



WHO WERE THE ANAKIM^{AND} NEPHILIM?

BY BRYAN E. BEYER

THE ISRAELITES STOOD ON THE VERGE OF inheriting the land the Lord had promised to Abraham centuries earlier (Gen. 12:1-3,7). They had received God's commands at Mount Sinai, crossed the wilderness, and now camped at Kadesh in the Wilderness of Paran (Num. 12:16; 13:26). God then directed Moses to select 12 men—one from each tribe—to scout out the land of Canaan (13:1-16). The men's 40-day journey took them the entire length and breadth of the land, and they returned with some of its bounty (vv. 21-25).

However, 10 of the scouts sounded a sober warning—"The people living in the land are strong, and the cities are large and fortified." Further, they exclaimed, "We also saw the descendants of Anak there" (v. 28).¹ The Nephilim, another formidable enemy, also presented a challenge (v. 33).

Joshua and Caleb tried to encourage the people with God's promise to give them victory (13:30; 14:6-9), but the people refused to believe. The Lord then appeared at the tent of meeting and announced judgment—the people would wander in the wilderness 40 years until the entire unbelieving generation died (vv. 21-23).

This article focuses on three areas. First, we will examine the meaning of the terms "Anakim" and "Nephilim." Second, we will discuss the relationship between the Anakim

and the Nephilim. Third, we will highlight the role of the Anakim as they interacted with God's people.

The Meaning of Terms

The term "Anakim" (or "descendants of Anak") designates a people group that the Old Testament mentions only fourteen times. The Hebrew word *anak* appears to be related to the word for "neck."² A related word describes neck chains for camels (Judg. 8:26). It also depicts parental instruction as a golden, ornamental neck chain (Prov. 1:9). Solomon described his bride as capturing his heart with one *anaq* ("jewel") of her necklace (Song of Sol. 4:9). Many interpreters have thus understood the Anakim as people with large necks—that is, as a tall, fearsome people of great stature (Num. 13:32).³

The term "Nephilim" only occurs three times in the Old Testament and appears related to the Hebrew *naphal*, which means "to fall." Some scholars have therefore suggested the Nephilim are angels who fell from heaven and intermarried with human women.⁴ Genesis 6:4, the text in question, however, does not specifically assert this. Rather, it indicates the Nephilim were "the powerful men of old, the famous men," who were on the earth in the days the sons of God married the daughters of men. Numbers 13:33 uses the term twice and connects the Nephilim with the Anakim.

The Relationship

The Anakim and Nephilim are specifically linked only in Numbers 13:33. If the term "Nephilim" in Genesis 6:4 indicates a specific people group, they would have perished in the great flood. Most likely the term in Numbers 13:33 designates a broader category of people with significant stature beyond the stature of the Israelites. Such an



Above: Hero shown having captured a lion, bare-handed; from the entrance hall of the palace of Assyria's King Sargon II, who reigned 722-705 B.C.



Kadesh-barnea in the Wilderness of Paran.

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Rising in the distance is the site of ancient city of Gath.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / BOB SCHATZ (9/33/12)

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / G.B. HOWELL / LOUVRE MUSEUM (35/12/57)



Above: Khirbet el-Balu, likely the site of the ancient city of Moab. Excavation has shown evidence of Late Bronze and Iron Age settlement.

Left: Necklace pieces from the Late Bronze Age, middle Assyrian period: 1500–1200 B.C.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (60/8416)

understanding could also fit the sense of the term in Genesis 6:4. The Anakim and Nephilim designated peoples whose size loomed large before the Israelites. The Israelites felt as small and powerless as grasshoppers before them, and they sensed the Anakim and Nephilim so viewed them.

The Bible identifies three men—Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai—as among the leaders of the Anakim at Hebron (Num. 13:22; Josh. 15:14). The name of the city formerly was Kiriath-Arba, which means “city of Arba.” Arba was the greatest of the Anakim (Josh. 14:15). Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai descended from Arba (15:13-14); but Caleb, one of the faithful scouts of the land (Num. 13:6,30), drove them out, demonstrating how taking God at His word would lead to victory.

The Anakim and God’s People

The Anakim posed a threat to the future of God’s people. As the Israelites prepared to enter Canaan, Moses reminded them how their fear of the Anakim had led to their judgment and wandering in the wilderness (Deut. 1:28,34-35). Nonetheless, God had provided for them during that time of wandering (2:7).

Other similar people groups likewise threatened the Israelites. The Emim lived in Moab and were like the Anakim (vv. 10-11). The Zamzummim lived east of the Jordan, but ironically, the Ammonites drove them out and occupied the region (vv. 20-21). Perhaps Moses mentioned this fact to encourage God’s people; God had enabled the Ammonites to defeat such peoples, and He would enable Israel to do the same! Later, Moses assured the Israelites that the Anakim were strong, but

God was stronger and went before them (9:1-3).⁵

Moses’ words proved true. As Joshua, Moses’ successor, led Israel’s army, he worked to eradicate the Anakim from Judah’s hill country (Josh. 11:21). Caleb assisted by driving them from Hebron (14:12; 15:13-14). Anakim remained only in Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod—cities the Philistines later inhabited (11:22). Some scholars have suggested Goliath and his brothers were descendants of the Anakim (1 Sam. 17:4; 2 Sam. 21:15-22).⁶

The peoples the Israelites faced as they entered the promised land presented a challenge to their Hebrew faith. Would they choose to believe God’s promise and take the land, or would they give in to their circumstances and decide they could not win? The first time they faced the obstacles, they refused to believe, and they paid dearly for their unbelief (Heb. 3:16-19). A journey of 11 days turned into 40 years (Deut. 1:2)! But as the people chose to believe God, He gave them victory over their enemies.

The accounts of the Anakim and Nephilim remind believers today that we too face obstacles. Our spiritual journey will include difficulties that will challenge our faith and force us to moments of decision. In such moments, will we choose to believe God or give in to our circumstances? Will we trust God’s promise to lead us? When the Israelites chose to give in to unbelief, they failed miserably. When they chose to trust God, they drove the Anakim from the land. 📌

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

2. “אֲנָקִים” (*anak*, neck) in Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1906; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 778.

3. Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 238, describes them as “children of the neck.”

4. Ronald B. Allen, “Numbers” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 812; “Nephilim” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1186.

5. Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 189-90.

6. Kenneth O. Gangel, *Joshua*, vol. 4 in *Holman Old Testament Commentary* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2002), 188.

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