

The Meaning of the Word *Nephilim*: Fact vs. Fantasy

Michael S. Heiser

PhD, Hebrew Bible and Ancient Semitic Languages,
University of Wisconsin-Madison

There's a lot said and written about the word *nephilim*. I know it may sound incredible, but practically all of it is wrong—even what's written by Old Testament scholars. It's a case of one scholar parroting what the scholar before him or her has said, and so on down the line. If you're not a Hebrew scholar, have no fear. You'll be able to understand this. That is, you don't need to know how to read Hebrew to follow what I'll say. If you're a follower of ancient astronaut theorist Zecharia Sitchin, you may want to run the other way since this short paper will not only show you how the meaning Sitchin's says is impossible really IS what the word means, but you'll see how sadly inept Sitchin's work in Hebrew is. Don't say I didn't warn you. If you are a Hebrew scholar, please note that I'm serious about the above claim that most of what's written about this word is wrong. You've probably accepted the idea that the word *nephilim* is simply the masculine plural participle of Hebrew *naphal*. It isn't. As you read, ask yourself a fundamental question: Have I ever asked myself why the typical explanation that *nephilim* comes from Hebrew *naphal* doesn't jive with Hebrew morphological patterns for a masculine plural participle in *any* stem?

Point # 1 – The morphology (the “shape”) of the word *nephilim*

The word "Nephilim" is formed / spelled TWO ways in the Old Testament Hebrew text:

נְפִלִים (Genesis 6:4 and once in Numbers 13:33)
נְפִילִים (also in Numbers 13:33)

The [difference](#) between them, of course, is the [extra letter](#) in the second spelling:

↓
נְפִילִים

This difference in spelling—this “[extra letter](#)”—is critical to understanding where the word does and does *not* come from, which in turn informs us as to how it should and should *not* be translated.

The extra letter is the letter *yod* (י), which has two functions: (1) the “y” sound; (2) to MARK the long “i” sound (as in “ee”, like in English “machine”). In the case of *nephilim* (notice the English spelling with two “i” vowels), the *yod* serves to give us the long “i” vowel sound. Hence *nephilim* is technically (correctly) pronounced “nepheelem.”

So how is it that *yod*—obviously a consonant if it gives us the “y” sound—acts like a vowel? As many readers know, ancient Hebrew, like other Semitic languages, was originally written WITHOUT vowels (there were only consonants). Around the 6th century B.C., Hebrew began to use certain consonants for vowel sounds – the letters essentially did “double duty.” Among these consonants was the letter indicated by the arrow above – the Hebrew consonant *yod*. *Yod* began to be used as a vowel marker. Our English letter “y” does the same kind of thing. We all learned in kindergarten that the vowels were a, e, i, o, and u – “and sometimes y.”

The reason for this historical development was the preservation of correct pronunciation. Such “double duty” consonant-vowels are called *matres lectiones* (Latin for “mothers of reading” – they were to guide the reader into correct reading / pronunciation). At a time when Hebrew was being lost as a spoken tongue (recall that in the 6th century B.C. the Jews were exiled in Babylon), this system was developed to teach people to read correctly.

What about the form of the word *nephilim* that lacks the “middle *yod*”? And what about the dots under the letters? Let’s take the second question first. The dots under the letter are *also* vowels. Specifically, they are called “vowel points.” They were inserted during the Middle Ages to supplement the “consonant doing double duty” system of vowels. Now for the first question. A word with “historically long” vowels could be written “defectively”—that is, in an abbreviated form *when only the vowel POINTS were used*. The *nephilim* that lacks the middle *yod* vowel marker is written “defectively” and only has the “dot vowels.”

Now here’s the important part. The “*im*” at the end of *nephilim* is the plural ending – that is, it tells us the word is plural. That means the rest of the letters constitute the “root” or base of the word. The root consonants of the word spelled defectively (without that extra *yod*) are therefore: **n-ph-l**.¹ This is why so many have thought that *nephilim* comes from *naphal* – it looks that way due to the consonants. But there’s a problem with that. Since *nephilim* occurs once (Num 13:33) in a “full” form – *with the middle yod* – that tells us that **the scribes of the Hebrew Bible knew the correct pronunciation of the consonant string had a long “i” sound between the “ph” and the “l”**. They were preserving the correct pronunciation of the “base” word as *n-ph-i-l* (n-ph-ee-l). You might be wondering, “so what?” Well, what this tells us is that when determining the root of this word and understanding its “shape” (its morphology) in the plural, we must find a way to

¹ The “ph” is the “f” sound. The Hebrew letter is the letter “p” but it’s not a “hard” p – it becomes “ph” like in English “phone”.

account for the long “i” (ee) sound in the middle. This is the downfall of the standard view.

Why? Well, as the plural form is spelled, the word can only be two things in terms of Hebrew morphology: (1) a plural of a masculine noun; (2) an active masculine plural participle.

Taking the second option first, recall from your English days that participles are “verbal adjectives” – they function like both a verb and an adjective. If we have a plural participle here, the word would mean “those who fall” or possibly “those who fall upon” (a Hebrew expression for going to war or fighting in battle) if the preposition “upon” followed the participle. But here’s the problem: If the root is from Hebrew “n-ph-l” / *naphal* (“to fall”), the masculine plural participle would be spelled like this in the Hebrew Bible:²

נפלים

This word is pronounced “*nophelim*” with long “o” (the raised dot between the first and second consonants, reading right to left as Hebrew requires), not the middle long “i” vowel as required. **The vowels are different.** You don’t need to read Hebrew to tell that, either – it’s visually obvious. This shows us that the word *nephilim* is NOT the active participle of Hebrew *naphal*. The practical point here is that *nephilim* cannot mean “those who fall” or “those who fall upon”—that meaning does not match the form, and the form does not match the meaning. Not only does the shape of the word deny this view, but there is no following preposition “upon” in Genesis 6:4 or Numbers 13:33 – a preposition that IS present elsewhere when this word occurs in descriptions of battle elsewhere.

Some argue that *nephilim* means “those who ARE fallen,” as in those who are evil, or who “have fallen” in battle. (And in the case of Sitchin, those who “fell from heaven” from spaceships or who “came down” from heaven in spaceships; more on this nonsense in a bit). These options (except for Sitchin’s) have one thing in common: they assume a *passive* idea in the word’s meaning – an outside force caused the falling. **This would mean the form of the participle should be passive.** But the above form (“nophelim”) is *not* the correct form of a plural passive participle. The masculine plural passive participle of *naphal* is spelled yet another way.³

² For people who have Hebrew, this form is the Qal stem, and that is the only possible plural participle stem this can be because there is no prefix on the participle form – it begins with the first radical of the root – *nun*.

³ This is also the Qal form for the same reason above.

נפולים

This form is pronounced “*nephulim*” with middle long “u” vowel – not middle long “i” vowel as required. **This shows us that the form of the word *nephilim* does not derive from the passive participle of Hebrew *naphal* either.** The word *nephilim* does not mean “fallen ones” if the root is considered to be Hebrew *naphal*.

At this point we should point out another problem in the “fallen ones” view of the form of the word *nephilim*. At no point in Genesis 6 or Numbers 13 do we read that the *nephilim* sinned. We do get something like that idea from the book of Enoch (1 Enoch), but that isn’t preserved in Hebrew. Additionally, at no point do we read that the *nephilim* are spiritually fallen as a result of Adam and Eve’s fall from grace. The Fall of Adam and Eve passed on all *humans* (Romans 5:12), and the *nephilim* were not normal humans – they were hybridized beings (human + a foreign seed) and so **not included in the Fall, at least as Romans 5:12 describes** (this assumes the literal view of Genesis 6 – see below). Even Genesis 6, where the *nephilim* make their grand appearance, does not say they are fallen. The beings that did the evil act of Genesis 6 were not the *nephilim*. The transgression in that passage was between human beings and the sons of God. The sons of God and the *nephilim* are not the same; that latter are offspring of the former.⁴ Lastly, we aren’t even told that the flood was the fault of the sons of God, and so how would it be that their offspring, the *nephilim*, are fallen in the sense of being inherently evil?

I am speaking here of Genesis 6 alone, where the biblical text just describes the *nephilim* as the mighty men of renown. The other clans that spring from the *nephilim* are the enemies of Israel for sure (like the Anakim), and so could be seen as evil. The giants in the book of Enoch and other Jewish literature composed after the biblical material (as far as the existing texts we know about) are certainly evil. But here’s the point: basing their evil nature on some presumed “meaning” of the word as “fallen” (passive participle from that word) is basically reading later Intertestamental and rabbinic tradition *back into* the word. This is poor methodology and is anachronistic. It’s also unnecessary. The word *nephilim* means giants (see below), and they turned out to be evil later on *by virtue of their actions* (in both biblical and non-biblical Jewish literature). They weren’t given some name because of some inherently fallen spiritual state (as though they could not be redeemed and were “more fallen” than humans).⁵

I mention all this because it is most likely that *nephilim* comes from the ARAMAIC word *naphal* (same meaning, “to fall”). If that is the case, then the “full” spelling (with middle

⁴ This is contrary to what Sitchin says, but he ignores the syntax of Genesis 6:1-4 and the fact that all the Intertestamental Jewish texts that refer to this event have them as separate groups (even texts he quotes in his books – but he doesn’t quote those parts).

⁵ This is an important observation given the question of whether *nephilim* or other giants could be redeemed – convert to worshipping the true God. The evidence for this is circumstantial and therefore we should draw no conclusion on this

yod) can be accounted for as a masculine plural participle IN ARAMAIC.⁶ However, even this option for “fallen ones” fails because it cannot explain why the *nephilim* were said to be **giants**—which is made explicitly clear in Numbers 13:33, where the giant Anakim are said to be descendants from the *nephilim*.

There is a better option for the base root of the word *nephilim*—and one that does indeed come from ARAMAIC. This option is superior because:

- a. It accounts for the middle “i” / middle *yod* spelling;
- b. It explains why Numbers 13:33 would link the giant clans of Moses’ day to the *nephilim* of Genesis 6;
- c. It explains why the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament used by Jesus, the apostles, and the early Church) reads “*gigantes*” (giants) for *nephilim* in these passages;
- d. It explains why ALL other ancient Jewish texts from the Intertestamental period that reference the Genesis 6:1-4 event have the *nephilim* as giants;
- e. It explains why all the Jewish and early Christian commentators prior to Augustine took the literal view of Genesis 6:1-4 (angelic-human cohabitation that produced giants).

This option is that *nephilim* comes from the Aramaic noun *naphil* (note the “i” in that noun between the “ph” and the “l” as required above by the long form of *nephilim*). The plural would be *nephilin* as with the other Aramaic option (and would read *nephilim* after being brought into the Hebrew Bible and “normalized” to Hebrew spelling):

נְפִילִין

This view is not only supported by the required morphology, but it is not unique to me. I reproduce here (but the scan isn’t great) the entry for *naphil* from the leading Aramaic lexicon – M. Jastrow’s *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (vol. 2, pp. 923-924). Note that Jastrow draws on rabbinic tradition (which derives from Intertestamental literature like Enoch) that the giants caused the downfall of the world—but remember this is anachronistically reading the rabbis *back into* the Hebrew Bible. Amazingly (for you *Façade* readers), the word also refers to a species of lizard!

Bottom of p. 923:

⁶ The Aramaic form would be *nephilin* – with “in” plural ending since that’s the way Aramaic does masculine plurals. (Note this fact, which anyone taking Aramaic learns in the first few weeks – because in the Sitchin example below he can’t tell the difference between Hebrew and Aramaic – in a situation where the “-in” plural is present in the text. He says that text is written in Hebrew). The Hebrew Bible has a number of words brought into it from Aramaic and then “corrected” into proper Hebrew form (and recall Aramaic was the language of Babylon during the Jewish exile there).

נְפִילִים m., pl. נְפִילִים, נְפִילִים (b. h.; cmp. פִּילָא *giant*s.
 Gen. R. s. 26 וְנִשְׁפָּלוּ וְנִשְׁפָּלוּ וְנִשְׁפָּלוּ they are called *n'filim*, because
 they caused the downfall of the world; a. e.—בֵּן הַנְּפִילִים a) name
 of a *demon*. Bekh. 44^b בֵּן הַנְּפִילִים *nervous prostration*, v.
 נְפִילִים II.—b) name of a *species of lizards*, living in the
 water. Sifra Sh'mini, ch. VI, Par. 5; Hull. 127^a (בֵּן הַנְּפִילִים).
 Ex. R. s. 15 בֵּן הַנְּפִילִים some ed. (corr. acc.).

top of p. 924:

נְפִילִים m., pl. נְפִילִים I f. ch. same, 1) *giant*. Ruth R. to
 II, 1 וְנִשְׁפָּלוּ וְנִשְׁפָּלוּ וְנִשְׁפָּלוּ when a giant marries a giantess.—2) *Orion*.
 —Pl. נְפִילִים, v. נְפִילִים I.

Point # 2 – Zecharia Sitchin's silliness on the word *nephilim*

Much of the above applies to Sitchin's work since it demonstrates that when he says *nephilim* can't mean giants he is completely wrong. He not only depends on a false (and morphologically implausible) meaning for the term, but he also fails to explain (or even tell his readers) about the Aramaic explanation or the Septuagint's translation "giants."

Sitchin leans on the "fallen" explanation noted above since he wants the word *nephilim* to mean "fallen" (i.e., "came from") heaven – since that serves his idea that the *nephilim* are aliens. It is also for this reason that he says (against all evidence, textual and historical) that the sons of God ARE the nephilim. Sadly, many Christian interpreters who try to address Sitchin commit the same blunder.

Sitchin ultimately offers three meanings for *nephilim*:

- "those came down from above"
- "those who were cast down"
- "people of the fiery rockets"

Simply stated, these options are far from the mark. The last one in particular is completely bogus and self-serving.

First, the Hebrew verb that usually is used for "to come down" (meaning "direction as in a journey") is **varad** - **רָד**, not naphal. Obviously the Hebrew consonants are completely different than that found in *nephilim*. The verb naphal does not mean cast down UNLESS it occurs in the Hiphil stem (then it is

possible). But the Hiphil participle of EITHER *naphal* or *yarad* would begin with the Hebrew letter “m” (מ) – this is just a standard feature of Hiphil participles – a rule of Hebrew grammar Sitchin is supposed to know if he knows Hebrew. Even if you do not read Hebrew you can visually see that letter does not occur in the spelling of *nephilim*.

Sitchin’s word meanings simply have no basis at all with respect to the form of the word *nephilim*. His “translation” of nephilim as "people of the fiery rockets" is absolutely contrived. *Naphal* has nothing to do with fire or rockets (check ANY Biblical Hebrew dictionary or lexicon). You will find Sitchin's understanding in NO dictionary; he makes it up.

Point # 3 – Zecharia Sitchin apparently doesn’t know Hebrew or Aramaic – the latter for sure

I hope you can follow this last point. I have scanned the pages from Sitchin’s book *Stairway to Heaven* to prove it to you since it’s such a shocking blunder. Note the underlined word in the “Hebrew” letters in the scan – the underlining was Sitchin’s and makes his error that much more egregious.

LASTLY: A Truly Incredible Sitchin Error in Regard to the Nephilim:

From his *Stairway to Heaven* pp. 110-112

הא באדין חשבת בלבי די מן עירין הריאנתא ומן קדישין היא ולנפילין

Sitchin notes: "But as we examine the Hebrew original, we find it does not say 'watchers'; it says 'Nephilim' – the very term used in Gen 6. Thus do all the ancient texts and ancient confirm each other. The days before the deluge were the days when the Nephilim were upon the earth, the mighty ones, the people of the rocket ships."

The next picture is my writing – I took it from a PDF file I wrote a while back on this:

The above text is from the Genesis Apocryphon found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and concerns a myth about the conception of Noah. Sitchin is at pains here to make the sons of God (the "holy ones") equal to the Nephilim (see above), and thus have Noah as a Nephilim descendant, as well as to distinguish the Nephilim from the evil Watchers of Intertestamental literature. He even emphasizes the word "nephilim" to make sure we know what word he is talking about (see underlining). Unfortunately, he makes two amazing blunders:

1) **The language is Aramaic, not Hebrew (contra his quote);** this is detectable to someone who knows the difference. You can tell by virtue of the endings " - in" (ן -) plural endings (as opposed to - im / ם - of Hebrew; cf. לנפילין (spelled in English letters here "nephilin" with an "n" ending), עירין and קדישין).

2) **When Sitchin says the text does not say "watchers" he misses the word IN THE LINE a few words prior to "nephilin".** The enlarged word is WATCHERS in Aramaic!

הא באדין חשבת בלבי די מן **עירין** הריאנתא ומן קדישין היא ולנפילין

It's hard for me to draw any other conclusion than that Sitchin doesn't know Aramaic from Hebrew. There's simply no way he can be an expert in Semitic languages and make this kind of mistake.