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Who Were the Sons of God in Genesis 6?

David Livingston

Suggested Meanings for the "Sons of God"

Who actually were the "sons of god?" Some say they were **fallen angels**. However, to have children, they must have been sexual beings, and angels are not. From Matthew 22:30 we may conclude they are neither male nor female. Furthermore, if the judgment of the Flood was against the "sons of god" and they were angels, they would actually have escaped it since they are spiritual beings.

Another interpretation is that they were the **sons of Seth**, the godly line. Could this be so? Could the godly line become so totally corrupt that they were responsible for the Flood? It is difficult to imagine believers becoming that corrupt.

The third possibility is that of rabbinical Jewish interpretation. It is that "sons of god" were **rulers or princes**. What follows will be very close to this. The first two explanations have become the popular ones and most people have never heard of this third possibility. Even when considered, it is dismissed as untenable (cf. Keil and Delitzsch's commentary on Genesis 6).

Perhaps a combination of the first and third is the best explanation. That is, that the "sons of the gods" may be *demon-possessed* rulers!

A New Interpretation

In 1962, Meredith Kline suggested a new interpretation in *The Westminster Theological Journal*. His thesis was that the "sons of the god" were tyrannical "divine" kings like those we know from historical times in the ancient Near East (www.ancientdays.net/nimrod.htm).

The fact that an historical theme so prominently treated in the Sumerian-Babylonian epic tradition finds no counterpart [or connection with] Genesis 3–6 according to standard [traditional] interpretations is itself good reason to suspect that these interpretations have been missing the point (Kline 1962: 199).

If Kline is correct, then the Genesis 6 reference may be to real men (rulers) coming onto history's stage with spurious claims to divinity in defiance of the authority of the Lord God. Instead of acknowledging His Lordship, they established their own authority as supreme head of a fabricated religio-politico system; then they held their subjects in gross spiritual darkness and abject physical slavery (www.ancientdays.net/opiate.htm). Each king, in his city-state (in historical times) claimed to be a "son of the patron god or goddess" (of his city or empire). In other words, he was the self-proclaimed representative of the local god on earth.

Thus, the king is divine, he is god, and manifested himself as such especially on the [New Year Festival](#). And *this is not the result of a long history of evolution, but goes back to the earliest times* (our emphasis; Engnell 1967: 18).

We see no reason why historically well-established post-Flood patterns cannot also explain pre-Flood conditions. Paralleling the biblical record we have well-known accounts like the Sumerian King List and the Gilgamesh Epic which speak both of pre- and post-Flood situations; but only the Bible has the detail and accuracy to give the true picture.

In tracing the development of such a system, [we see Cain first establishing a city-state](#) when he deliberately forsook *Yahweh* and went into a condition of wandering (Gn 4:12). The despotic pattern inherent in this system is seen in Lamech's polygamy and possible human sacrifice, all part of a humanly-established religious system. Historic parallels are again easily discernible in Genesis 10–11, with names of well-known post-Flood city-states listed. Then there is the account of the great rebellion at Babylon with the building of the first ziggurat or temple-tower, all part of a (post-Flood) re-established anti-*Yahweh* religion. At the very heart of this religion is a king claiming to be a "son of the gods."

To digress a moment, some may wonder, "Where did all the people come from by Cain's time for there to have been enough inhabitants to build a city?" To answer, we are not told how much time had transpired before Cain built a city; it could have been a long time. And, with an early "population explosion," there may have been thousands born in only 100–200 years. Someone may ask, "But where did Cain get his wife to start it all?" The

answer is that he married his sister. Adam and Eve had many children after Cain and Abel (Gn 5:4).

An excellent volume on ancient cities is that of Fustel de Coulange, *The Ancient City*. Although originally written in 1864, it has not become outdated. De Coulange says in regard to our topic,

With the ancients, a city was never formed by degrees, by the slow increase of men and houses. They founded a city all at once, all entire in a day...As soon as the families...had agreed to unite and have the same worship, they immediately founded the city as a sanctuary for this common worship, and thus *the foundation of a city was always a religious act* (our emphasis; 1956: 134).

This fact may well be the basis on which Cain founded the first city and on which many cities were subsequently founded until the Gospel came.

Divine Kingship

What is it? When did it start? How? Where? What are its chief characteristics? The study of divine kingship has been thorough and many insightful and helpful books and articles have been written (with only a few referred to here).

Perhaps there never were any gods without kings, or kings without gods. When we have discovered the origin of divine kingship we shall know, but at present we only know that *when history begins there are kings, the representatives of gods* (our emphasis; Hocart 1927: 7).

However, there may be more clues to the rise of divine kingship than the documents from earliest times contain. **Genesis 6 seems to indicate that kings were acting like gods before the beginning of history as we know it—before the beginning of Sumer.**

In considering divine kingship, it should be noted that “kingship” is not the same as “king,” the person; nor “kingdom,” the king’s domain (which includes people and property). “Kingship” is authority, *the authority to rule*. A problem in any political system is how to get this authority. In the USA we have a system based on consent by the governed. (This concept makes it difficult, incidentally, to understand the absolutism of the ancient system.) When one desires absolute authority, such as in the ancient Near East, he must get it by force or subterfuge, or a combination of both, which is the most usual method.

Thus, divine kingship *did not evolve*. It was fabricated— deliberately formulated— usually by a group of priest-nobles who supported one man in power.

Having said that, it follows that the purpose of myths, epics and literature on clay tablets, papyri, parchments, and monuments, have the fundamental purpose of establishing and maintaining the right-to-rule a certain area and people. Clever men (priest-nobles) manipulated the populace's religious instincts to cause them to follow and obey the local god's "son." He owned the people and land, in theory at least. And he acted either as god (in Egypt), or as his representative (in Mesopotamia and other cultures). When all the literature and monuments were used to glorify and exalt this man as the son, or representative, of god, **religion became the opiate (binder and blinder) of the people!** Manipulation of religion for political purposes began in Sumer, was picked up in Akkad (Old Babylon), revised with the same themes in Assyria and Neo-Babylonia, was enjoyed by Persian monarchs, captivated Alexander and his successors (Antiochus "Epiphanus" means "the revelation of god"), and was copied by Rome. (It is even found in Africa, the Far East, and the Americas.)

There would be nothing extraordinary in a worldwide diffusion of divine kingship: the doctrine evidently has exercised a great fascination over the human mind. Greece and Rome shook it off in their youth, but returned to it in their old age. When Alexander claimed to be the son of Zeus he was merely continuing, reviving, or borrowing from the East an ancient belief that the first-born of the king was really the son of a god who had assumed bodily form in order to lie with the Queen, a belief which was current in Egypt under the Early Dynasties of the Empire, if not earlier. The later Romans had to accept the divinity of kings with their empire...Having thus re-established their sway over Western Europe the divine kings of the world did not again surrender it except to another Divine King, a Spiritual King, incarnated once for all in order ever after to rule over the souls of men (Hocart 1927: 15-16).

This is most interesting when one recalls that Nebuchadnezzar (a "divine" emperor whose name may mean "Nebo has protected the succession-rights") had a vision in which kingdoms having divine kingship were finally smashed by the kingdom of Christ, the true King who was truly Divine (Dn 2).

How Divine Kingship Works

There are three principles basic to the function of "divine" kingship in the ancient Near East. They are essential to using religion for political control.

1. The king is divine. From the beginning of written history, the Sumerians, after (and even before) the Flood (see the Sumerian King List), considered the king to be divine.

The earliest known religion is a belief in the divinity of the kings. I do not say that it is necessarily the most primitive; but *in the earliest records known, man appears to us worshipping gods and their representative, namely kings* (our emphasis; Hocart 1927: 7).

To make religion really work for government, the person at the top has to assume divinity or semi-divinity.

2. The king has absolute power. He is above the law; he makes it and changes it as he pleases since he gets direct orders from "heaven." For instance,

We must not think that Hammurabi felt that he was bound by his code of laws. That code he received from the hand of the god Shamash for the establishment of justice in the empire, for the rulership of which he had been predestined from the foundation of the world. From the gods he had his scepter and to them alone he was responsible (Luckenbill 1924: 4).

3. Documents supporting the right to rule. There must be something like a "constitution." Written materials discovered by archaeologists are, to a great extent, documents related in some way to this "right" and its outworking in the kingdom.

Every individual, whether he realizes it or not, has the inclination to worship someone, even if it is only himself. If someone were able to trick a group of people into believing that the Creator had made *him* king as his "son" and get them to worship him, he could make the people his slaves. In the epic literature of the ancient Near East we frequently note that the hero has been chosen by the gods to rule. Actually, the literary texts (www.ancientdays.net/corancienttexts.htm) and monuments were fabricated to create this very impression on the people. In this literature the people were *created for the purpose of serving the gods and their emissaries!*

For instance in the *Enuma Elish* "creation" story, man was created from the blood of the gods (and clay), *in order to take care of the gods*. Georges Roux has this to say of its effect on Sumer:

Childish as this story might sound, it was loaded with grave significance for the Babylonians. To their deeply religious mind it offered a non-rational but nevertheless acceptable "explanation" of the universe. Among other things, it described how the world had assumed its alleged shape; it made good the fact that men must be the servants of the gods; it accounted for the natural wickedness of humanity, created from the blood of the evil god Kingu; it also justified the exorbitant power of Marduk (1966: 96).

Early man was not unintelligent. But, without God he was unscrupulous. The leaders may not have believed their superstitions, since they perpetrated them. The elite class deceived the working serfs and kept them in virtual slavery. There is really no way to know of the plight of the latter, for they were not taught to read and write. Most literature is found by archaeologists in the palace-temple complex of the ancient cities.

Thus, we suggest that the "shadowy" myths and legends of the ancient Near East are *deliberately* shadowy. They did not "evolve" as a sort of folklore. They were fabricated originally, copied and, in successive societies, revised and reused to retain control. These documents make up the "constitution" for the kingdom. They helped to maintain the palace and the temple in control, and included providing all the needs of the king, and the ruling class, as representative of the gods.

Scriptural Considerations

Reviewing the development of humanly devised religious systems in Scripture, we find them from the very beginning. A spirit of defiance of the Lord characteristic of these systems is seen in Cain's unworthy sacrifice and his murder of Abel, a true worshipper of *Yahweh*. Lamech continued in the spirit of Cain (and Gn 6:1-4) opposing the Sethites, who were the first to "call upon (worship) the name of *Yahweh*." (It is probably erroneous to think that Israel and the world first heard of *Yahweh* through Moses, as many imply in discussing Exodus 3:14 and 6:3.)

The genealogy of believers is listed in Genesis 5. What a contrast to the ungodly rebels of chapters 4 and 6! After the insertion of chapter 5, the narrative picks up again in chapter 6 with the cause of the Flood laid at the feet of the "sons of the gods."

Who will be saved? The worshippers of *Yahweh* and no others. And so the theme goes throughout the Old Testament (*Tanakh*) into the New Testament (*B'rit Hadashah*), when *Yahweh* comes among men as Jesus (*Yeshua*), and throughout history to this hour. The anti-*Yahweh*, anti-Christ men could

have come to the Lord and been saved too. But, they chose to defy Him and set up their own religio-politico system in opposition to Him.

Exposition of Genesis 6:1–5 in Light of “Divine” Kingship

“Sons of the Gods”

In Scripture, adherents of a religious system were called “sons.” For instance, the “sons of Hamor” in Genesis 33:19 must have belonged to a cult in which donkeys were sacrificed while making a covenant (Wright 1965: 131). E. Kautzsch in Gesenius’ *Hebrew Grammar* says,

ben denotes membership of a guild or society (or of a tribe, or any definite class). Thus *benei haelohim* (of Gn 6 and Job) properly means not “sons of god(s),” but beings of the class of *elohim* (1922: 418).

Many references are found in the Old Testament to “sons (followers) of the prophets.” Even in the New Testament, Paul called Timothy his “son” (or disciple). It may not, therefore, be out of line to suggest that a follower of a temple-order would be a “son” of the order (or “class,” as Kautzsch calls it), including the priest-king. But, in the latter’s case, he would be called “son of the god so and so...” For instance, the city of Ashur—which became the center of the Assyrian Empire—had a patron god also named Ashur. In the seventh century BC, the well-known Assyrian emperor, Ashurbanipal, came to power and took upon himself a name which means “Ashur Has Made a Son.”

Cities with their patron gods, then, developed a system that helps us understand the meaning of Genesis 6:2. Such a practice was so widespread that everyone reading this passage in ancient times would immediately understand what was meant. **The “sons of the gods” include all city-kings.** Or, it may be describing just one city’s typical religio-politico system, the king with the religious leaders.

Since the “sons of god” are temple adherents, the writer of Genesis is not necessarily calling them this in sarcasm. He is using the term in the oriental sense. However, **he did not mean that they were actually divine, only that they were adherents of another religious system.** On the other hand, believers were not called by this term in the Old Testament.

By this simple literary stroke the author at once caught the spirit of ancient paganism and suggested darkly the satanic shapes that formed the background of the human revolt against the King of Kings. For these “sons of

the god" were of all the seed of the serpent most like their father (Kline 1962: 192).

The Ziggurat at Ur.

Sacred Marriage

If "the sons of the gods" are despots pretending to be "divine" kings, then who are the "daughters of men?" Possibly the children of Seth, that is, "believers." Or, they may simply have been "men," common people, in contrast to "divine" kings. Likely this latter is the sense in which it is used since it describes well the practices of the ancient Near East. There tyrants took (or "snatched away") whoever they chose of the daughters of the common man. They were his "property."

The Hebrew word *laqach* means "to take, to grab and pull away." But the modern Hebrew meaning is simply "to marry." In Genesis 6, it likely means that the sons of the gods *forcibly* took the daughters of "men," whoever and whenever they chose. In the historical period, "divine" kings followed in their footsteps, for it is here we learn that the kings, in the name of their god-father, claimed to own all the people. Of course, this meant the women really belonged to him since he was "son of the creator."

A very early example of this is the epic hero Gilgamesh. The men of his city, Uruk, raged at him for ravishing their wives and daughters. We see the problem in Scripture when Sarah was taken from Abraham by the Egyptian Pharaoh (Gn 12:10–20). Abimelech of Gerar took Rachel from Jacob. The "prince" of Shechem took Dinah from Jacob. Later, Esther was chosen from among the most beautiful (illustrating that the ruler could have whatever women he wished). Even in Israel, the practice was picked up (although not by kings claiming to be divine). David took plural wives and ended with Abigail, the fairest in the land. Solomon then went "all out" in the kingly tradition of wife-getting and ruined Israel.

Another practice from historic times may have a bearing on the meaning of this. Once each year in Mesopotamia the New Year's Festival was celebrated.

Each city-state ensured the fertility of its own fields and the fecundity of its own people and cattle by means of a Sacred Marriage between its patron-god and one of its goddesses (Roux 1966: 90).

The king represented the god, and one of the most beautiful women in the land represented the goddess. In the "sacred" marriage the king represents Father God, or Heaven, and the woman represents Mother Earth being

fertilized. This is the heart of the fertility cult concept. (It may be difficult for 21st-century evangelicals to grasp the complete depravity of these ancient societies. Even the Apostle Paul did not want to elaborate on their shameful activities.) If the practices described above follows after the pre-Flood situation, and it bears a remarkable resemblance, then it will help us to realize that this idolizing of immorality, brought on by complete rebellion against the Lord, and made the Flood necessary to cleanse the earth.

"Flesh"...Not Gods

Further confirmation that Genesis 6 refers to *human* tyrants, "divine" kings, is seen in the way the Lord refers to them in verse 3. They are "flesh." The Hebrew word is *basar*, and is used today for meat hanging on a hook in the meat market—just plain, perishable flesh. To *Yahweh* there is nothing at all divine about these "sons of the gods." They have only *assumed* divinity to themselves, and have corrupted all mankind by directing the worship He deserves to their own foul selves. Thus, He will not "strive" any more to correct them. The decision has been made—obliterate them! (cf. Ez 28:2; www.ancientdays.net/universalflood.htm).

"Fallen Giants"

"Giants" in verse 4 may mean tall men. The word *niphal* refers sometimes in Scripture to men of large stature. But it also means "to fall." It may have a double meaning here—tall men who have fallen from *Yahweh's* favor, men who sin *grossly*.

"Tyrants"

"Mighty men" are such in the sense of tyranny. *Gibborim* has that meaning. These were men who "made a name for themselves." That is, men renowned for their infamy and "idolized" for it. (We can see a revival of this rebellious way in Genesis 11:4, "let us make us a name.") On the other hand, a true believer should "humble himself under the mighty hand of God who will exalt him [make him a name] in due time" (1 Pt 5:6).

"Corruption"

Verse 5 refers to the total state of corruption this whole system brings on. It should not be a new paragraph in Scripture. When men make a god in their own image and then worship that god, "every imagination and thought of the heart is only evil continually!" A vicious cycle of degeneration carries men downward. Man's highest worship becomes that of his lowest nature. The gods act worse than men. People caught in a culture of this kind cannot

escape. They cannot worship *Yahweh* there. For Abraham to do so, he had to come out of Ur and live as a nomad with his family. Lot tried to live in the city-state of Sodom, but lost his family. Sodom was dedicated to homosexuality.

If believers were to worship the Lord they would have to live as nomads. That explains why He gave them a special land and told them to exterminate the inhabitants when they finally settled there. To follow their ways would bring certain destruction. And so it is to this hour. Paul tells us today, "Wherefore, come out from among them and be ye separate [to the Lord]" (2 Cor 6:17).

Salvation!

Verses 1–8 are a unit, with the conclusion that only one man found grace in the eyes of the living, true God—Noah. Many ask, "How could a loving God destroy all mankind?" The answer is that His love is shown *in that He saved anyone at all!* They all deserved to die for their sins, including Noah. But he and his family were spared by the *grace and love of God*, and were used of God to reinstitute the race. Tragically, after some time, corruption again enveloped mankind and God had to tell Abraham to get out of Ur to save his own family. With Abraham—one faithful man and his family—God started over again to develop a faithful people.

Some Concluding Thoughts

1. Ancient rulers used religion as an "opiate."
2. "To be as god" is the original temptation to sin. It is the great desire of Satan and men. They will do anything to try to attain it, even to deifying themselves while defying God.
3. Pre-Flood patterns were reinstated as outlined in Genesis 10–11. Ham and his descendants were apparently the most responsible. We find the theme of "divine kingship" wherever his sons go.
4. The unseen "city of God" is the ultimate destination for believers. (Heb 11:9–10; 12:28; Rv 21:2–4.)
5. God's program is centered in the family where He is worshipped. The church is like an enlarged family.

Note

1. This article was published by Dr. Livingston in *Bible and Spade* 22 (2008): 34–40, and posted on his website at www.ancientdays.net/sonsofgod.htm. Scripture quotations are from the King James Version. For additional resources, see Leroy Birney, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Winter 1970; Manfred Kober, *The Baptist Bulletin*, March 1974; and Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University Press, 1948).

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