

## THE NEPHILIM AND THE FLOOD

By Ashby L. Camp

Copyright © 2002 Ashby L. Camp

According to Num. 13:33, some of the spies who had been sent to reconnoiter the land promised by God to Israel reported back (ASV): "And there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak, who come of the Nephilim: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight." Some advocates of a local Noachian flood cite this verse as support for their position. They are misguided in doing so.

The "strong" version of this local-flood argument (in terms of what is claimed) is:

1. The inspired writer affirms in Num. 13:33 that descendants of the pre-flood Nephilim were living after the flood.
2. The Nephilim were not among the eight people on Noah's ark.
3. The Nephilim could not survive a global Noachian flood outside the ark.
4. Therefore, the flood of Noah's day was not global.

The glaring problem with this form of the argument is that the inspired writer, Moses,<sup>1</sup> does *not* affirm in Num. 13:33 that descendants of the pre-flood Nephilim were living after the flood. He simply reports that the faithless spies described the inhabitants of the land as descendants of the Nephilim. Those were their words, not his.

---

<sup>1</sup> Regarding authorship of the Torah, Dillard and Longman state (p. 39):

In a strict sense, the Torah is anonymous. Nowhere do these five books explicitly or implicitly claim that Moses is their exclusive author (Aalders, 5). On the other hand, early Jewish and Christian tradition (see Harrison, IOT, 497, who cites Ecclesiasticus 24:23, Philo, Josephus, the Mishnah, and the Talmud) is virtually unanimous in ascribing Genesis through Deuteronomy to him. On what grounds?

Although a connection is never specifically made between Moses and the present Torah (in the Torah), there are a number of references to his writing activity (Allis, 1-18). God commands him to record certain historical events (Ex. 17:14; Num. 33:2) and laws (Ex. 24:4; 34:27) as well as a song (Deut. 31:22, see Deut. 32). While Moses is not identified as the author of much of the Torah, the text does witness to the fact that he was the recipient of revelation and a witness to redemptive acts.

According to later biblical testimony, there was a book of the Law that was associated with Moses' name (Josh. 1:7, 8). Late in the history of Israel, the Israelites could refer to a "Book of Moses" (2 Chron. 25:4; Ezra 6:18; Neh. 13:1). These passages provide strong intrabiblical data for a Mosaic writing, while not being specific about its shape or scope. It is also clear that Jesus and the early church connected much, if not all, of the Torah with Moses (Matt. 19:7; 22:24; Mark 7:10; 12:26; John 1:17; 5:46; 7:23).

This evidence has led to the belief that Moses wrote the Torah. Nonetheless, this statement is always qualified by the admission that certain passages were added after Moses' death. The most obvious of these so-called post-Mosaica is Deuteronomy 34, the narrative of the death of Moses.

Even if the spies intended their reference to the Nephilim to be understood literally, which is doubtful (see below), it cannot be argued that Moses tacitly endorses the claim by reporting it without comment. He does comment. He makes clear that the faithless spies spoke falsely about the land. In describing their words as an "evil report," Moses is saying "not simply that they describe the land as evil, but that their accusations about it are untrue (cf. TEV 'false report')." (Wenham, 120; see also, Milgrom, 106). Since earlier in the Pentateuch he states unequivocally that all people except Noah and his family perished in a global flood of divine judgment (Gen. 6:11-13, 17, 7:4, 21-23), if the reference to the Nephilim is to be understood literally, then it also is to be understood as one of the false things in the report.

It will not help the proponent of this argument to claim that the phrase "the sons of Anak, who come of the Nephilim" was an editorial comment by Moses endorsing the assertion of the faithless spies. First, the phrase is almost certainly to be understood as the words of the spies themselves rather than as the words of Moses. It was their own clarification of what they meant in claiming they had seen the Nephilim -- they had seen the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim.

This is recognized by all the major translations (RSV, NASB, NIV, NEB, NRSV, REB, ESV),<sup>2</sup> as indicated by inclusion of the phrase within the quote of the spies. Indeed, why would Moses vouch for the credibility of the spies in claiming to have seen the Nephilim, given that the claim is part of what he labels a false report?

Second, even if the phrase "the sons of Anak, who come of the Nephilim" clearly was as an editorial comment endorsing the spies' claim rather than the words of the spies themselves, the phrase is textually suspect. It is absent in the Septuagint, and according to Eryl Davies (p. 140), is "generally regarded as a scribal gloss, inserted on the basis of vv. 22, 28 (cf. Holzinger, Baentsch, Gray, Patterson)." It thus cannot be attributed with any confidence to Moses.

The "weak" version of the argument is:

1. If the flood of Noah's day was global, it is unlikely that some Israelites at the time of the spies' report would consider it possible that the flood was not global.

2. Therefore, if some Israelites at the time of the spies' report considered it possible that the flood was not global, it would be *evidence* (not conclusive proof) that the flood was not global.

3. Some Israelites at the time of the spies' report considered it possible that the flood was not global. This assertion is based on:

---

<sup>2</sup> KJV and ASV do not use quotation marks. Other translations, such as NKJV, include the phrase within the quote of the spies but translate "nephilim" as "giants."

a. Num. 13:33 establishes that some Israelites at the time of the spies' report considered it possible that descendants of the pre-flood Nephilim were living in the land.

b. The only way for descendants of the Nephilim to be living at the time of the spies' report is if the flood was not global.

c. Therefore, some Israelites at the time of the spies' report considered it possible that the flood was not global.

A major problem with this form of the argument is the doubtfulness of the first premise. Until Genesis was written, was known throughout Israel, and was accepted as divine revelation (as the definitive account of history), many claims about ancient history may have been considered possible. A variety of oral traditions, including stories about the Nephilim, may have been available to the Israelites in Egypt. Since it cannot be established that at the time of the spies' report Genesis existed and was accepted throughout the community as the definitive account of history (indeed, that seems highly unlikely), one cannot gauge the likelihood that uncertainty about a global flood would exist within the community.

To put it another way, the proponent of this argument is suggesting that the Genesis account may not teach a global flood by claiming that some of the Israelites at the time of the Exodus were uncertain that the flood was global. But their uncertainty is not relevant to what Genesis teaches unless they held that uncertainty with knowledge of Genesis and with a commitment to it as the word of God. The Jewish and early Christian writers who unquestionably knew of Genesis and were committed to it as the word of God were unanimous in affirming a global flood. See, e.g., <http://www.robibrad.demon.co.uk/Chapter6.htm>.

Another problem is that Numbers 13 does not establish that some of the Israelites considered it possible that descendants of the pre-flood Nephilim were living in the land (point 3.a. above). It establishes only that the faithless spies referred to some of the inhabitants as the Nephilim.

The fact the Israelites were disheartened by the spies' false report does not prove they considered it possible that descendants of the Nephilim were living in the land. In addition to referring to some of the inhabitants of the land as the Nephilim, the spies told the people that the inhabitants were of great size (Num. 13:32), that they lived in large fortified cities (Num. 13:28), that they were too strong to conquer (Num. 13:31), and that the land was harsh and unforgiving (Num. 13:32). One cannot know what role, if any, the reference to the Nephilim played in the Israelites' discouragement.

And assuming it played a role, one cannot know whether it did so as a hyperbolic rather than as a literal reference. In other words, if describing the inhabitants as "the Nephilim" was a hyperbolic way of saying they had the fierce and frightening qualities of the Nephilim of old, it would contribute to the Israelites' discouragement regardless of

whether they knew it was impossible for the inhabitants literally to be descendants of the Nephilim. The reference would be a statement about character not lineage.

In fact, many scholars are convinced the spies were using hyperbole. Ronald Allen writes (p. 812):

The Land of Promise was a good land, a gracious gift of the Lord. By speaking evil concerning the land, the faithless spies were speaking evil of him. At this point their words became exaggerations and distortions. The Anakites (who were of large size) were now said to be Nephilim, the race of giants described briefly in the mysterious context of the cohabitation of the sons of God and daughters of men (Gen. 6:4). The use of the term *Nephilim* seems to be deliberately provocative of fear, a term not unlike the concept of bogeymen and hobgoblins. The exaggeration of the faithless led them to their final folly: "We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."

Nahum Sarna concurs (p. 46):

While it is not certain from [Gen. 6:4] whether or not the Nephilim themselves procreated, it is contrary to the understanding of the biblical narrative that they should have survived the Flood. Hence, the reference in Numbers is not to the supposedly continued existence of Nephilim into Israelite times; rather, it is used simply for oratorical effect, much as "Huns" was used to designate Germans during the two world wars.

Gordon Wenham says (p. 120) the faithless spies described the Sons of Anak "with fantastic hyperbole as Nephilim." Timothy Ashley says (p. 243), "Connecting the *men of great stature* with the *Nephilim* is an exaggeration for rhetorical effect." And Kenneth Mathews says (p. 337), "it is better to understand the allusion to the Nephilim therefore in Numbers 13 as figurative, cited by the spies because of the violent reputation attributed to 'Nephilim' from ancient times."

A variation of the weak version of the argument substitutes "a scribe at the time the suspect phrase was added" for "some Israelites at the time of the spies' report." This yields:

1. If the flood of Noah's day was global, it is unlikely that a scribe at the time the suspect phrase was added would consider it possible that the flood was not global.

2. Therefore, if a scribe at the time the suspect phrase was added considered it possible that the flood was not global, it would be *evidence* (not conclusive proof) that the flood was not global.

3. A scribe at the time the suspect phrase was added considered it possible that the flood was not global. This assertion is based on:

a. Num. 13:33 establishes that a scribe at the time the suspect phrase was added considered it possible that descendants of the pre-flood Nephilim were living in the land.

b. The only way for descendants of the Nephilim to be living at the time of the spies' report is if the flood was not global.

c. Therefore, a scribe at the time the suspect phrase was added considered it possible that the flood was not global.

The flaw in this argument is that, even if the phrase is undoubtedly a scribal addition, it does not establish that the scribe considered it possible that descendants of the pre-flood Nephilim were living in the land (point 3.a. above). As noted above, the phrase is almost certainly to be understood as the words of the spies themselves rather than as an editorial comment. By putting these words in the mouths of the faithless spies, the scribe simply was making express what was implied in the original text, i.e., that in saying they had seen the Nephilim, the spies were referring to the Anakites. He was not making his own statement on the subject, affirming that the Anakites were indeed descendants of the Nephilim. What scribe would vouch for the credibility of the spies in claiming to have seen the Nephilim, given that the claim is part of what Moses labeled a false report?

Someone might object, "If the scribe knew it was impossible for the Anakites to be descendants of the Nephilim, why would he clarify that the spies' mention of the Nephilim was a reference to the Anakites and not point out that the Anakites could not be descendants of the Nephilim?" But this objection is ill founded.

First, if the spies' mention of the Nephilim was understood by the scribe to be a hyperbolic reference to the Anakites, there is no affirmation about literal descent and thus no need to point out that literal descent was impossible. Second, if the spies' mention of the Nephilim was understood by the scribe to be a statement about literal descent, its falsity is apparent from the immediate narrative and from the larger context of the Pentateuch, so no further comment was necessary.

Thus, Numbers 13 offers no support for the local-flood position. It neither affirms that the Nephilim survived the flood nor establishes that Moses, the Israelites, or a later scribe considered it possible that the Nephilim survived the flood. And even if some of the Israelites of that day considered it possible that the Nephilim survived the flood, there is no reason to think such a view could stand in the light of Genesis.

When one explains why advocates of a local flood are misguided in appealing to Numbers 13, they sometimes respond with a catch-22 argument. That is, they point to the fact an explanation of their error is necessary as evidence that both sides of the flood debate must "interpret away" passages, as though that somehow puts the positions on equal footing.

But the footing is only equal if the merits of the interpretations undergirding the positions are equal. The question is whether the merit of the local-flood interpretation of Numbers 13 is comparable to the merit of the global-flood interpretation of texts like Gen. 6:11-13, 17, 7:4, 21-23. It is not. I have explained why the local-flood interpretation of Numbers 13 is flawed. For a fair presentation of the biblical case for a global flood, see Davidson, "Biblical Evidence for the Universality of the Flood" at <http://www.grisda.org/origins/22058.htm> and in Hasel, "The Biblical View of the Extent of the Flood" at <http://www.grisda.org/origins/02077.htm>.

## REFERENCES

- Allen, Ronald B. "Numbers." In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelain, 2:655-1008. Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan, 1990.
- Ashley, Timothy R. *The Book of Numbers*. New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI. Eerdmans, 1993.
- Davies, Eryl W. *Numbers*. New Century Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI. Eerdmans, 1995.
- Dillard, Raymond and Tremper Longman III. *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan, 1994.
- Mathews, Kenneth A. *Genesis 1-11:26*. New American Commentary. Nashville. Broadman & Holman, 1996.
- Milgrom, Jacob. *Numbers*. J.P.S. Commentary. New York. Jewish Publication Society, 1990.
- Sarna, Nahum M. *Genesis*. J.P.S. Commentary. New York. Jewish Publication Society, 1989.
- Wenham, Gordon J. *Numbers*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL. InterVarsity Press, 1981.