

THE BED OF OG

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In the third chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses recalls how God helped the Israelites defeat Og king of Bashan and his people. The narrative concludes by stating, *For only Og king of Bashan was left of the remaining Rephaim; behold, his bed was an iron bed, in Rabbah of the children of Ammon, nine cubits was its length and four cubits its width, by the cubit of a man* (Deut. 3:11). What was the purpose of mentioning the bed of Og and its dimensions? The standard approach is that it demonstrates that Og was a giant. This is also the reason that Og is noted to be a member of the Rephaim, considered to be giants (Deut. 2:10-11). Moses mentioned this to stress the greatness of the victory against such a formidable foe.¹

Og the giant is a popular figure in midrashic literature. There he is described as a survivor of the Flood (TB *Niddah* 61a) by riding along on Noah's Ark, fed by Noah through a hole in the side of the vessel (*Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 23). In the battle against the Israelites he tore out a mountain to throw at the Israelite camp, but was slain by Moses who struck him on his ankle, which was thirty cubits high (TB *Berakhot* 54b). His femur is reported as being over three parasangs long (TB *Niddah* 24b).

While the image of Og as an enormous giant is a popular one, many commentators preferred to interpret the rabbinic statements about Og's height as allegories.² Legends in the Talmud may be interpreted this way; however, the question remains: how to understand the height of Og in a realistic way, based on the dimensions given in the Torah for his bed, which would be about 14 feet long and six feet wide.

OG THE SMALL GIANT

Some commentators saw Og as a huge individual, but within the range of human potential. Ibn Ezra explains that Og was twice the size of an average person. This seems to be based on the height given for Goliath, *six cubits and a span* (I Sam. 17:4), roughly double the height of an average person when we

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consider a cubit to be around 18 inches, and a span half of that.³ Rambam similarly understands that Og was "six cubits tall, or a little more," "twice as long as an ordinary person," something that is "undoubtedly an exceptional height among men, but not quite impossible." This is based on Rambam's understanding that a bed is generally made a third longer than the person who is to sleep in it.⁴ Modern beds are not constructed to have so much extra space, but by explaining that this was the case in ancient times, the height of Og is greatly reduced from the length of his bed. R. David Zvi Hoffmann brings an opinion that Og may have displayed an extra large bed on purpose in order to exaggerate his size, making him in reality much smaller than his bed would indicate, but still larger than normal.⁵

Remains of such very large people may even have been discovered in the vicinity. Josephus (*Antiquities* 5:125) reports that huge bones were displayed in Hebron "to this day, bearing no resemblance to any that have come within men's ken." In recent times skeletal remains of seven-foot females have been found in a twelfth-century BCE cemetery on the east bank of the Jordan.⁶

However, if the term *eres*, translated by Ibn Ezra and Rambam as 'bed', is understood to mean 'crib' as Rashbam states here, Og would be considerably larger. This is in fact cited by Riva (Rabbi Judah ben Eliezer), an early tosfist, as a way to make the verse square with the enormous dimensions given for Og in the Talmud. The bed in Deuteronomy was only a crib for the baby giant.⁷ Rationalist commentaries translated *eres* as a bed, not a crib. Ramban on this verse explains that the bed was displayed in Rabbath Ammon by the Ammonites to show that they defeated the gigantic and powerful Rephaim, of whom Og was the lone survivor.

FORTIFICATIONS

The early medieval tosfist R. Yosef Bekhor Shor explains that the word *eres* means neither a bed nor a crib, but a fortification.⁸ He refers to the end of Amos 3:12 where the word appears, although it is generally translated there as 'bed' or 'couch' — *Just as a shepherd can rescue from the mouth of a lion [but] two legs or the cartilage of an ear, so shall be rescued from the Children of Israel who dwell in Samaria [but] the corner of a bed and the edge of a couch (eres)*. The translation of the last four words is a matter of debate among commentators, but 'fortification' does not seem to fit well,⁹ especially when we consider that the word *eres* is explicitly used in Psalms 6:7 as a parallel for *mittah*, bed. Bekhor Shor also mentions the Aramaic

word *arsaya*, used in the Talmud to denote an arcade along a row of houses, suggesting that it may also describe fortifications. However *arisa* and *arsa* are the Aramaic terms commonly used for 'bed' and 'crib' as well.¹⁰

According to Bekhor Shor, the fortifications of the city of Rabbath Ammon were as strong as iron, nine cubits high and four cubits wide. This entails understanding the word 'iron' in the verse metaphorically, and the words *nine cubits was its length* as actually referring to height. Despite all of these difficulties, this approach, that *eres* means the fortifications used by Og, was adopted by Hizkuni,¹¹ Pa'aneah Raza,¹² R. Jacob of Vienna,¹³ Rosh and other tosafists.¹⁴ This interpretation avoids any discussion of the height of Og himself.

A DECORATIVE OBJECT

Because of the very high melting point of iron, the casting of molten iron was impossible using the technology of the ancient world. Wrought iron, shaped by hammering, was used for relatively small objects such as axes, plowpoints and swords. When we read of "iron chariots" in Joshua 17:16, archeologists generally understand that only the chariot's axles were actually made of iron, which stood for the whole vehicle.¹⁵ A very large iron object, nine cubits long and four cubits wide, would have been truly remarkable in biblical times; such large objects were generally made of copper or bronze in those days,¹⁶ for example, the copper altar in the Tabernacle and the furnishings of Solomon's Temple (I Kgs. 7:45-46). Archeologist Alan Millard has proposed that the bed of Og was not made wholly of iron, but only strengthened or adorned with iron. Since at that time iron was difficult to work with and obtain, it was considered a precious metal and even used in jewelry. There is evidence from a sixteenth-century BCE Hittite text that a "throne of iron" was given as a gift from one ruler to another, probably referring to a throne embellished with iron.¹⁷ In light of this, Og's bed may be seen as a decorative treasure item, meant to impress visitors, and possibly never actually used for sleeping. In fact, Targum Jonathan on this verse indicates that the *eres* was displayed in the treasure house of Rabbath Ammon.

SARCOPHAGUS

Many contemporary Bible commentators, particularly non-Jewish ones, prefer to translate the word *eres* as a tomb or sarcophagus.¹⁸ This usage appears in Aramaic¹⁹ and would be a figurative use of a word that commonly means 'bed', similar to the use of the word *mittah* (II Sam. 3:31) or *mishkav* (II Chron. 16:14) which both literally mean 'bed' or a place to lie down, but are also used to indicate a final resting place.²⁰ Large sarcophagi are not unusual and have been reported by many ancient historians.²¹ Thus, the size of the sarcophagus was impressively large, but not a practical indicator of Og's actual height.

Since these were generally made of stone, the fact that the text describes it as 'iron' is explained in various ways. Some suggest that the sarcophagus was made out of black basalt, which contains about 20% iron and has the color and hardness of iron,²² others that the "stones ring out with a metallic sound" when struck with a hard object, so that it sounds as if it were made of iron.²³

CULTIC OBJECT

There is one more way to understand Og, the bed, and indeed the function of this whole passage in Deuteronomy. Og does not only appear in Israelite texts, he is mentioned in Phoenician inscriptions as well. There he is considered "a legendary-mythological hero," a "representative or patron of the heroes of the Underworld." A Phoenician coffin from the sixth or fifth century BCE contains the warning that "Mighty Og will take revenge" on one who violates the tomb.²⁴ He was deified and given the role of a protector of tombs, and possibly functioned as the local deity of Rabbath Ammon. The huge *eres* displayed there could be understood as a ceremonial bed, a cultic object indicating his presence.²⁵

Based on this approach, the gigantic *eres*, adorned with iron, is not simply an indicator of Og's size, but more importantly of the lasting impression he made on the local population. After his death, he was venerated as a supernatural protector, and the *eres* was built to inspire fear and awe of this local deity. When Moses says that to this day Og's *eres* is on display in Rabbath Ammon, what is meant is that Og is still being worshipped there. Moses is emphasizing to the Israelites the significance of their victory against Og, an enemy so fearsome that he was actually deified and was still being worshipped when Moses was giving his final address to his nation.²⁶

NOTES

1. See *Midrash Lekah Tov*, Deuteronomy 3:11.
2. See, for example, Rashba's interpretation of *Berakhot* 54b, where he uses the story of Og trying to throw a mountain at the Israelites as an opportunity to discuss rabbinic aggadic tales in general: *Commentary to the Legends of the Talmud* by R. Solomon ben Abraham ben Aderet, Leon A. Feldman, ed. (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1991) pp. 58-61 (Hebrew).
3. Ibn Ezra, Deut. 3:11, see note 21 in the *Torat Hayyim* edition. For the size of a cubit, see P.C. Craige, *New International Commentary – Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976) p. 120.
4. *The Guide for the Perplexed*, translated by M. Friedlander (New York: Dover, 1956) 2:47, p. 248. This view is followed by Rabbi Elie Munk, *Call of the Torah – Devarim* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 2001) p. 29, who calculates Og as being ten feet and three inches tall. The Rambam here is referring to the concept of a third as used in the Bible, meaning a third of the total number (9) rather than a third of Og's height (6 cubits).
5. R. David Zvi Hoffmann, *Commentary to Deuteronomy* (Tel Aviv: Nezach, 1959) p. 57 (Hebrew). He indicates that this practice was not unknown in ancient times. Legend has it that Alexander the Great, upon leaving conquered territory, "had billets made with giant couches to leave the impression that the Greeks had been a race of giants." Michael Wood, *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) p. 197.
6. Jeffrey Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996) p. 17.
7. *Rabboteinu Ba'alei ha-Tosafot al Hamishah Humshei Torah* (Benei Berak: Makhon le-Hafatzat Perushei Ba'alei ha-Tosafot al ha-Torah) p. 495.
8. *Perushei Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor al ha-Torah*, Yeshoshafat Nevo, ed. (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994) p. 311.
9. Amos Hakhham, *Da'at Mikra – Amos* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990) p. 24.
10. Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Jerusalem: Horev) pp. 1117, 1118, 1121.
11. *Commentary of Hizkuni*, Deuteronomy 3:11.
12. *Pa'aneah Raza* (Jerusalem: Makhon Torat ha-Rishonim, 1998) p. 490.
13. *Peshatim u-Perushim al Hamishah Humshei Torah mi-Rabbenu Ya'akov mi-Vienna* (Mainz, 1888) p. 196.
14. *Hadar Zekenim* (Benei Berak: Makhon le-Hafatzat Perushei Ba'alei ha-Tosafot al ha-Torah) pp. 374-5.
15. Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) pp. 167-8. However, see Alan R. Millard, "Back to the Iron Bed: Og's or Procrustes'?", *Congress Volume Paris 1992* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995) p.194, who understands that the chariots were iron-plated.
16. King and Stager, pp. 164-7.
17. Alan R. Millard, "King Og's Iron Bed: Fact or Fancy?" *Bible Review* 6 (April 1990) pp. 16-21. See also Alan R. Millard, "King Og's Bed and Other Ancient Ironmongery," Lyle Eslinger & Glen Taylor, eds., *Ascribe to the Lord*. (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press, 1988) pp.481-492.

18. J. R. Bartlett, "Sihon and Og, Kings of the Amorites" *Vetus Testamentum* 20 (July 1970) p. 270, especially note 2.
19. A.D.H. Mayes, *The New Century Bible Commentary – Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979) p. 144.
20. *Olam ha-Tanakh — Devarim* (Tel Aviv: Dorozin-Eti, 1994) p. 49.
21. For example, Herodotus 1.68 on the tomb of Orestes.
22. S.R. Driver, *International Critical Commentary – Deuteronomy* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986) p. 54.
23. Duane L. Christensen, *World Bible Commentary – Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001).
24. Moshe Weinfeld, *The Anchor Bible – Deuteronomy 1-11* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) p. 184.
25. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, Pieter W. van der Horst, eds. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1995) p. 1205.
26. It is interesting to note that Jewish mystical literature also understood Og to have a supernatural aspect: in *Tikkunei Zohar* (tikkun 69, p. 108b) Og is stated to be connected to the demonic force Ogiel. See Reuven Margalio, *Mal'akhei Elyon* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1988) p.272, note 86.