

February 9, 2003
Marcellus of Sicily

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Caleb wanted to be, more than anything, a slayer of giants, and the giants he especially had in mind to slay were the Anakim. Who could blame him?

Caleb was not alone in his sentiments about the Anakim. This Semitic tribe of giants, living in the southern portion of the land of Canaan, was very familiar to its disgruntled neighbors. The Egyptians, for example, who knew all about the Anakim, certainly did not like them; they left us our earliest reference to these giants on an execration text from the dawn of the second millennium B.C. Such texts are inscriptions on shard pieces containing the names of Egypt's adversaries; those shards are fragments of pottery, originally inscribed with appropriate curses against enemies. Thus adorned, the pottery was ritually broken, to exorcise and annul, as it were, the military might of the foe. Well, sure enough, on one of those Egyptian shards there is a curse against "the ruler of Iy-'anaq" and his confederates.

These Anakim were the descendents of Arba, the father of Anak (Joshua 15:13). Arba is described as "the greatest man among the Anakim" (14:15). For this reason, their major city was named "the city of Arba," Kiriath-Arba (21:11). Although that same place was known to the Israelites as Hebron, to this day the Arabic name for it, Deir el-Arba'in, recalls the earlier Canaanite tradition.

Caleb knew the Anakim firsthand and up close. Representing the tribe of Judah, he was one of twelve spies whom Moses commissioned to investigate the Promised Land: "Go up the way into the Negev, and go up to the mountains, and see what the land is like" (Numbers 13:17-18). Since it was the time for the grape harvest, Moses exhorted the spies especially to bring back some of the land's vintage (13:20).

The latter, in fact, proved to be extraordinary: "Then they came to the Valley of Eshcol, and there cut down a branch with one cluster of grapes; they carried it between two of them on a pole" (13:23). With such evidence of the land's largesse, one would have thought that the Israelites could hardly wait to invade the place. Indeed, the report of the spies, who had investigated the land for forty days, was rather enthusiastic

with respect to its fertility: "It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit" (13:27).

Had this information been the only element in the report of the spies, Israel's invasion of the land might have begun at once. Unfortunately, however, ten of the twelve spies were simply overawed by the size the Anakim that the invaders would be obliged to fight: "Nevertheless, the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the descendents of Anak there. . . . We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we. . . . And we were like grasshoppers in their sight, and so we were in their sight" (13:28,31,33).

This report of the majority of the spies so discouraged the Israelites that "all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night" (14:1). There ensued the usual litany of Israelite complaints, like "If only we had died in the land of Egypt!" and "Why has the Lord brought us to land to die by the sword?" (14:2-3). Indeed, there even arose a movement to go back to the condition of slavery: "Let us select a leader and return to Egypt" (14:4). It became clear, in any event, that the case for invading Canaan enjoyed no popular support.

This report of the espionage delegation, and more especially the people's reaction to it, brought great distress to the delegation's only two members who dissented, Joshua and Caleb. In vain did these two exhort the Israelites to begin the invasion (13:30; 14:6-9). They were nearly stoned to death for their efforts (14:10).

Israel's infidelity in this matter would rankle Joshua and Caleb for decades to come, until at last, after the death of Moses, Joshua assumed command of a new generation of Israelites and accomplished what the Lord had commanded in the first place. Caleb was given the task of attacking and conquering the three sons of Anak: Ahinam, Sheshai, and Talmi (Joshua, 15:14; Judges 1:10), the very tribes that had earlier struck such fear in the hearts of his companions (Numbers 13:22). To his family was given the city of Kiriath-Arba, renamed Hebron. One suspects that Caleb insisted on this arrangement. He had a score to settle with those giants.

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