

## Giants in the Bible and the *Shanhaijing* : A Study in Comparative Anthropology

Ronald Hendel \*

**Abstract:** A study of the perspectives on giants in the Bible and the *Shanhaijing*. The two perspectives are organized by different hierarchies of space and time and distinctive ideologies, but similarly privilege the observer — Chinese or Israelite — in the order of things. Both perspectives are arguably shaped by a shared ecological feature: megalithic structures in the landscape that serve as a visual reminder of the presence of giants in the periphery or the past.

**Key Words:** Giants, Bible, *Shanhaijing*, Center-Periphery

The ancient Classic (or Guideways) of Mountains and Seas (*Shanhaijing*, ca. 4th-1st cents. BCE) includes a cautionary note in the prologue to its second section: “Things possessing anomalous forms are those born with divine natures. Whether they are long-lived or short, only the sage can understand their ways” (6.1a).<sup>①</sup> Despite this limitation, I wish to explore the ways of some of the anomalous creatures in the *Shanhaijing* and the Hebrew Bible as an exercise in what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls “perspectival anthropology,”<sup>②</sup> that is, a comparison of the relations and representations of self and others across cultures. Such comparison also

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\* Ronald Hendel, Professor, University of California, Berkeley.

① Trans. Richard Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 30.

② Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds* (Chicago: Hau, 2015), 55-74.

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necessarily includes the researcher's perspective as a mediating and equivocal term. Castro writes:

Doing anthropology means comparing anthropologies, nothing more —but nothing less. Comparison is not just our primary analytic tool. It is also our raw material and our ultimate grounding, because what we compare are always and necessarily, in one form or another, comparisons.<sup>①</sup>

By comparing comparisons, we perceive more richly some of the distinctive features of each culture in conjunction with their shared practices. Comparison always entails a blend of similarity and difference, such that the comparanda — in this case, giants and humans — can expose different constellations of local anthropology. In this sense all our perspectives — ancient and modern — may enter a dialogue of respectful illumination and critique.

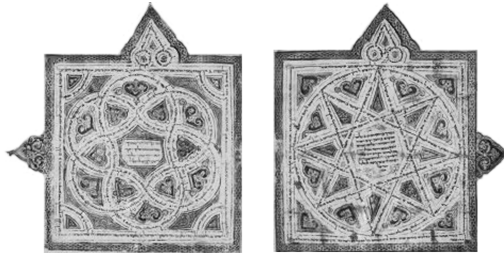
I hope to show that the perspectives on giants in the *Bible* and the *Shanhaijing* are organized by two different hierarchies: (1) a spatial order arranged around a cosmic center in the *Shanhaijing*, which implicitly supports an ideology of imperial expansion and rule, and (2) a temporal order arranged around the genealogical principle in the Hebrew Bible, which implicitly supports the ideology of a peripheral latecomer in its cultural sphere. Each hierarchy serves to privilege the observer — Chinese or Israelite — in the order of things, either as its spatial center or its temporal turning point. These two perspectives also shape different affective responses to the giants in distinctive mixtures of wonder and fear. While the giants are conceived differently in the two book — particularly with respect to space, time, and affect — both perspectives are arguably shaped by a shared ecological circumstance. The presence of megalithic structures in the landscape seems to be a visual reminder, in both cultures, of the presence of giants in the periphery or the past.

## Giants in the *Shanhaijing*

The *Shanhaijing* presents a mythic geography of the world, proceeding from the mountains of central China — organized into the center and the four

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① Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds*, 56.



cardinal directions — to the surrounding seas and the lands within and beyond them.<sup>①</sup> This is an imagined landscape, which only loosely corresponds to physical geography (e.g., there are no encircling seas around central China). The book is an itinerary of strange creatures, some of which have healing or other propitious properties, and local gods and spirits. After leaving the mountains of central China, the local creatures include strange humans with one or more bizarre features, such as the Pendant-Ears People, the One-Eyes People, the Long-Arms People, the Long-Thighs People, the People Without Calves, and the Feathered People. As Richard Strassberg observes, the *Shanhaijing* is a mythic travelogue and bestiary, in which “fact and fantasy combined... to distribute a diverse population of strange creatures throughout a vast, sacred geography where they dwell in the eternal present of mythological time.”<sup>②</sup> Over five hundred anomalous creatures populate this cosmic geography.

This panorama illustrates a binary opposition of civilized people and barbarians. As Anne Birrell comments, this duality “followed the notion that non-Chinese people and foreign lands were symbolically and literally separated from the sacred heartland by four surrounding seas, divided into inner and outer, which formed a sort of cordon sanitaire between civilization and barbarism.”<sup>③</sup> The peoples of foreign lands are “others” both with respect to geography and physiognomy — they are distant from the center and have strange bodies.

Among these exotic creatures are several groups of giants, mostly to the north and east, who are described with a blend of wonder and amusement:

The Land of Bofu [in the north] lies east of the Land of the People Who Hold Up Their Ears. They are giants. In their right hand they hold

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<sup>①</sup> See Trans. Richard Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas*; Rémi Mathieu, *Étude sur la mythologie et l'ethnologie de la Chine ancienne: Traduction annotée du Shanhai jing* (2 vols.; Paris: Collège de France, 1983); Riccardo Fracasso, “The Shanhaijing: A Bibliography by Subject,” *Cina* 23 (1991): 81-104; Anne Birrell, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas: Translated with an Introduction and Notes* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

<sup>②</sup> Trans. Richard Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas*, 10.

<sup>③</sup> Anne Birrell, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas: Translated with an Introduction and Notes*, III.

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a green snake, and in their left hand they hold a yellow snake. (8.3a)<sup>①</sup>

The Land of Giants lies to the north [beyond the seas]. Its people are very big. They sit down and scrape away to make boats. (9.1a)<sup>②</sup>

Beyond the East Sea in the Great Wilderness... is the Land of Giants. There is the market of Giants. Its name is the Hall of the Giants. One of these Giants sits back on his heels up on the Hall. He is pulling on both of his ears. (14.2)<sup>③</sup>

There are people here [beyond the northeast sea] named the Giants, and here is the Land of Giants. They have Li as their family name. They are millet-eaters. (17.2a)<sup>④</sup>

In the southern region [within the south sea] there are the Giants of Gan. They have a human face, long forearms, and a black body. They are hairy and their heels are back-to-front. When they see humans, they laugh so much that their lips cover their whole face. This is how other people make their escape from the giants. (18.5b)<sup>⑤</sup>

Several of these groups of giants practice arts of civilization — they carve wooden boats, shop at a big market, and eat millet, a civilized food.<sup>⑥</sup> These traits mark the giants as at least partially civilized “others.” As Birrell observes, “millet-eaters among foreign peoples classify them as ‘one of us,’ but not quite.” The giants also seem unthreatening. They are pictured as

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① Anne Birrell, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas: Translated with an Introduction and Notes*, 123; Trans. Richard Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas*, 180.

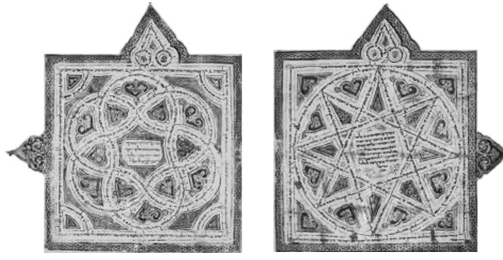
② Anne Birrell, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas: Translated with an Introduction and Notes*, 127; Rémi Mathieu, *Étude sur la mythologie et l'ethnologie de la Chine ancienne: Traduction annotée du Shanhaijing*, 1. 429-430.

③ Anne Birrell, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas: Translated with an Introduction and Notes*, 159; Rémi Mathieu, *Étude sur la mythologie et l'ethnologie de la Chine ancienne: Traduction annotée du Shanhaijing*, 1. 526-527.

④ Anne Birrell, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas: Translated with an Introduction and Notes*, 183; Rémi Mathieu, *Étude sur la mythologie et l'ethnologie de la Chine ancienne: Traduction annotée du Shanhaijing*, 1. 601.

⑤ Anne Birrell, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas: Translated with an Introduction and Notes*, 193; Rémi Mathieu, *Étude sur la mythologie et l'ethnologie de la Chine ancienne: Traduction annotée du Shanhaijing*, 1. 635.

⑥ Anne Birrell, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas: Translated with an Introduction and Notes*, XXX.



sitting down, some to carve boats and another to pull on his ears while resting on the market roof. They are, by turns, industrious and amusing. The southern giants are even comical. They look like monkeys, and when they see humans, they laugh uproariously.

The last instance — the Giants of Gan — has a distinctly perspectival quality, showing how the humans and giants perceive and respond to each other. To human eyes, the giants look like huge simians, perhaps “an anthropomorphic vision of an orangutan.”<sup>①</sup> The giants’ distended lips when they laugh accentuate their comical bodies and mask the giants’ eyes, which is “how other people make their escape from the giants.” This comment, while comical, implies that the humans fear the giants. They are exotic but potentially dangerous creatures. To the giants’ eyes, it is humans who are exotic and comical, provoking uproarious laughter. In this mirrored perspective, each see the other as strange creatures, objects of wonder. This reflexivity shows a native anthropology in which the Self and Other are alike in their perceptions and affects, even as their bodies, locales, and degrees of civilization differ. This comparison seems at home in an imperial structure, in which civilized humans (i.e., Chinese) and foreigners subsist together in an ordered spatial hierarchy. The giants and the humans have their respective places in the cosmic imperium, with each kind practicing its ways in peace.

This picture of spatial hierarchy between center and periphery, in which humans, gods, and hybrids dwell, arguably reflects and supports the political ideology of the book’s era of composition. As Strassberg argues, “The proliferation of the hybrid during the latter part of the Zhou dynasty can... be seen to embody a certain kind of cultural logic particular to the age... [and] mirrors the pluralistic nature of the feudal state... [E]ach major state was faced with reconciling the increasing quality of ‘strangeness’ to itself as it expanded and annexed culturally different appendages.”<sup>②</sup> By this cultural logic, the hybrids “legitimately dwell in the environment alongside humankind and simply represent another, overlapping order with its own principles.”<sup>③</sup> The

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① Rémi Mathieu, *Étude sur la mythologie et l’ethnologie de la Chine ancienne: Traduction annotée du Shanhaijing*, 635 n. 4.

② Trans. Richard Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas*, 45.

③ Trans. Richard Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas*, 44.

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hybrids are not monsters, who must be exterminated to make way for civilization. They dwell in their own mythical space, enclosed within the larger order.

In the *Shanhaijing*, the anomalous forms and strange natures of the giants are securely located in the distant periphery of the Kingdom of Heaven. This perspectival anthropology persisted for millennia. As Strassberg observes, “The Guideways continued to be a major source of... cultural information about distant foreign lands up until the late nineteenth century,”<sup>①</sup> as illustrated in Fig. 1.

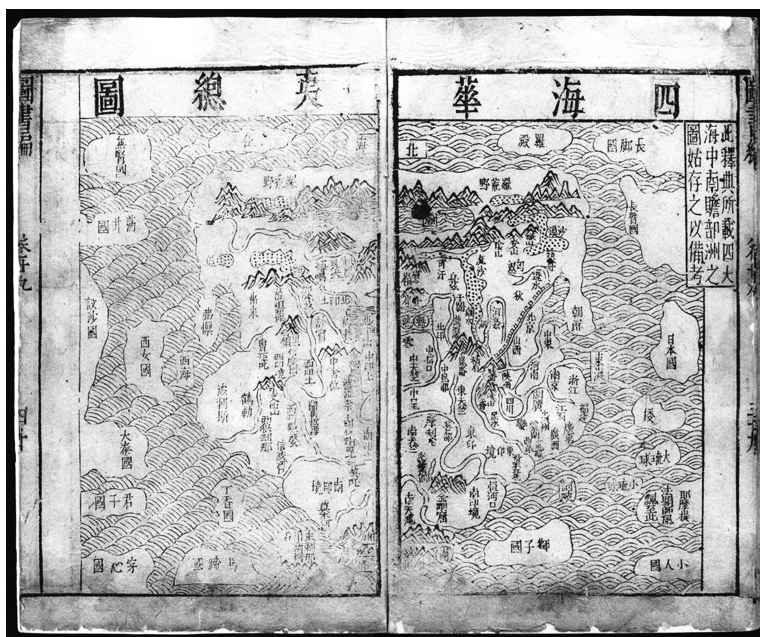
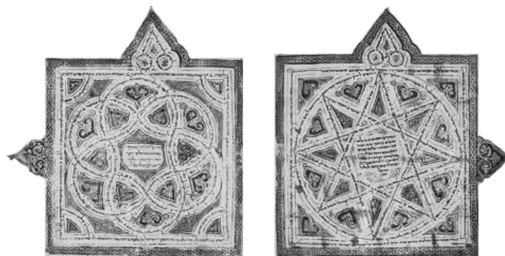


Fig. 1. Complete Map of the Four Seas, China, and the Barbarians (Sihai huayi zongtu), 1532.

Note: Several of the hybrid peoples from the *Shanhaijing* are listed in the regions within and beyond the surrounding seas, including the Long-Arms People and the Long-Thighs People (upper right) and the People Without Calves (upper left).

Source: Zhang Huang's *Tushu bian* (1613), Harvard-Yenching Library.

<sup>①</sup> Trans. Richard Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas*, 35.



## Giants in the Hebrew Bible

According to the testimony of the Hebrew Bible, giants lived in the land of Canaan prior to the Israelite conquest.<sup>①</sup> The Israelites first encounter these giants when Moses appoints scouts to explore the region of Hebron prior to their entry into Canaan. On the scouts' return to the Israelite encampment, they report to Moses:

“We came to the land that you sent us, and indeed it is flowing with milk and honey, and this [huge grape cluster] is its fruit. However, the people who live in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very great, and indeed we saw there the children of Anak.” ...Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, “Let us go up immediately and possess it, for we are able to prevail over it.” But the people who went up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for it is stronger than us... There we saw the Nephilim — the children of Anak are from the Nephilim — and we seemed in our eyes like grasshoppers, and so we seemed in their eyes.” (Numbers 13:27-28, 30-31, 33)

This report (from the J source) ends with a striking perspectival note. To the Israelites, their puny size in the presence of the giants makes them seem like insects in comparison: “we seemed in our eyes like grasshoppers, and so we seemed in their eyes.” They see themselves from the giants' perspective. But, unlike the Giants of Gan in the *Shanhaijing*, this perspectival encounter creates not comedy but terror. The scouts see that the giants would destroy them in battle with as little effort as humans would crush a grasshopper. The giants of Hebron, in this case of perspectival encounter, are wholly fearsome and dangerous. This is, of course, an imagined perspective — the Israelites see themselves through the giants' eyes, but we are not told what the giants themselves perceive. The Israelites are the agents in this scene (“we seemed...

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<sup>①</sup> Ronald Hendel, “The Landscape of Memory: Giants and the Conquest of Canaan,” in *Collective Identity and Collective Memory: Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History in Their Context*, eds. Johannes U. Ro and Diana Edelman, BZAW 534 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 263-288.

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we seemed”), and the giants the objects of terror.

The giants of Canaan go by several ethnonyms in the *Bible* — here Nephilim and children of Anak, and elsewhere Rephaim, Amorites, and other terms. The ethnonym Nephilim recalls the story in Genesis of their origins in the era before the flood:

The Nephilim were on the earth in those days — and also afterwards — when the Sons of God went into the daughters of humans, and they bore children for them. These were the warriors of old, the men of renown. (Genesis 6:4)

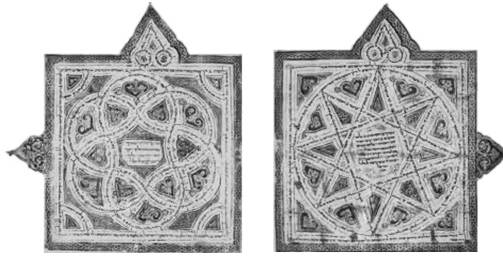
The Nephilim are the hybrid offspring of male gods and female humans, and they become mighty warriors — although we are not told the details of their famous exploits. Their giant size — also not mentioned in Genesis — seems to come from their hybrid, semi-divine origins. This concept is shared with the Mesopotamian warrior-king Gilgamesh, who was two-thirds divine and one-third human, and was, according to the Hittite version, eleven cubits tall (16.5 ft. or 5 m).<sup>①</sup>

In Deuteronomy, Moses emphasizes the fearsome size of the giants, echoing the scouts’ report: “It is a people greater and taller than us, with great cities fortified up to heaven, and indeed we saw there the children of the Anakim” (Deuteronomy 1:28). Moses expands on his description of the giants in his exhortation to Israel about the upcoming conquest:

Hear O Israel, you are going to cross the Jordan today to go in and dispossess nations greater and mightier than you, with great cities fortified up to heaven, a people great and tall, the children of the Anakim, whom you know. And you have heard it said, “Who can stand before the children of Anak?” But know today that Yahweh, your God, he is going to cross before you as a devouring flame. And he will destroy them and subdue them before you, and you will dispossess them and destroy them quickly, as Yahweh has promised you. (Deuteronomy 9:1-3)

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① Andrew R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts* (2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1. 447.



Moses emphasizes that Yahweh will vanquish the giants — “he will destroy them and subdue them” — after which the Israelites finish the job — “you will dispossess them and destroy them.” Yahweh’s destruction of the giants is the prelude to the Israelite conquest and settlement, which completes the redemptive drama of the Exodus and fulfills his promises to the ancestors.

The book of Amos draws a similar picture of Yahweh’s destruction of the giants of Canaan (calling them Amorites):

It was I who destroyed the Amorite before them,  
whose height is like the height of cedars,  
and whose strength is like oaks.  
And I destroyed his fruit above,  
and his roots below.  
It was I who brought you up from the land of Egypt,  
and I led you in the desert for forty years  
to inherit the land of the Amorite. (Amos 2:9-10)

The giants’ height is compared to the height of cedars (the tallest known tree) and their strength to oak trees (the strongest tree). The tree metaphor is developed further when Yahweh states that he destroyed them utterly, from “his fruit above” to “his roots below.” Even the strongest and tallest are utterly vanquished by Yahweh. In this perspectival poetry, the giants are huge and mighty in the natural landscape, but are insignificant compared to Yahweh. From God’s perspective, the giants are mere grasshoppers.

According to these texts, Yahweh destroys the giants so that Israel can inherit the promised land. In Deuteronomy and Joshua, there is a double causality, such that the Israelites also destroy them. This destruction is carried out by Joshua’s army:

At that time Joshua came and cut off the Anakim from the hill country, from Hebron, from Debir, from Anab, and from all the hill country of Judah and from all the hill country of Israel, with their cities. Joshua eradicated them. No Anakim remained in the land of the children of Israel; only in Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod did they remain. (Joshua 11:21-22)

As this passage relates, a few giants survived the conquest. They survive

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in Israel in cities that will later become Philistine-Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod. The last of these giants are eventually destroyed by David and his men. According to 2 Samuel 21: 15-22, David's men kill four huge warriors "descended from the Raphah" (a biform of Rephaim), including one named Goliath of Gath. The defeat of this giant is retold in 1 Samuel 17, where it is David who kills Goliath. Goliath is a mighty warrior and tall — six cubits and a span (9.75 ft., 3 m; 1 Samuel 17:4)<sup>①</sup>— but David defeats him easily with his shepherd's sling.

The encounter between David and Goliath also has a perspectival touch. Although Goliath is a huge warrior wearing heavy armor, David, a young shepherd, views Goliath as a strange and uncivilized foreigner, comparable to a wild animal. As David says to King Saul:

Your servant was a shepherd for his father's sheep, and when a lion or a bear would come and take a sheep from the flock, I would go out after it and kill it and rescue it from its mouth. And if it rose against me, I would seize it by the beard and strike it and kill it. Just as your servant killed the lion and the bear, so this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them. (1 Samuel 17:34-36)

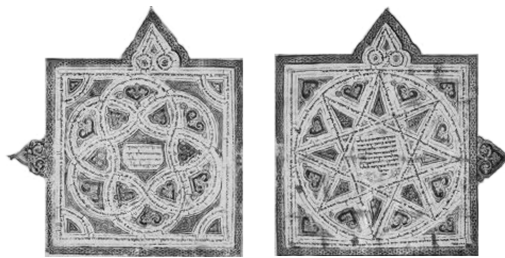
Although this mighty warrior instills fear in Saul and the other Israelites, to David he is but an uncircumcised foreigner, comparable to the lions and bears that used to menace David's flock. The giant Philistine is but a wild beast.

Goliath mimics David's perspective when he asks, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" (1 Samuel 17:43). This mockery is ironic, since David easily defeats Goliath with his sling and stone, as one would a dog or beast. David's victory over Goliath signals his ascent to kingship, which transforms his status as shepherd into the royal shepherd of Israel. His defeat of this last giant in Israel is a sequel to the conquest of the giants of Canaan by Yahweh and the Joshua generation.

In these stories of biblical giants, there is an implication that their existence is limited to the past. Yahweh and the Israelites destroy them so that

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<sup>①</sup> 4QSam<sup>a</sup> and the LXX have a smaller height, four cubits and a span. It is not clear which number is original.



Israel may inherit the promised land. The giants' end is Israel's beginning. This theme is recapitulated in the story of David's rise, which yields the Davidic monarchy. In each case, the destruction of the giants is a necessary preliminary to the proper order of things. The giants belong to a past era, and their fate is their destruction. This temporal pastness of the giants seems to be encoded in several of their ethnonyms. They are Nephilim, literally the "fallen ones." The giants of Transjordan are the Rephaim, which also refers to shadowy spirits of the dead. Other ethnonyms include Emim, literally "terrors," and the Zamaummim, literally "whisperers." These mighty peoples were giants, but now they sleep in the dust. As Julius Wellhausen observed, the ethnonym Amorite also has a quality of past time: "While the Canaanites still live in the land in the present of the biblical narrator... the Amorites... belong only to the past, they have been exterminated."<sup>①</sup> The mighty giants are now only a memory.

The pastness of the giants is a feature of Israel's self-fashioning as a chosen people dwelling in a promised land. The place of the giants in their local anthropology can be elucidated in comparison with the anthropology of giants in the *Shanhaijing*. For the latter, the people of China are the indigenous inhabitants in the cosmic center — the Middle Kingdom — and the giants — anomalous hybrids — dwell in the periphery. The center and periphery are linked spatially and conceptually within the imperial order of the cosmos. This cultural logic makes the giants objects of wonder — and even comedy — in their exotic domains. In the Hebrew Bible, the giants are the indigenous people in the cosmic center, and it is Israel who are a peripheral people, arriving on the scene of history long after the dispersion of the nations (see the Table of Nations and the Tower of Babel in Genesis 10-11).

In the cultural logic of the Hebrew Bible, other people came first in the genealogy, and Israel's rise is a turning point of history. In the meantime, the cosmic center — the land of Israel — is occupied by dangerous "others" — giants — until the time of Israel's conquest and settlement. The indigenous giants are liminal, both with respect to their anomalous physiognomy and their

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<sup>①</sup> Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* (3rd ed.; Berlin: Reimer, 1899), 343.

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existence in the pre-Israelite era. In a sense, they are a temporal place-holder — a people doomed to die — until the time when the rightful dwellers in the cosmic center arrive.

Tab. 1 indicates some contrasts in the human-giant relations in the Bible and the *Shanhaijing*. For Israel the giants are peripheral in time, while in China they are peripheral in space.

Tab. 1 Contrasts in the Human-Giant Relations in the Bible and the *Shanhaijing*

	periphery	center
space	giants	Chinese
time	giants	Israelites

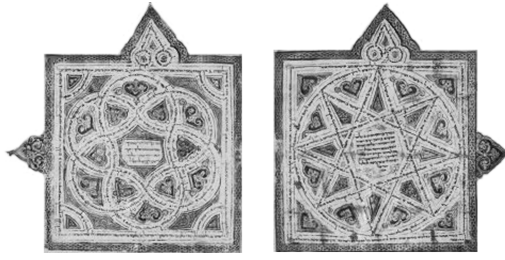
In both cultures, the giants are foreign and hybrid “others,” dwelling on the far side of the central order of things. For Israel, this set of contrasts marks the Israelites as the rightful possessors of the land, fulfilling their destiny as the chosen people and liberating the land from frightening creatures. For China, the rightful possession of the land is not in question, since the civilized Chinese are the land’s original inhabitants, perpetually dwelling in the cosmic center. In the *Shanhaijing* the perspectival anthropology is rooted in the spatial hierarchy of empire, whereas for Israel the perspective is temporal, embedded in genealogical time. The indigenous giants, in this sense, guard the temporal boundary of Israelite identity.

## The Landscape of Memory: Megaliths in China and Israel

The *Shanhaijing* attributes the creation of the landscape to the great god Yu, who filled in the surface of the earth after the flood and “mark[ed] the divisions and boundaries under the sky and on earth” (5.54a).<sup>①</sup> Within this landscape is a feature that may be related to the anthropology of giants in China and Israel. This is arguably a shared feature of the two cultures, in

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① Anne Birrell, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas: Translated with an Introduction and Notes*, 103; Rémi Mathieu, *Étude sur la mythologie et l’ethnologie de la Chine ancienne: Traduction annotée du Shanhaijing*, 1. 372.



which the giants are signified in the landscape. In both cases, massive stone structures seem to mark the existence of giants.

In traditional Chinese scholarship, the giants of the *Shanhaijing* are often identified with foreign peoples of northeast China (Dongbei) or Korea. As Strassberg observes, the passages about giants tend to “refer to the north or east, leading to speculation that ancient mythology located such a giant people somewhere between China and the Korean Peninsula.”<sup>①</sup> It may not be coincidence that the landscape in this area is marked by a profusion of dolmens, huge stone structures built in the Bronze Age (ca. 2000-200 BCE) as burial chambers. These dolmens are found throughout northeast China and Korea. Fig. 2 presents a dolmen in Shipengshan. Sarah Nelson writes:

The Chinese term is *shipeng*, stone huts, which indicates both their size and their construction with four upright stone slabs topped by a much larger capstone. Dolmens are most numerous in the Liaodong peninsula, where they tend to be large and well made, with polished stones rather than the raw slabs that characterize Korean dolmens. One dolmen near Yingkou, for example, was large enough to have been reused as a building. The interior is 2.8 by 2.6 m while the cover slab is 8.6 by 5.7 m. Dolmens are known as far north as Jilin province.<sup>②</sup>

The dolmen fields are densest in the Korean peninsula, where some 50,000 have been recorded. As Jangsuk Kim comments, “Dolmens were conspicuous monuments that were both physically and symbolically imprinted on the landscape.”<sup>③</sup>

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① Trans. Richard Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas*, 207; Rémi Mathieu (*Étude sur la mythologie et l’ethnologie de la Chine ancienne: Traduction annotée du Shanhai jing*, 1. 429 n. 8) notes that the Han state conquered and colonized northwest Korea (Gojoseon) in the late second century BCE.

② Sarah Milledge Nelson, “Introduction,” in *The Archaeology of Northeast China: Beyond the Great Wall*, ed. Nelson (London: Routledge, 1995), 16. See further Bai Yun Xiang, “Megalithic Monuments in the Northeast Area and Eastern Coast of China,” in *Meeting on Megalithic Culture: Comparing Prehistoric Ruins of the East and Europe* (Nara, Japan: ACCU, 2003), 41-53 ([www.nara.accu.or.jp/img/report/Internationalconference/i2002.pdf](http://www.nara.accu.or.jp/img/report/Internationalconference/i2002.pdf)).

③ Jangsuk Kim, “From Labour Control to Surplus Appropriation: Landscape Changes in the Neolithization of Southwestern Korea,” *Journal of World Prehistory* 27 (2014): 270.

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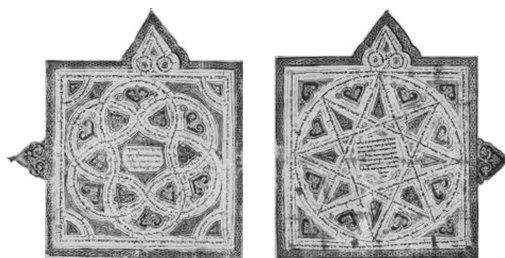
Fig. 2. Dolmen in Shipengshan 石棚山石棚, near Yingkou, Liaodong Peninsula, China.  
Note: The capstone is 8.6 m (28.2 ft.) long and 5.7 m (18.7 ft.) wide.

The connection between the landscape of megalithic structures in northeast China and Korea and the locale of the giants of the *Shanhaijing* is comparable to the link between megalithic structures in Israel and Transjordan and the locale of giants in the Bible. The dense dolmen fields in northern Israel and Transjordan, built during the Early Bronze age of the Levant (third millennium BCE), corresponds to the regions of Bashan, Ammon, and Moab, the territory of the Transjordanian Rephaim, Emim, and Zamzummim. The Bedouin call these stone structures “houses of the ghouls” (*biyūt el ghūl*). As Paul Karge and others have argued, these megalithic structures were likely viewed by Iron Age peoples as the remains of ancient giants.<sup>①</sup> Other huge stone structures in Israel — particularly the ruins of Middle Bronze Age cyclopean walls (ca. 2000-1550 BCE) in sites such as Hebron and Gath — were likely also instrumental to the biblical memory of giants in the land.

Fig. 3 is a photo of two dolmens near Amman, Jordan. One of the

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① Paul Karge, *Rephaim: Die vorgeschichtliche Kultur Palästinas und Phöniziens. Archäologische und religionsgeschichtliche Studien* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1917), 612-613.



dolmens is roughly the size of the bed of Og, one of the last of the Rephaim, which could be seen in biblical times at Rabbat-Ammon:

For only Og, king of Bashan, was left of the remnant of the Rephaim. Behold his bed — an iron bed — is it not in Rabbat of the children of Ammon? Nine cubits is its length and four cubits its width, according to the common cubit. (Deuteronomy 3:11)

The bed of this “remnant of the Rephaim” measures some 13.5 feet long and 6 feet wide. The capstone of the dolmen on the right (below) in Amman measures 12 feet long and 6 feet wide. It was razed during the expansion of Amman in the 1950’s, but it — or a dolmen like it — was likely regarded as a giant’s bed in biblical times.<sup>①</sup>

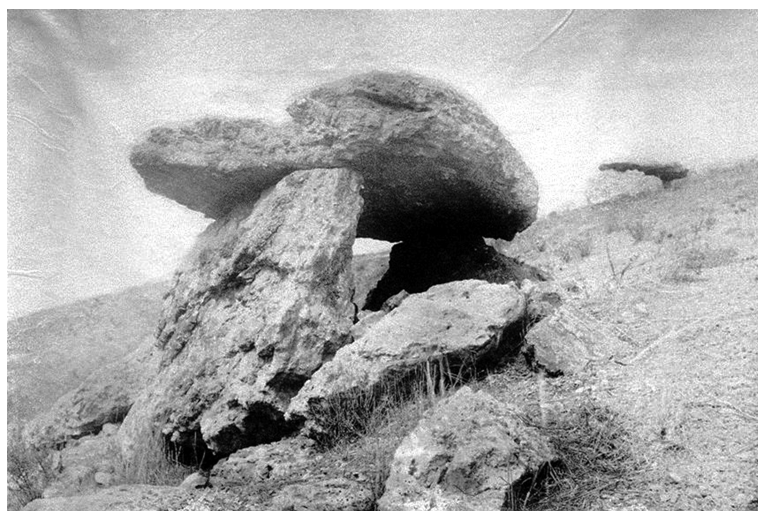


Fig. 3. Dolmens near Amman, Jordan.

Note: The capstone of the foreground dolmen is 8 ft. (2.4 m) square. The capstone of dolmen on the right is 12 ft. (3.7 m) long and 6 ft. (1.8 m) wide.

Source: Photo by A. M. Mantell, 1910, courtesy of the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF-P-4048).

<sup>①</sup> The description of Og’s bed as “iron” is a difficulty; one would expect stone or flint; see Ronald Hendel, “The Landscape of Memory: Giants and the Conquest of Canaan,” 280.

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Elsewhere, dolmens are often identified as giants' beds or tombs, for example German: *Riesenbetten*, *Hünenbetten*, or *Riesengräber*; Dutch: *hunebedden*; Swedish: *Jättegömmor*; and Italian (Sardinia): *Tombe dei Giganti*. In this respect, the dolmens are memory-stones, the works of giants.

In his study of the “legendary topography” (topographie légendaire) of the Holy Land, Maurice Halbwachs remarks that the landscape’s “visible facts are the symbols of invisible truths.”<sup>①</sup> Megaliths in China and the Levant, to premodern eyes, arguably signified the past existence of giants. Their works were striking features of the landscape. These stone structures point to mighty figures and forces of the past and present. Compared to them, the people may have seemed in their own eyes like grasshoppers, evoking emotions of wonder and fear.

## Conclusions

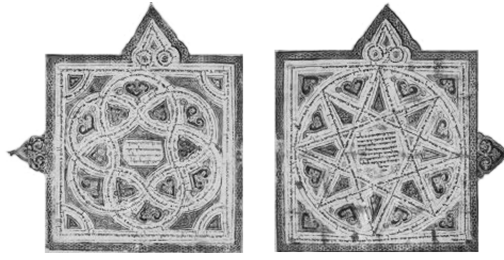
Mary Douglas emphasizes on anomalies in the task of cross-cultural comparison: “By focusing on how anomalous beings may be treated in different systems of classification, we make a frontal attack on the question of how thought, words and the real world are related.”<sup>②</sup> This task has global and particularistic aspects: we gain insight into how people across time and space connect up thought, word, and reality, and how particular peoples do this in local contexts. Anomalous creatures — for instance, pigs and giants in the Hebrew Bible — can be real or fictive, and their status is dependent on the background classification scheme. For instance, pigs are unclean within the class of land animals because they do not chew their cud (Leviticus 11:7), while giants are anomalous because they are hybrids of humans and gods (Genesis 6:4). In the *Shanhaijing*, giants and other exotic creatures are anomalous hybrids, “born with divine natures” and difficult to understand (6.1a).

By comparing the comparisons between humans and hybrids in these

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① Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 204.

② Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 282.



two cultures, we learn about each culture’s “typology of the strange.”<sup>①</sup> The political and religious ideologies behind these typologies are also illuminated: the imperial Mandate of Heaven in China and the temporally belated chosen people in Israel. The different perspectives on giants point to the importance of hybrid forms in each culture’s self-fashioning.

This type of perspectival anthropology also illuminates modern constellations of thought. We moderns tend to be skeptical of the existence of giants for a variety of reasons, including what Weber called the rationalizing process of “the disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) of the world.”<sup>②</sup> This process has analogues and precedents in ancient China and Israel. The founder of Chinese historiography, Sima Qian, wrote in his *Shiji* (ca. 100 BCE): “As for the strange beings illustrated in the ‘Basic Annals of Yü’ and in the *Shanhaijing*, I do not dare speak about them.”<sup>③</sup> As Nicola Di Cosmo comments, “This passage constitutes the most direct evidence of the historian’s quest for a non-mythological, observable, and empirically testable knowledge of foreign lands.”<sup>④</sup> On the biblical side, the allegorist Philo of Alexandria (1st cent. CE) maintained that the concept of giants in the Bible is meant non-literally: “He [Moses] uses this name analogically, when he wishes to indicate excessive size of body.”<sup>⑤</sup> Philo rationalizes the giants by redefining the terms, an exegetical move adopted by many interpreters in Jewish and Christian traditions.

Chinese interpreters also appealed to figurative language in order to maintain the veracity of the *Shanhaijing*’s hybrid creatures. As Strassberg observes, the scholar Bi Yuan (1730-1797) “argued that the book was not at all concerned with discussing the strange, for if the language were understood

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① See Trans. Richard Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas*, 43.

② H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 139-140.

③ Trans. Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 292.

④ Trans. Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History*, 292.

⑤ Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, ed. and trans. Ralph Marcus (LCL 380; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 60-61.

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figuratively, even the most fantastic descriptions could be seen to refer to actual creatures or foreign peoples.”<sup>①</sup> The category of the figural allows the classic text to preserve its truthful representation of reality.

In 1869 Theodor Noldeke took a step that these interpreters could not, describing the giants as fictional creatures of folklore: the giants “were for the Hebrews about the same as the Hunen for our people and the Joten for the Scandinavians.”<sup>②</sup> This perception of the biblical giants as fictive rests on a comparison with other giants, whose nature is shaped by the background category of folklore. This category, constructed in the mid-nineteenth century, has, as Dan Ben Amos observes, “a triad of attributes — traditionalism, irrationality, and rurality.”<sup>③</sup> For the modern scholar, giants are what other people believe, primarily peasants and premoderns. In the Folk-Studies Movement in China of the 1920’s and 30’s, scholars brought this perspective to bear on the *Shanhaijing*.<sup>④</sup> Here too, the conceptual and affective responses to anomalous creatures are determined by the local classificatory system.

For us moderns, the status of giants remains perspectival, but when we see them in our classic texts, they no longer look back at us. In a sense, our understanding of how thought, words, and worlds relate still includes their hybridity, marking a difference with others in space and time. The giants animate our cultural maps and genealogies, even as they no longer exist in the landscapes of the real world.

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① Trans. Richard Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas*, 25.

② Theodor Nöldeke, *Untersuchungen zur Kritik des alten Testaments* (Kiel: Schweser, 1869), 161; see also Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 1. 311-312.

③ Dan Ben Amos, “The Idea of Folklore: An Essay,” in *Folklore Concepts: Histories and Critiques* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 1.

④ Trans. Richard Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas*, 27-28.