REPHAIM (רְפָאִים, *repha'im*). A Hebrew word often simply transliterated in modern English Bible versions (e.g., Gen 14:5 ESV, LEB). When the term is translated, it is rendered "giants" (1 Chr 20:4 ESV), "shades" (i.e., spirits of the dead; Isa 26:14 ESV), or simply "the dead" (Job 26:5 ESV). These translation choices point to the interpretive problem associated with the term: It is difficult to identify whether the Rephaim were humans (living or dead), quasi-divine figures, or disembodied spirits. Old Testament usage associates the term with all these possibilities, while external Semitic source texts in which the term is found (Ugaritic, Phoenician) do not describe the Rephaim as giants. Identification is further complicated by uncertainty regarding the term's etymology and how it is translated in the Septuagint.

Etymology

Scholars believe the most likely Semitic root for *repha'im* is רפא (*rp'*). This is the consensus despite the transparent links between the term and Hebrew רפה (*rph*). For example, in 2 Sam 16:18–22 Goliath is linked to other giants, other "descendants of the giants" (ESV; the latter term in Hebrew being הָרָפָה, *haraphah*). However, in the parallel account in 1 Chr 20:6–8, the term rendered "giants" is הָרָפָא (*harapha'*). This makes clear that, at least for these biblical writers, רפא (*rp'*) and רפה (*rph*) were alternate spellings of the same root. Of the two, words formed with *rp'* are far more frequent in the Hebrew Bible, and the spelling of the plural *repha'im* features the *aleph* as the third consonant in the root. Brown notes that there is an etymological relationship between plural *repha'im* and the Ugaritic plural *rpʾum* (Brown, "I Am the Lord, Your Healer," 175; see discussion below for the Ugaritic term).

The verbal root *r-p-'* means "to heal" in the vast majority of instances where it is used in the Hebrew Bible. According to Brown, the root "occurs 67 times in verbal conjugations … and 19 times in derived nominal forms" (Brown, "I Am the Lord, Your Healer," 37). While most scholars accept this root as underlying *repha'im*, it offers little help in ascertaining the meaning of the biblical Rephaim. The biblical Rephaim are never cast as "healers" in context.

The situation is the same concerning Ugaritic *rpʾum*. The Ugaritic material yields no example portraying the *rpʾum* as healers. In fact, for many years it was doubted the Ugaritic corpus contained a single instance of the root *r-p-ʾ* that supported a meaning of "heal." Brown asks the question directly: "Is there any context in which the Ugaritic root *rpʾ* clearly means 'to mend, heal, repair' or 'make whole'?" (Brown, "I Am the Lord, Your Healer," 116). He is skeptical about the existence of any clear example (Brown, "I Am the Lord, Your Healer," 118–20). However, more recent work in re-editing the Ugaritic tablets has provided clarity on the reading of one text (*KTU* 1.114:28) whose context supports this meaning for a verb form (third-person feminine singular): "when she [either Athtart or Anat] would heal [*trpʾ*] him [El] …" (Bordreuil and Pardee, *Manual of Ugaritic*, vii, 195; compare del Olmo Lete and

Sanmartín, *Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language*, 742). Wyatt, another Ugaritic scholar, takes the verb form as a plural: "Athtart and Anat [returned].… And they brought back meat.… When they had cured [*trpʾ*] him [El], he awoke" (Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 412).

Despite this paucity of supporting material, scholars have continued to presume the underlying meaning of "heal" for Ugaritic *rpʾum* (Rouillard, "Rephaim," 692). But this lone instance cannot adequately inform the meaning of the plural *rpʾum* in Ugaritic material. The one Ugaritic tablet that witnesses a verb form from *r-p-ʾ* with a meaning "heal" is not about the Ugaritic *rpʾum*. They appear nowhere in the context. There are therefore no instances where the *rpʾum* are cast as healers (Brown, "I Am the Lord, Your Healer," 124–27). The fact that the Septuagint twice renders *repha'im* with ἰατροὶ (*iatroi*, "healers"; Psa 88:10 [87:11 LXX]; Isa 26:14) does not clarify the situation since the Septuagint renders Hebrew *repha'im* inconsistently (see below). That is, ἰατροὶ (*iatroi*) may be a purely interpretive or speculative translation.

For these reasons, appealing to Ugaritic material to conclude that the Hebrew *r-p-ʾ* ("heal") is the source of *repha'im* is quite tenuous. Consequently, scholars have sought a Semitic homograph, within or without the Hebrew Bible, for clarity on the root of *repha'im* and its meaning.

Johnson offers one of the more coherent discussions of the alternative roots for *repha'im* (Johnson, *Vitality of the Individual*, 89). While noting the uncertainty of the Ugaritic material, Johnson first discusses biblical Hebrew *rph* as an option. Among the glosses offered in the *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament [HALOT]* for the verb רפה (*rph*) are "to grow slack," "wither, collapse," and "to slacken, let loose" (*HALOT*, 1277). Other sources include "sink down" as a possible gloss (*TWOT, 858*). Since ancient Israel, along with other surrounding cultures, considered the dead inhabitants of the underworld to still be experiencing some sort of subterrestrial life, the rationale for this root as the basis for *repha'im* is that the term denotes "weakness or loss of energy" (Johnson *The Vitality of the Individual*, 89). This would aptly describe the cadaverous existence of life in the underworld; passages like Job 26:5 describe the dead (*repha'im*) beneath the surface of the cosmic waters under the earth, sinking listlessly in the realm of the dead.

While it is certain that the Hebrew Bible portrays the dead in Sheol as alive, yet comparably speaking, in a considerably weaker state than the living (Isa 14:9; 26:14; Prov 21:16), Johnson rejects *rph* as the proper root, preferring instead to understand Ugaritic *r-p-ʾ* as meaning "to join." His conceptual argument is that this lemma "is to be explained in a passive sense as originally denoting those who are 'joined' or 'massed' together in the community of the dead" (Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual*, 90). Proverbs 21:16 resonates with this perspective ("One who wanders from the way of good sense will rest in the assembly of the dead [קְהַל רְפָאִים, *qehal repha'im*]"). Johnson follows the work of H. L. Ginsburg in this regard, who noted that *r-p-ʾ* in the Ugaritic Keret Epic occurred in parallel to *q-b-ṣ*, which means "to gather" (*KTU* 1.15.iii:3–4, reconstructed on the basis of lines 1.15.iii:14–15). Ginsburg writes, "The meaning of *r-p-ʾi* is revealed by its parallelism to *qbṣ*, the root of which means 'to collect' in Hebrew.… Evidently *rpʾ* meant originally 'to join.' From this it is but a step to the Heb. and Arab. sense

'to mend' and to the Hebrew sense 'to heal.' The idea of joining or gathering seems to underlie all the uses of the root *rpʾ* in the Rephaim (Rp) texts.… The Heb. (and Phoen.) *rĕpāʾîm* 'shades' presumably also means literally 'those gathered' (compare Prov. 21:16)" (Ginsburg, "Legend of King Keret," 41).

Though speculative, the proposal of Ginsburg and Johnson has considerable appeal. The lone Ugaritic verbal occurrence of *r-p-ʾ* (*KTU* 1.114:28) could be translated to say that Athtart and Anat "joined" El after they brought him meat, and provides a semantic rationale for understanding both Ugaritic *rpʾum* and Hebrew *repha'im* as a "gathered" collective of underworld inhabitants. This understanding (potentially) avoids the incongruence of a relationship of the term to healing.

The Rephaim in Ugaritic and Phoenician Texts

The primary extrabiblical texts that inform our understanding of the biblical *repha'im* are the Ugaritic tablets. The Ugaritic *rpʾum* (usually vocalized as an active substantive participle *rapi'uma*) are divine residents of the underworld. They are clearly divine, though in one sense all inhabitants of the disembodied realm of the dead are divine in Ugaritic (and Israelite) religion. To be disembodied (dead) by definition is a requisite quality of the nonhuman realm.

The term *rpʾum* occurs in parallel to *ʾilnym* ("chthonic gods") and *ʾilm* ("gods") in KTU 1.6 vi:45–49. This text (part of the Baal Cycle) has the *rpʾum ʾilnym* under the authority of Shapsh, the sun deity. The scene is the realm of the dead. Ugaritic mythology, like other ancient Near Eastern belief systems, considered the (deified) sun to enter into the realm of the dead when it disappeared below the horizon at night (Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 144 n. 123). The following lines clearly describe the *rpʾum* in the realm of the dead with other divine spirits of the earth (chthonic deities) and the human dead: "O Shapsh, you rule the *rpʾum*; / O Shapsh, you rule the chthonic gods (*ʾilnym*); / The gods (*ʾilm*) are your community. / Behold, the (human) dead (*mtm*) are your community" (author's translation).

Other Ugaritic texts place the *rpʾum* in the underworld (e.g., KTU 1.20–22; KTU 1.108; KTU 1.161). KTU 1.20–21 are fragmentary tablets that "deal with the journeying of the *Rpʾum*, deceased and deified kings, to a communion-ritual.… These texts perhaps supply the mythological background to the rites underlying KTU 1.161" (Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 314). The former are known as "the *RPʾUM* texts" by Ugaritic specialists. KTU 1.161 has been characterized as "the order of service for the funeral of King Niqmad (IV?) … and perhaps involving a *kispum*-rite in the invocation of the late king's ancestors, and as a part of a coronation ritual, with elements of the previous two" (Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 430–31). A *kispum* ritual was intended to honor dead kings and other royalty. If KTU 1.161 indeed mixes funeral and coronation elements, the goal would have been to link the past and present, thus legitimizing the successor's right to rule—in effect invoking the approval of the dead warrior-kings (*rpʾum*) who had gone before.

The common English translation "shades" captures the otherworldly, shadowy nature of the living-dead residents of the underworld. The word choice may also be motivated by the first line of KTU 1.161, which describes the ritual as "the document of the sacrifice of the shades" (*ẓlm*; "shadow"; Bordreuil and Pardee, *A Manual of Ugaritic*, 217, 337).

There are two first-millennium BC Phoenician texts that include reference to the רפאם (*rp'm*): the sarcophagus inscriptions of kings Tabnit (*KAI* 13) and Eshmunazar (*KAI* 14). The inscriptions of these deceased kings threaten all who disturb their rest by declaring, "May they have no resting place with the Repha'im" (Heiser, *Hebrew and Canaanite Inscriptions*).

The Rephaim of the Hebrew Bible

The identification of the *rp'um* as divinized warrior-kings in the underworld provides a clear connection to one contextual meaning of *repha'im* in the Hebrew Bible: spirits of the dead in the underworld. Several biblical texts employ *repha'im* in parallel to other words for the shadowy dead (e.g., מֵתִים, *methim*; "dead") or in contexts dealing with the grave (קֶבֶר, *qever*; שְׁאוֹל, *she'ol*) or the underworld (she'ol). [Psalm 88:10](#) (Heb. [88:11](#)) asks (ESV): "Do you work wonders for the dead (*methim*)? Do the departed (*repha'im*) rise up to praise you? *Selah* Is your steadfast love declared in the grave (*qever*), or your faithfulness in Abaddon?" (ESV)

Hebrew *methim* ("dead") and *repha'im* also occur in connection with each other in [Isa 26:14](#) ("They are dead [methim], they will not live; they are shades [*repha'im*], they will not arise"). [Proverbs 2:18](#) admonishes the wise man to avoid the seduction of the adulteress by warning that "her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the departed" (*repha'im*; compare [Prov 9:18](#)). [Job 26:5–6](#) places the Rephaim in the underworld: "The dead (*repha'im*) tremble under the waters and their inhabitants. Sheol is naked before God, And Abaddon has no covering" (ESV).

While all humans, righteous or not, go to the grave/Sheol in Old Testament theology (e.g., [Gen 37:35](#); [42:38](#); [Pss 6:5](#); [9:17](#); [89:48](#)), these passages should not be read as though the term *methim* ("dead") merely renames *repha'im*. Rather, it seems likely that, at least in some instances, the Rephaim are being distinguished from the mere human dead. This would mirror the usage of *rp'um* in Ugaritic texts, which have the human dead and the divinized *rp'um* both present in the same underworld.

For example, some texts clearly suggest that the Rephaim are warrior kings in the manner described in the material from Ugarit. [Isaiah 14:9](#) is particularly interesting in this respect, as it describes Sheol awaiting the *repha'im*, a term set in parallel to "the leaders (literally, "goats") of the earth (עַתּוּדֵי אֶרֶץ, *attudey arets*)" who were "kings of the nations." The Rephaim are unmistakably royal in this passage. They may also be quasi-divine dark powers, since "leaders" literally means "goats" (lemma: עַתּוּד, *attud*). That term is used elsewhere ([Ezek 39:18](#)) to describe Israel's quasi-divine enemies (Gog and Magog and their hordes). [Ezekiel 38–39](#), in fact, have these hordes hailing from the "heights of the north" (יַרְכְּתֵי צָטוֹן, *yarkethey tsaton*), phrasing that overlaps with descriptions in Ugaritic literature for the location of the divine council and Baal's domain ([Ezek 38:1–3](#), [6](#), [15](#); [39:2](#)). [Ezekiel 39:18](#) also

associates the invaders with Bashan (Ezek 39:18), the place of the giant-clan Rephaim in Deuteronomy (see below). In other words, the biblical portrayal of the Rephaim in such texts goes beyond casting them as mere human kings. The Rephaim are associated with divine powers hostile to Israel.

These observations lead us to the second contextual meaning of *repha'im* in the Hebrew Bible: the giants encountered in Canaan during the conquest and the time of David. The term *repha'im* is linked to other terms for Old Testament giant clans in the Torah. The Israelites' first trek to the promised land under the leadership of Moses failed when the people lost faith after the spies sent into the land reported the presence of the unusually tall Anakim, also referred to as Nephilim (Num 13:28–33; compare Gen 6:4). The Anakim are mentioned in several passages in Deuteronomy as "great and tall" enemies (Deut 1:28; 2:10, 21; 9:2). In describing ancient inhabitants of Moab, the Emim, Deut 2:10–11 specifically describes the Anakim as *repha'im*: "(The Emim formerly lived there, a people great and many, and tall as the Anakim. Like the Anakim they are also counted as Rephaim, but the Moabites call them Emim").

While the Moabites referred to the giant Emim/Anakim as Rephaim, the ancient people of Ammon called them Zamzummim: " 'And when you approach the territory of the people of Ammon, do not harass them or contend with them, for I will not give you any of the land of the people of Ammon as a possession, because I have given it to the sons of Lot for a possession.' (It is also counted as a land of Rephaim. Rephaim formerly lived there—but the Ammonites call them Zamzummim—a people great and many, and tall as the Anakim; but the Lord destroyed them before the Ammonites, and they dispossessed them and settled in their place" (Deut 2:19–20 ESV).

Farther north in ancient Canaan in the region of Bashan, there were other Rephaim occupants. Several passages make the identification clear:

• "So we took the land at that time out of the hand of the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, from the Valley of the Arnon to Mount Hermon (the Sidonians call Hermon Sirion, while the Amorites call it Senir), all the cities of the tableland and all Gilead and all Bashan, as far as Salecah and Edrei, cities of the kingdom of Og in Bashan. (For only Og the king of Bashan was left of the remnant of the Rephaim. Behold, his bed was a bed of iron. Is it not in Rabbah of the Ammonites? Nine cubits was its length, and four cubits its breadth, according to the common cubit)" (Deut 3:8–11 ESV).

• "Now these are the kings of the land whom the people of Israel defeated and took possession of their land beyond the Jordan toward the sunrise, from the Valley of the Arnon to Mount Hermon, with all the Arabah eastward: Sihon king of the Amorites who lived at Heshbon and ruled from Aroer, which is on the edge of the Valley of the Arnon, and from the middle of the valley as far as the river Jabbok, the boundary of the Ammonites, that is, half of Gilead, and the Arabah to the Sea of Chinneroth eastward, and in the direction of Beth-jeshimoth, to the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, southward to the foot of the slopes of Pisgah; and Og king of Bashan, one of the remnant of the Rephaim, who lived at Ashtaroth and at Edrei" (Josh 12:1–4 ESV).

- "All the kingdom of Og in Bashan, who reigned in Ashtaroth and in Edrei (he alone was left of the remnant of the Rephaim; these Moses had struck and driven out" (Josh 13:12 ESV).

The giant Og, the king of Bashan (e.g., Deut 1:4; 3:10; Josh 9:10), is partnered in Scripture with another king, Sihon of Heshbon. Together they are referred to as "kings of the Amorites" (Deut 3:1–8; 4:46–47; 31:4; Josh 2:10; 9:10). "Amorite" is a term that can refer broadly to the inhabitants of Canaan (e.g., Gen 15:16; Deut 1:7). Its association with Sihon, Og, and the Rephaim makes Amos 2:9–10 especially interesting, as it describes the Amorites dispossessed in the conquest of Canaan as unusually tall ("I destroyed the Amorite before them … whose height was like the height of the cedars and who was as strong as the oaks" [ESV]).

The conquest accounts inform us that the vestiges of the Anakim who escaped the Israelites settled in Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod, cities that would later become associated with Philistine occupation (Josh 11:22). The famous Philistine giant, Goliath, was from Gath (1 Sam 17:4, 23). Second Samuel 21:20–22 notes that there were other giants from Gath. The Philistine giants from Gath are described as "descended from הרפא (*hrp'*)," one of the etymological roots discussed above, in 1 Chr 20:6, 8. These interconnections likely contributed to the naming of the Valley of Rephaim (Josh 15:8; 18:16). This valley was the location of several skirmishes between the Philistines and Israelites (2 Sam 5:18; 23:13; 1 Chr 11:15).

The portrayal of the Rephaim as giants and, ultimately, lineal descendants of the Nephilim, offspring of the divine sons of God (Gen 6:1–4) via the Anakim (Num 13:32–33), is unique to the biblical material. While the *rpʾum* at Ugarit were considered warriors and warrior-kings, there is no suggestion they were thought to be of unusual stature. A number of explanations for this characterization of the Rephaim have been offered. Unusual height was considered a sign of either divine parentage or intervention. It would therefore not be a surprise if biblical writers considered the presence of such individuals among the enemy inhabitants of Canaan to have been a threat that was supernatural in nature. The most recent scholarly discussions of this topic are those of Doak (*The Last of the Rephaim*) and Heiser (*The Unseen Realm*, ch. 12–13, 23–25).

Translation of *Repha'im* in the Septuagint

In roughly half of the occurrences of *repha'im* in the Hebrew Bible, the Greek Septuagint renders the term with the word γίγας (*gigas*, "giant"; plural: γίγαντες, *gigantes*; e.g., Josh 12:4; 13:12). Given the association of unusual height with the Rephaim in the books of Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua, this is not unexpected, particularly in books detailing Israel's conquest of Canaan. But it is precisely at this point that the Septuagint is irregular. While Joshua 12:14; 13:12 refer to giants, in other passages associated with the conquered Rephaim, the Hebrew term is simply transliterated Ραφαΐν (*Raphain*) (e.g., Deut 2:11, 20; 3:11, 13; Josh 15:8). The variation most likely reflects the decisions of two different translators. The Septuagint's translation diversity is evidenced in how it treats "Valley of the Rephaim." The term *repha'im* is rendered with Ραφαΐμ (*Raphaim*) (2 Sam 23:13); τιτάνων (*titanōn*, "Titans"; 2 Sam 5:18); and γιγάντων (*gigantōn*, "Giants"; 1 Chr 11:15; 14:9).

The Septuagint also inserts comments about giants (presumably Rephaim) that are otherwise unknown in the traditional Old Testament texts. One instance occurs in 2 Sam (=2 Kingdoms) 21:10, where we learn of a Respha, the daughter of Aia the concubine of Saul, who had covered the bodies of Saul and Jonathan from carrion-feeding birds. Verse 11 inserts an obscure, interruptive thought in the account: "And it was told David what Respha the daughter of Aia the concubine of Saul had done, [and they were faint and Dan the son of Joa of the offspring of the giants (*giganton*) overtook them.] And David went and took the bones of Saul, and the bones of Jonathan his son."

The Septuagint's use of *titanon* ("Titans"; lemma: τιτάν, *titan*) for *repha'im* creates a conceptual link between the biblical Rephaim and Greek mythology. The Titans were, depending on the Greek writer and text, divine beings or the giant offspring of divine beings (Heiser, "Giants"). On two occasions (2 Sam 5:18, 22), the Masoretic phrase עֵמֶק רְפָאִים (*emeq repha'im*, "valley of the Rephaim") is rendered κοιλάδα τιτάνων (*koilada titanōn*, "Valley of the Titans"). As Doak notes:

"… [T]he very references to the Giants and Titans already suggest a world which is in some way comparable to Greek myth … [T]he effect of the introduction of Greek mythological vocabulary in suggestive and enigmatic places can only, in effect, serve to make the Greek Giants and Titans part of the biblical story" (Doak, *Last of the Rephaim*, 58).

While the assumption that the biblical story as originally composed had some relationship to Greek mythology appears overstated, it appears likely that the translators of the Septuagint were influenced to varying degrees by Greek mythological Titan traditions in their approach to the Rephaim in the Hebrew text they used to produce their translation.

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