

The Riddle of the Rephaim

Exploring the mysterious demigods of the Bible

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An illustration of the [War in Heaven](#) for [Milton's Paradise Lost](#) by Gustave Doré. {{PD-US}}

The identification of the beings known as “Rephaim” in biblical and ancient Near Eastern sources has caused much bewilderment throughout the years. Biblical dictionaries and encyclopedias usually provide two main meanings for the word: (1) ghosts or shades of the dead, and (2) a mythical and ancient race of giants. These meanings are mostly derived from the mentions of the Rephaim in the Bible.

The Rephaim appear in the Bible in a variety of contexts. Here are some examples (author’s translation):

Only King Og of the Bashan was left of the remaining **Rephaim**. His bedstead, an iron bedstead, is now in Rabbah of the Ammonites; it is nine [cubits](#) long and four cubits wide, by a standard cubit.

Deuteronomy 3:11

After this, fighting broke out with the Philistines at Gezer; that was when Sibbecai the Hushathite killed Sipai, a descendant of the **Rephaim**, and they were humbled.

1 Chronicles 20:4

Do you work wonders for the dead? Do **Rephaim** rise to praise you?

Psalms 88:11-12

It will save you from the forbidden woman, from the alien woman whose talk is smooth. ... Her house sinks down to Death, and her course leads to the **Rephaim**.

Proverbs 2:16-18

The dead will not live, the **Rephaim** will not rise, you punished them and brought them to ruin; you wiped out all memory of them.

Isaiah 26:14

Were the Rephaim great warriors or leaders, such as [King Og](#) or the Philistine generals? Were they affiliated with a certain nation or people? Is the word Rephaim a synonym for the dead? Why were they considered to be so frightening in the afterlife? And why did God take it upon himself to punish and destroy them?

If we go over the dozens of references to the Rephaim in the Bible, we see that it is very difficult to reach a single clear conclusion about their identity. Luckily, we have other sources from the ancient Near East that mention them. The first source is the Ugaritic texts, written in alphabetic cuneiform. These texts were mostly found in the ancient city of Ugarit in northern Syria in the mid-20th century. They tell much of the mythical concepts and belief systems of the people who lived there during the Bronze Age until the destruction of the city (c. 1200 B.C.E.). Some of these concepts are also known from the Bible, such as rituals associated with the gods Baal and [Asherah](#).

What do we know of the Rephaim in Ugaritic texts? They are heroes, warriors, judges, kings, and demigods, much like Heracles or Theseus in Greek myths. They are beloved and celebrated both by gods and men, in life and death.

The word Rephaim is also found in three Phoenician burial inscriptions. These inscriptions share similar concepts with the Ugaritic texts: The Rephaim were

ancient heroes and kings, and once they perished, they dwelled together in a specific place in the underworld.

Although we have plenty of sources that mention the Rephaim, scholars still debate their identity. The Rephaim have been affiliated with or depicted as: (1) shades of the dead or a specific group among the dead; (2) healers or physicians; (3) ancestors; (4) kings, rulers, judges, heroes, and generals; (5) gods or demigods; (6) giants or titans; (7) an ethnic group or tribe; and (8) household gods (biblical teraphim) or fertility deities.

In my recent study, I tried to unlock the riddle of the Rephaim in the ancient Near East using two main keys.¹ The first is to prioritize the archaeological evidence, namely ancient inscriptions, which depict the Rephaim in a clearer sense than the Bible, which was edited and corrected according to different agendas over hundreds of years.

The second is to analyze the negative treatment of the Rephaim in the Bible. Whenever we encounter the Rephaim in biblical texts, they are either dead or being killed, enemies of Israel and of God, giants, monstrous humans, and objects of terror. It seems that although the Rephaim were highly regarded by many ancient Near Eastern peoples, they were hated and reviled by the biblical authors. What is it about them that causes God to struggle against them and their memory, and why are they still demonized long after death?

The fact that the Rephaim are considered to be demigods and the mortal descendants of the gods in the ancient Levant could not be tolerated through monotheistic perceptions. Monotheistic belief systems were fragile in ancient Israel and caused great dispute among the people, prophets, priests, and monarchy. The idea that some men might be divine or descendants of God was thought outrageous, as presented in Genesis 6:1-4, when a race of heroes ([Nephilim](#)) with divine blood is born to the “sons of God” and the “[daughters of men](#).”^a This race is later identified with giants and Rephaim whom the biblical writers believe need to be eliminated. This can also be demonstrated through the eyes of the prophets, who ridicule foreign kings who presented themselves as gods (see Isaiah 14:1-23; Ezekiel 28:1-9).

The Rephaim can be found in various places throughout the Levant, including Canaan, Philistia, Judah, Ammon, Moab, Bashan, Syria, and Phoenicia. This suggests a shared concept, which likely originated in a single place and then spread to different societies in the ancient Levant. The concept identifies a beloved ruler as a part of an ancient divine bloodline of mortal heroes, which provides justification for his own bloodline to rule.

In biblical texts, however, the idea of a semi-divine monarch or a leader cannot be tolerated. The concept of the Rephaim needed to be eradicated from the belief system of Israel and Judah, and this explains the negative treatment they receive in the Bible, which is the complete opposite of how they are viewed in Ugaritic and Phoenician sources.

Notes

1. See Jonathan Yogev, [The Rephaim: Sons of the Gods](#), Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 121 (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

a. See, e.g., Jaap Doedens, Biblical Profiles: “[Exploring the Story of the Sons of God](#),” [BAR, Summer 2020](#).

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