (i.e., demoting the giant of the Hebrew Masoretic Text from something like 9'6" to 6'6"), but Goliath qualifies as a "giant" in any sense, and, combined with his other characteristics and association with the Philistines, plays his role quite well.

(3) *The giant as elite animal-adversary.* The first two categories above are typical for consideration of the giant in the Bible or other literature. These next three are subtler but should nevertheless be considered. Obviously Goliath functioned as an elite military opponent, but one other tale of a giant encounter in the Hebrew Bible depicts the giant-battle as a parallel exploit to battling a prestige *animal*, a lion (1 Chronicles 11:22–23):

Benaiah son of Jehoiada was a man of valor and a worker of great deeds from Qabzeel. He struck down two (sons) of Ariel of Moab, he went down into a pit and struck down a lion on a snowy day, and he struck down an Egyptian man, a giant man, five cubits tall [i.e., 2.3 meters, or 7.5 feet]. In the hand of the Egyptian was a weaver's beam; he went down with a staff, and snatched the spear from the hand of the Egyptian and killed him with his own spear.<sup>[10]</sup>

The parallel language of how Benaiah "went down" (Heb. *yārad*) to fight both the lion and the huge Egyptian highlights the prestige connection between animal and giant. To be sure, the giant displays qualities of what is "wild" and untamed, and participates in a the category of the "wild man."<sup>[11]</sup> As Richard Bernheimer argues, the concept of "wildness" played a much more loaded theological role in the premodern world than it does today, alluding to everything "uncanny, unruly, raw, unpredictable, foreign, uncultured, and uncultivated. It included the unfamiliar as well as the unintelligible."<sup>[12]</sup> In medieval anthropology, the giant defied categorization as either human or animal, prompting confusion about the origins of these creatures and whether they had a soul.<sup>[13]</sup>

(4) *The giant as unruly or overgrown vegetation.* Giants could also be drawn into fruitful literary and symbolic parallel with out-of-control vegetation. The examples from the Hebrew Bible on this front are subtle but intriguing. Joshua 17:14–18 makes the clearing of forest space in the land of the "Rephaim" (a class of giants in the Bible) parallel to clearing out Canaanites, and in Joshua 11:21, a term used for cutting down plants, *kārat* (e.g., Deut 19:5; Isa 44:14; 1 Kgs 5:20[6]), describes the cutting down of the giant Anaqim. Admittedly, *kārat* is a more generic term for all kinds of cutting violence, but the nuance of the verb in relation to giants suggests

something of the wildness of uncleared land, a place of inhabitability, natural threat, and banditry (see, e.g., Isa 29:17; 32:15; 2 Sam 18:8; Isa 56:9; Hos 2:12; 1 Sam 22:1–5). The overabundance of the floral world of Canaan described in Numbers (13:23, 13:33) and Deuteronomy (8:7–9) paints a picture of the land that is both loaded with fruitful wonders but also in need of pruning and control<sup>[14]</sup>—it is a land that could “devour its inhabitants” (Num 13:32). Overgrown humans and plants appear together in Papyrus Anastasi I (“Craft of the Scribe”; Egypt, c. 12th century BCE), where Canaan is described as

overgrown with junipers and *alluna* [oak] and cedars (that) have reached the sky, where lions are more numerous than leopards and bears, and surrounded with Shasu on every side...The face of the pass is dangerous with Shasu, hidden under the bushes. Some of them are 4 or 5 cubits, nose to foot, with wild faces. Their thoughts are not pretty, they do not listen to cajoling, and you are alone...<sup>[15]</sup>

(5) *The giant as the defeated past.* The giant can play a role as historiographic cue, marking the change from past to present. As they do in many legendary texts, giants mark geographical boundaries—at the edge of the land of Canaan, preventing Israel’s entrance—but they also stand at important narrative junctures in the Bible’s memory of the past. In Genesis 6:1–4, the monstrous beings haunt the boundary between the pre- and post-flood worlds; in Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua they mark the divide between pre- and post-Israel Canaan; and even Goliath signals the point at which David proves himself militarily as upcoming king, as Goliath is the victim of David’s first violent and victorious political act (1 Samuel 17). In this sense, the giant is one of the Bible’s more powerful symbols of the past—the inadequate, defeated past—and the defeat of the giant propels the victor (whether nation or individual) into a new era.

Moreover, one could even compare the end of the Bible’s “gigantic age” at the Conquest to ruminations in Greek heroic literature on the end of the “heroic age.” Just as the Trojan War marked the end of a certain type of heroic action, the formidable pre-Israelite population was shown reaching its end in totalizing battle (note the awe and antiquarian interest with which the narrator of Deuteronomy 3:11 speaks of Og of Bashan). Perhaps more directly the Greek *Gigantomachy* and *Titanomachy* traditions feature giants as representatives of the “bad old days,” and the Greek preoccupation with using artistic themes from these giant battles in classical architecture (such as at the Siphnian treasury building at Delphi) exemplifies the way giants could be used as political symbols of victory and control.<sup>[16]</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Whatever interpretive paths we choose, the giant remains alluring, even if a bit embarrassing. After the Hebrew Bible had (mostly) been completed, giants lived on, prolifically, in the traditions of third–first century BCE Judaism, most notably in 1 Enoch and the Qumran *Book of Giants*. These early Jewish traditions cannot simply be attributed to an arcane exegetical fascination with the weirdness or ambiguity of the giant; rather, early interpreters saw in these

figures deeply meaningful opportunities to speak of the persistence of evil and the meaning of empire.<sup>[17]</sup>

One of my own favorite stories encoding the anxiety of the giant in the face of disaster comes through an odd digression in the *City of God* (15.23), where Augustine tries to persuade his audience to believe in the literal existence of giants not only in the past (i.e., such as those produced by the unholy union of Gen 6:1-4), but also in the present.<sup>[18]</sup> Apparently there lived in Rome a particular woman in the years leading up to the sacking of the city in 410 CE, born of ordinary-sized parents, “who by her gigantic size overtopped all others.” According to Augustine, people flocked in droves to gawk at the giantess, even as the enemy hordes amassed at the gates—a grim commentary, it seems. This exact reference to the fall of Rome along with the woman in Augustine’s account takes advantage of the power encapsulated in the figure of the giant, who acts as both a diversion and a focal point, a fraught avoidance of what lies just outside the city while acting simultaneously as a recognition of terror and the specter of the monstrous by a society obsessed with its own demise. In this latter sense, the woman *is* the barbarian horde. The Romans could not stop the invaders, just as they could not refrain from staring at the woman, who, in her celebrity, was a domesticated, manageable circus giant, a segue to real disorder and real death.

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## Notes

[1] The essay here is a “popularized” version of two of my recent publications: *The Last of the Rephaim: Conquest and Cataclysm in the Heroic Ages of Ancient Israel* (Ilex Series 7; Boston and Washington, D.C.: Ilex Foundation and the Center for Hellenic Studies; via Harvard University Press, 2012), and the forthcoming “The Giant in a Thousand Years: Tracing Narratives of Gigantism in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond,” in Matthew Goff, Loren Stuckenbruck, and Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst (eds.), *Ancient Tales of Giants from Qumran and Turfan: Proceedings of an International Conference at Munich, Germany (June 6-8, 2014)* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck). Interested readers will find extended discussions of the topic at hand and other academic resources in these aforementioned works.

[2] E.g., two seven-foot female skeletons at Tell es-Sa’idiyeh (Jordan) from the twelfth century BCE; see reference in Jeffrey Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 17 and 347 n. 102.

[3] Consider the name of the city of “ruins” in Joshua 7–8, “Ai” (“Ruins”); on all of this, see Ronald S. Hendel, “[Biblical Views: Giants at Jericho](#),” *BAR* 35.2 (2009).

[4] A recent surge of excellent studies by scholars have begun to illuminate these texts; see, e.g., Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *The Book of Giants from Qumran: Texts, Translations and Commentary* (TASJ 63; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000); *idem*, “The ‘Angels’ and ‘Giants’ of

Genesis 6:1–4 in Second and Third Century BCE Jewish Interpretation: Reflections on the Posture of Early Apocalyptic Traditions,” *DSD* 7.3 [2000]: 354–77; *idem*, “The Origins of Evil in Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition: The Interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4 in the Second and Third Centuries B.C.E,” in C. Auffarth and L. Stuckenbruck (eds.), *The Fall of the Angels* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 87–118; Matthew Goff, “Monstrous Appetites: Giants, Cannibalism, and Insatiable Eating,” *JAJ* 1.1 (2010): 34–37; *idem*, “Gilgamesh the Giant: The Qumran Book of Giants’ Appropriation of Gilgamesh Motifs,” *DSD* 16 (2009): 221–53; and most recently Joseph L. Angel, “Reading the *Book of Giants* in Literary and Historical Context,” *DSD* 21 (2014): 313–46.

[5] See [Maura Nolan, “Historicism After Historicism,” in Elizabeth Scala and Sylvia Federico \(eds.\), \*The Post-Historical Middle Ages\* \(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009\), 63–86, esp. 64–69.](#)

[6] For excellent general studies on the reception of giant motifs, see the major studies of Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: A Study in Art, Sentiment, and Demonology* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1952); Walter R. Stephens, *Giants in Those Days: Folklore, Ancient History, and Nationalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1989); Susan Stewart, *On Longing, Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1984); Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999).

[7] Josias L. Porter, [The Giant Cities of Bashan, and Syria’s Holy Places](#) (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1884), 12, 84–85.

[8] At this point, especially, I draw from my forthcoming essay “The Giant in a Thousand Years,” cited above.

[9] Brevard Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, 2nd edition (London: SCM Press, 1962), 57. See also comments in Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis: übersetzt und erklärt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901), 53; Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis*, rev. ed., trans. J. H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1972), 115; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, trans. J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 365, 369.

[10] Cf. the parallel in 2 Samuel 23:20–23, where the Egyptian is said to be “of notable appearance” and not necessarily a giant. In 2 Chronicles 20:6, a six-fingered man described in 2 Samuel 21:20 as a “man of strife” is transformed (either by copying error or intentionally) into a “giant man.”

[11] Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, 19–20; Gregory Mobley, “The Wild Man in the Bible and the Ancient Near East,” *JBL* 116.2 (1997): 217–33.

[12] Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, 19–20.

[13] Stephens, *Giants in Those Days*, 58–138.



[14] See Brian R. Doak, [\*Consider Leviathan: Narratives of Nature and the Self in Job\*](#) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 80–82, 140–41.

[15] James P. Allen (trans.), “The Craft of the Scribe,” in William W. Hallo (ed.), *The Context of Scripture*, vol. III, Archival Documents from the Biblical World (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 9–14, here 12 (18.7) and 13 (23.7).

[16] See, e.g., Mary B. Moore, “The Central Group in the Gigantomachy of the Old Athena Temple on the Acropolis,” *AJA* 99.4 (1995): 633–39; *idem*, “Lydos and the Gigantomachy,” *AJA* 83.1 (1979): 79–99; Richard T. Neer, “Framing the Gift: The Politics of the Siphnian Treasury at Delphi,” *Classical Antiquity* 20.2 (2001): 273–336.

[17] See Loren T. Stuckenbruck, “The Origins of Evil in Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition: The Interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4 in the Second and Third Centuries B.C.E.,” in C. Auffarth and L. Stuckenbruck (eds.), *The Fall of the Angels* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 87–118.

[18] The following paragraph comes directly from my *The Last of the Rephaim*, 227–28.