

Sihon's and Og's Overthrow

-By Steve Quayle-

Late winter of their fortieth year in the wilderness found the Israelites encamped at Eziongeber, a small port town on the Gulf of Elath (modern Aqaba). As the time to invade Canaan approached, over two million men, women, and children began a two-hundred-mile trek north toward ancient Jericho. For all the hardship it brought, that earlier mission of the twelve spies to search out Canaan had served one good purpose. As a result of his later debriefings of the twelve, Moses now had a far better idea of the land's physical features, the strength of its occupants, and the logistical problems and other obstacles that the invading Hebrews would encounter. From their intelligence reports, he learned, too, that many giants occupied the south country, but that not many now lived in the lands east of the Jordan River. So central Canaan seemed to him the most vulnerable place to attack. He therefore decided that the Hebrew legions should strike first from across the Jordan, near Jericho.

Their long march toward this well-known city of the giants took the Hebrew multitude through Edom, Moab, Gilead, and Bashan. Some four hundred years earlier, many Rephaim, Horim, Emim, and Zamzummim giants had possessed these lands. Then came Chedorlaomer and his Babylonian cohorts. On their punitive raids throughout Transjordan and Edom they slew many giants and wasted their cities. An unknown number managed to escape Chedorlaomer's sword, but their once-firm hold on those countries was forever broken. The "land of the Rephaim," so-called because the giants had so completely dominated it, was no more. In later times, the Rephaim that still lived in Transjordan and Edom were defeated by the numerous descendants of Lot and Esau. This interesting bit of history appears only in Moses' journal. In his account of the Hebrews' wearying march toward Canaan's eastern border, the great lawgiver included several entries--written parenthetically--that tell us how the Gibborim mongrels that survived Chedorlaomer's onslaught were finally dispossessed.

After leaving Elath, the Israelites first passed beyond the sons of Esau, who lived in Seir. This country, Moses wrote, was formerly occupied by the tall Horites, but the "sons of Esau dispossessed them and destroyed them from before them and settled in their place." Writing of their passage through the wilderness of Moab, he also noted: "The Emim lived there formerly, a people as great, numerous, and tall as the Anakim. Like the Anakim, they are also regarded as Rephaim, but the Moabites call them Emim." When they came opposite the land of Ammon's descendants, Moses gave orders that they not be provoked, explaining that the Lord God had given that country to the sons

of Lot for a possession. "It is also regarded as the land of the Rephaim," he added, "for Rephaim formerly lived in it, but the Ammonites call them Zamzummim, a people as great, numerous, and tall as the Anakim, but the Lord destroyed them before them. And they dispossessed them and settled in their place, just as He did for the sons of Esau, who live in Seir. . . . And the Avvim, who lived in villages as far as Gaza, the Caphtorim who came from Caphtor destroyed them and lived in their place."¹⁶⁷

Thus, in Transjordan, only a remnant of the Rephaim survived. But the Israelites still faced a considerable threat there. For many Amorites now inhabited that same vast territory. They stood not quite as tall as the Rephaim, Horim, Emim, and Zamzummim. But biblical records and ancient monuments still represent them as a people of great size and strength. The prophet Amos, in a later reference to this campaign, describes them in these words: "Thus says the Lord, '... It was I who destroyed the Amorite before them, though his height was like the height of cedars and he was strong as the oaks.'"¹⁶⁸ The cedar, of course, denotes the Amorites' exceptional tallness. The oak symbolizes their great might. Some monuments discovered by archaeologists bear out Amos' description. On these, says historian Philip Hitti, the "Amorite stature appear tall and martial. Their size and culture must have so impressed the primitive and short troglodytic inhabitants of southern Syria that legends grew that a giant race came and intermarried the daughters of men-- legends which were passed on to the Israelites."¹⁶⁹

Over these Transjordanian Amorites reigned two giant kings, Sihon and Og. Moses refers to them as remnants of the Rephaim. Og later became the most famous of the two, because of his great bedstead. But from what records we have, Sihon appears to have been the most powerful and probably posed the greatest threat to the advancing Hebrews' plan of attack. Having completed their long, hard march across Edom and Moab, Moses' legions now waded the Arnon, which formed the border between Moab and Sihon's kingdom. That night they pitched camp on the Bamoth plateau in the mountains of Abarim, not far from the famed peaks of Pisgah and Nebo. From this plateau the Israelites got their first view of the land promised to them. Only Sihon now stood between them and their resolve to enter and possess it. War with the giant king and his tall warriors thus seemed unavoidable. As a courtesy, Moses sent messengers of peace to Sihon, saying: "Let me pass through your land. We will not turn off into field or vineyard; we will not drink water from wells. We will go by the king's highway until we have passed through your border."¹⁷⁰

In their day, Sihon and Og commanded wide respect as great and mighty monarchs.¹⁷¹ Although Sihon is not described in scripture as a giant, as Og was, other sources definitely place him among the Rephaim. Rabbinical literature, for instance, identifies him as Og's brother. The ancient rabbis likewise list both kings as grandsons of Shamhazai, a fallen angel (Niddah

61a), who evidently was of the Nephilim. Sihon, they further write, resembled Og in stature and bravery (Midrash Agadah, Hukkat, ed. Buber, p. 130a). These old writings also identify him with Arad the Canaanite (Numbers 21:1), who was called Sihon because he resembled the foals in the desert for swiftness.¹⁷² Accordingly, the rabbis sometimes referred to him as “the Canaanite,” claiming that he was overlord of that land and had over there many vassal kings who paid him tribute. The five Midianite kings later slain by the Israelites (Numbers 31:8; Joshua 13:21) came under his suzerainty. Sihon, himself, when the Israelites asked permission to pass through his territory to enter Canaan, advised them that he was in that land only to resist their attack upon his Canaanite kings (Tan., Hukkat, 52, ed. Buber, p. 65a).¹⁷³

That he came primarily to defend his Canaanite territories, and not his Transjordan kingdom, sounds reasonable. For Sihon could not have viewed the Hebrews as much of a threat to his eastern domain. Experts who have visited this area say that if the king had retained his troops in the various cities of his Transjordan realm, the Israelites would have been able to take them only with the greatest difficulty. But as suzerain over several kingdoms west of the Jordan, Sihon apparently felt some obligation to protect them. Most likely he was also moved by arrogance. These small-statured desert nomads, he believed, could not possibly stand before his much taller, better-armed Amorites. He therefore denied Moses’ request for passage. Then, mustering a great army, he marched out to check Israel’s advance toward Canaan. At Jahaz, a small town on the plains of Moab, he led a charge against the Hebrews. What he thought would be an easy battle for his mighty Amorites against the puny Israelites suddenly turned into a rout of the Amorites. On that day at Jahaz the giant king and all his sons fell, mortally wounded.¹⁷⁴

Giving a fuller account of this important battle, Josephus writes: “As soon as the Hebrews saw them giving ground, they immediately pursued them close; and when they had broken their ranks, they greatly terrified them, and some of them broke off from the rest, and ran away to the cities. Now the Hebrews pursued them briskly, and obstinately persevered in the labors they had already undergone; and being very skilful in slinging, and very dexterous in throwing of darts, or anything else of that kind, and also having nothing but light armor, which made them quick in the pursuit, they overtook their enemies; and for those that were most remote, and could not be overtaken, they reached them by their slings and their bows, so that many were slain.”¹⁷⁵ Even many who had earlier managed to escape, according to Josephus, were later slaughtered as they crowded, in an agony of thirst, into the bed of a cool mountain stream.

Following up their stunning victory over Sihon at Jahaz, the Hebrews seized Heshbon, his capital. It lay about twenty miles east of the Jordan River, on parallel with the northern end of the Salt Sea. After wandering forty years in

the wilderness, these former slaves and sons of slaves now owned, by right of conquest, a piece of land. On that day they must have looked with exhilaration beyond the smoldering ruins of Heshbon to the surrounding countryside. Westward from where they stood on the crown of this low rocky hill, the Hebrews had the land of Canaan before them. Turning northward, they saw an elevated land crossed by well-wooded mountain ridges with broad fertile valleys intervening. Eastward they beheld a wide expanse of fruitful, rolling plains that extended unbroken to the desert. Beyond that distant wasteland rose a range of purple-fringed mountains. Greatly encouraged by their successes on the battlefield, they next besieged and captured the walled cities of Nophah, Medeba, and Dibon, putting all their lofty inhabitants to death. The rest of Sihon's towns and villages, being without protecting walls, soon afterward fell. The whole rich country situated between the Arnon to the south, the upper Jabbok to the north, and the Jordan to the west, along with its cities, crops, and cattle, thus came into the Hebrews' immediate possession.

"The wanderers were now masters of a wide region of splendid upland pastures, intersected by numerous fertile valleys, and abounding in streams," relates historian Cunningham Geikie. "The crossing of the Arnon and the digging of the first well had already kindled the poetry of the camp;¹⁷⁶ but such a conquest as this was still a more worthy theme for their inspiration. The vast tent city of the host, therefore, soon resounded with songs in praise of the conquerors, now returning to camp in triumph. Taunts and derision of their foe mingled in these strains, of which one has happily come down to us."¹⁷⁷ Around their campfires that night, the ballad singers, as if calling to the vanquished Amorites, sang:

Come back (will ye not) to Heshbon!
Build again and restore the city of Sihon!
For there went forth fire from Heshbon,
A flame from the stronghold of Sihon;
It has consumed the city of Moab;
And the lords of the heights of Arnon!... The balladeers, telling of the final victory of Israel, then jubilantly proclaimed:
We have hurled them down! Heshbon has perished even to Dibon!
We have laid them waste even to Nophah
(We have laid them waste) with fire, to Medeba.¹⁷⁸

Through Heshbon ran the main north-south highway that connected Edom and Moab to Bashan. From here the road westward ribboned rapidly down into the Jordan Valley, past Abu Shittim and the Meadow of the Acacias, to the fords opposite Jericho. This way to the promised land now lay open to them. But the Hebrew legions looked north. That way lived the giant King Og and his cedar-tall Amorite warriors. They remained a threat.

When Gilead's King Sihon marched out against Israel, Bashan's King Og, for some reason, made no move to join forces with him. He, like Sihon, probably viewed Israel as not much of a threat. He perhaps thought Sihon could, with his own forces and without much trouble, check the Hebrew invasion. Time and distance also could have been factors. Bashan was situated some sixty miles up the Jordan River from the point where Israel planned to cross over into Canaan. So Og may not have had enough time to prepare for such a distant campaign. Or, he may have been at odds with his brother. At any rate, for whatever reason, he remained at home. Being that far away, he now stood in no position to stop Israel's invasion. But Moses still regarded the enormous Amorite ruler as a most dangerous foe, and unwilling to have such a powerful enemy at Israel's back, he placed Jair and Nobah, chief men of the tribe of Manasseh, at the head of two divisions and ordered them to carry out strikes against the north country of Gilead and all Bashan.¹⁷⁹ While Nobah and his men marched toward Kenath in Gilead, Jair's army made haste toward Og's capital of Edrei, a strange city cut out of rock in the upper Yarmuk River valley.

An exceptional giant, Og ruled a country with sixty strongly fortified cities (see Argob's Sixty Cities of the Giants). His kingdom, extending from the Jabbok River to Mount Hermon, enjoyed a good, year-round climate. Bashan was also blessed with an exceedingly rich soil that yielded abundant crops, and its lush pasturelands produced many choice cattle. Consequently, in ancient times it became a byword for fruitfulness. The lord of this ideal land, according to Josephus, stretched to a colossal height and possessed great strength. "Now Og had very few equals, either in largeness of his body or handsomeness of his appearance," he writes. "He was also a man of great activity in the use of his hands, so that his actions were not unequal to the vast largeness and handsome appearance of his body; and men could easily guess at his strength and magnitude when they took his bed at Rabbath, the royal city of the Ammonites; its structure was of iron, its width four cubits, and its length a cubit more than double that size."¹⁸⁰

Og lived not at Edrei but at Ashtaroth, his principal capital. So, when he heard the stunning news of Israel's crushing defeat of his brother Sihon, and that Jair and his army were marching on Edrei, a few miles southeast of Ashtaroth, he rushed to that city's defense. As Jair approached from the south, Og marshaled his forces on the plain outside Edrei to oppose him. This move has long baffled military experts, for Edrei "was in ordinary circumstances almost unassailable, since it was, strange to say, built in a hollow artificially scooped out of the side of a hill, which the deep gorge of the Hiero-max or Yarmuk isolates from the country round."¹⁸¹

In other words, had he stayed put inside his subterranean city, which lay about seventy feet below the surface of the hill, "it would have been

impossible, humanly speaking, for the Israelites to have conquered him,” declares Cyril Graham. “The only hope they would have had of taking the place would be by a long siege, and that would hardly have been possible to maintain, because they could not, without great difficulty, invest the city. The western side, next the plain, they might watch, and cut off all supplies from that quarter--the most fruitful, indeed, in that part of Bashan; but to reach the eastern side of Edrei they must have penetrated some distance among the rocks; and not only would this have been too dangerous a work to attempt, but, even were they able to watch ever so well on that side, the people of Argob, knowing all the winding ways within the rocks, could always have managed to bring provisions to the city without being seen. The only real hope of taking the city was by drawing the Rephaim out into the plain. Whether some ruse was employed to entice the people from their stronghold, or whether Og, in full confidence of his great strength and invulnerability, planned a sudden attack, or, as we should now say, a sortie, on the Israelites as they lay before the city, we are not told. Either would be difficult. It would require no small amount of skill to entice these people from behind walls; and it is more improbable that such a people should of their own free will risk a battle in the open plain.”¹⁸²

Of course, Og’s full confidence in his great strength and invulnerability, could have moved him to his fatal, colossal blunder. But Graham prefers to believe that “some almost miraculous interference in favour of the Israelites” occurred.¹⁸³ He believes this interference was huge swarms of hornets that providentially drove Og and his Amorites out of their underground stronghold. For his evidence the historian points to Joshua 24:11-13. In this little noticed passage, Joshua reveals that these highly combative insects with their powerful stings played an important role in this and many of the Israelites’ later campaigns.¹⁸⁴

Thus discomfited and driven out of their unusual city by an army of angry hornets, Og and his Amorites divisions confronted Jair and his smaller men on the plains. In the ensuing battle, the Hebrews slew the giant king and his sons, slaughtered most of his army, and took possession of Edrei. In subsequent battles in the Argob, Jair captured some sixty cities that were fortified with high walls, gates, and bars, “besides a great many unwalled towns.”¹⁸⁵

The battle deaths of Sihon and Og wrote a finis to the story of the Transjordan giants. We know little else about them except that they were warlike, even amongst themselves; that they possessed phenomenal strength; that some of them were men of good intelligence and ability, like Sihon and Og. Just

how tall they were we do not know. But we may get some idea from Og's bed. The Ammonites, following behind the Hebrew army as scavengers, found the iron bed in Og's sleeping quarters at either Edrei or Ashtaroth. They took it to Rabbath, the royal city of the Ammonites. There it became a famous "museum piece." It drew curious crowds for many centuries, probably even down to the time of the Babylonian captivity (c. 586 B.C.). This great bed, reports the chronicler of Deuteronomy, measured "nine cubits long and four wide, according to the common cubit," i.e., thirteen-and-a-half feet by six feet.¹⁸⁶

"Allowing the bedstead to have been one cubit longer than Og, which is certainly sufficient, and allowing the cubit to be about eighteen inches long, for this is perhaps the average of the cubit of a man, then Og was twelve feet high," says Adam Clarke. "This may be deemed extraordinary, and perhaps almost incredible, and therefore many commentators have, according to their fancy, lengthened the bedstead and shortened the man, making the former one-third longer than the person who lay on it, that they might reduce Og to six cubits; but even in this way they make him at least nine feet high."¹⁸⁷

¹⁶⁷ Deuteronomy 2: 8-12, 19-23 NASB.

¹⁶⁸ Amos 2:9 NASB.

¹⁶⁹ Philip Hitti, *History of Syria* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), p. 195.

¹⁷⁰ Numbers 21:21-22 NASB. Until Sihon came and took it from them, this land east of the Jordan was possessed by the Moabites.

¹⁷¹ See Psalm 136:17-22, where they are spoken of in the same breath with Pharaoh.

¹⁷² To get some idea of how fast giants could run, see Maximinus.

¹⁷³ See *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 11 (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1901), p. 335.

¹⁷⁴ Deuteronomy 2:33.

¹⁷⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 4.5.2.

¹⁷⁶ See Numbers 21:16-18, for an account of the first well the Hebrews dug and the song they sang.

¹⁷⁷ Geikie, *Hours with the Bible*, Vol. 2, pp. 400-401.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, adapted from Numbers 21:27-30.

¹⁷⁹ See Numbers 32:41-42; Deuteronomy 3:14.

¹⁸⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 4.5.3.

¹⁸¹ Geikie, *Hours with the Bible*, Vol. 2, p. 402.

¹⁸² Cyril Graham, "The Ancient Bashan and the Cities of Og," *Cambridge Essays* (1858). Quoted by Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, *Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, Vol. I, p. 628.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ After their conquest of Canaan, Joshua reminded the tribes of the help they had received from the hornets. To the people gathered before him, he said: "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: '... The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Gergashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands. I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you--also the two Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow. So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.'"

¹⁸⁵ Deuteronomy 3:4-5, 14.

¹⁸⁶ Deuteronomy 3:11.

¹⁸⁷ Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, Vol. I (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1977), a reprint of the 1851 edition, pp. 744-745.