

Nephilim and relevance

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One of the oddest bits of Genesis is this from chapter 6:

When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose. Then the Lord said, 'My spirit shall not abide in mortals for ever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred and twenty years.' The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterwards—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.

What on earth—or heaven for that matter—is this all about?

If you read a variety of commentaries, both Christian and Jewish, what you find is that most agree: this is a very ancient part of the Bible and they don't really understand it very well. Some will place this passage in its historical context. Which helps, a bit. But everyone has trouble with what we might call the practical application of the passage. What does this mean for us today?

That's tough.

I've never read an answer to that question which wasn't quite a stretch.

Of course we could simply say this bit of Scripture is very old, very weird, and doesn't appear – as far as we can tell – to have much to do with us today. Which is in essence saying that not every part of the Bible is relevant for everybody at every time in history. And saying that, at least in certain circles, can get you in trouble.

At the very least by saying that, you raise serious questions about the relevance and importance of the Bible. How we know what is relevant and what is not? How do we decide? Can we "pick and choose"? Should we? Is it inevitable that we will? Or are we teetering on the edge of the dreaded slippery slope?

Honestly, all of us do pick and choose. All of us ignore some parts of Scripture and privilege other parts. So we might as well be honest about it. And because we do pick and choose we need to be honest and faithful about how we do it.

There are two concepts that help keep us honest and faithful.

First, Biblical interpretation is not just a singular, personal practice. Biblical interpretation involves the rest of the Christian community. That community is both local and worldwide. It involves face to face discussion and reading what Christians have thought within our particular tradition and outside of it. It involves reading what Christians from other places and times have thought. We help each other this way. We check our ideas and insights with the larger Christian community.

Secondly, This isn't all about you, or me. Not everything in the Bible is written to me or for me or about me. I am not the center of the Biblical universe.... and neither are you.

The story about the Nephilim must have been important at some time to somebody and to some community. In the future, perhaps it will have great meaning for the church. Who knows? But now... not so much. And that is okay because the Bible is not all about us. It is all about God and it is for other people besides us.

It is for people who live in exile.

It is for the Maccabees.

It is for the first followers of Jesus.

It is for the medieval church,

and the orthodox church,

and the reformers,

and the Amish,

and people living in Sudan,

and Canadians,

and Brazilians,

and our great-great grandchildren,

to name only a few.

So you can't find the relevance of the Nephalim for your life? Neither can I. So let's move along shall we? There is plenty in the Bible that is relevant. There is plenty in the Bible that is challenging and enlightening. There is plenty in the Bible I haven't taken seriously enough.

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