

Identifying the “Sons of God” in Genesis 6 Commentary of Kenneth Matthews (vol 1, pp 323-332)

6:2 The identity of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” is the major interpretive obstacle, though the whole passage is replete with problems that are interdependent. Who are the “sons of God” and “daughters of men”? What was the nature of their actions (v. 2)? What was God’s response (v. 3)? Who are the “Nephilim” and “Gibborim” (v. 4)? It is necessary to explore in some depth the meaning of these cryptic appellations if we are to understand how such marriages led to the wickedness antedating the flood and what this means for the author’s thesis in chaps. 1–11.

Many critical scholars view 6:1–4 as a remnant of an old myth, or at least originally mythic in form and function, historicized by the Yahwist (J) or a later editor. “Sons of God” is a common expression for the council of the gods in Canaanite usage (*bn ’lm*). This expression and related ones, describing the assembly of the lesser deities under the chief god El, are well attested in Ugaritic texts and in Phoenician and Ammonite inscriptions. Antiquity, it is argued, is full of stories in which deities mate with beautiful women by force or persuasion, giving birth to demigods. Originally, it is contended, the intent of the tale was to explain the beginnings of a race of giants.⁸³

If this were the case with 6:1–4, we must fault the enigmatic Yahwist (J) for his poor efforts at camouflaging the mythic element. More likely, as we find in the creation narrative (1:1–2:3) and the Tower of Babel (11:1–9), vv. 1–4 are a refutation of pagan stories that told of a race of superhuman giants. Ancient memory rightly reflected the distant past when fierce tyrants ruled the day, but the author of Genesis by relating the Nephilim to the wickedness of the times and their ensuing judgment showed that they were altogether mortal, not at all superhuman, and subject to the judgment of God.⁸⁴ The biblical author not only “set the record straight” but also used it as testimony condemning the wicked generation, which deserved the cataclysmic flood to follow.

Historically, three opinions have won a significant following for identifying the “sons of God”: (1) angels, (2) human judges or rulers, and (3) the descendants of Seth. More recently some have suggested that this baffling epithet refers to royal despots, similar to the second view. Others have taken a combination of the angel and human views in which the human despots are demoniacs possessed by fallen angels.⁸⁵ Still others, who attribute 6:1–4 to pagan sources, argue that the “sons of God” are the lesser gods of the Canaanite pantheon.⁸⁶ These disparate views hold an essential tenet in common: the narrative tells how human conduct transgressed divinely established boundaries.⁸⁷ Precisely how this occurred is the problem the expositor faces.

1. As angelic, celestial beings, the “sons of God” (*bēnê hā’ēlōhîm*) defied God by moving outside their appointed realm and marrying (molesting?) human “daughters.”⁸⁸ In this interpretation *’ēlōhîm* is taken as a proper noun (“God”) or as a genitive of attribute (indicating quality), where it refers to a class of beings, giving the sense of “divine beings.” In this latter sense it means they are of the realm of the heavenly (angels) in contrast to the “daughters of men,” whose realm is terrestrial. As the argument runs, their unnatural sexual union (*contra* 2:24) produced the “Nephilim,” whose notorious deeds (v. 4) required the strongest of penalties (v. 5). Proponents of this view can boast that it is the oldest opinion known, since it was advocated among the Jews at least by the second century B.C. as indicated by *1 Enoch* 6–11.

Early Christian writers also advocated the angel view. The influence of Enoch is found among Christian authors of the east until the third century and among Latin authors to Ambrose.

The strength of this traditional opinion lies in the use of this phrase elsewhere in referring to angelic hosts in God's heavenly court. Moreover, since *hā'ādām* ("men") occurs in v. 1 as a reference to collective mankind, we can expect the same meaning in v. 2, where it occurs for the "daughters of men." This indicates, according to this view, that there is a contrast intended between the "daughters of men," which refers to human women, and the "sons of God" who are of the divine sphere, namely, angels. Additionally, as noted earlier, there is evidence of an ancient memory among pagan peoples that celestial beings had cohabited with humans. For example, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* depicts the goddess Ishtar proposing marriage to Gilgamesh (who himself is semidivine). Thus in this view, the Hebrew account corrects the false notion that there was in antiquity a superhuman race of semidivine beings and shows that the culprits were not gods but degenerate angels whose offspring were merely sinful "men [flesh] of renown," subject to the same destruction of God's moral outrage as any mortal human. Christian proponents of the angel interpretation also appeal to the New Testament, where it is contended that the apostles allude to Gen 6:1–4 in referring to fallen angels (1 Pet 3:19–20; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6). These "angels" are imprisoned awaiting the day of God's judgment because they "did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home" (Jude 6). If this is the case, then the New Testament writers were in agreement with the Jewish opinion as reflected by *1 Enoch*.

However, taking the "sons of God" as angels has its drawbacks. Contextually, there has been no identification of an angelic host, at least in the sense of a heavenly court, in the account to this point. Moreover, from beginning to end 6:1–8 concerns humanity and its outcome, not angels and their punishment. The flood is God's judgment against "man" (vv. 3, 5–7), and there is no reference to the culpability of angels. Also it is difficult to reckon this view with procreation as a power bestowed by God upon the terrestrial order of animals and humanity (1:22, 28). There is no biblical evidence elsewhere that procreation is a trait of the heavenly hosts, although admittedly angels take on other human properties (cf. 18:1–2, 8 with 19:1, 5). Yet even here there is significant difference between holy angels who acquire the ability to eat and rebellious angels who acquire sexual properties. By what line of reason does one propose that the fallen condition of angels somehow results in the exercise of corporeal procreation? Angels are spiritual beings, not corporeal (Heb 1:7, 14). Also Jesus, when distinguishing earthly life from that of heaven, asserts that angels do not have sexual relations as humans and implies they are not sexual (Matt 22:30 pars.). This differs remarkably from the pagan perception of supernatural beings.

Moreover, the New Testament evidence presented for this interpretation is complicated by its exegetical obscurity and its uncertain relationship to Jewish pseudepigrapha, especially *1 Enoch* (1 Pet 3:19–20; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6, 14–15). *First Enoch* 1–36 tells of Enoch's journeys following his translation (Gen 5:24). He is commissioned to forewarn the fallen angels who had sinned by cohabitation with human women (Gen 6:1–4); afterward the book recounts his universal travels, including his visit to the abyss, where he sees the imprisoned angels, detained until the final judgment. It is apparent to anyone familiar with Jewish apocryphal literature that this interpretation of Gen 6:1–4 reflected in *1 Enoch* was widespread. Many commentators assume that Peter's readers were familiar with this interpretation and that the apostle either alluded to *1 Enoch* or he himself subscribed to the angel view in showing that the resurrected Christ, not Enoch, was Lord over evil and would triumph over hostile powers, including spiritual forces (1 Pet 3:19–20).

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Among several alternatives to this interpretation, however, is the view that Christ “in spirit” preached repentance through Noah (2 Pet 2:5) to the *human* generation of the flood during the building of the ark. This human audience was alive then but now is confined to prison, awaiting judgment. This is likened to 1 Pet 4:6, which says “the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead,” meaning those who heard when alive but now are dead. None of the New Testament passages identifies the sin of the angels (“spirits,” 1 Pet 3:19), and there is no detail, such as marriage or bearing children, that ties the passage with 6:1–4. Since the New Testament line of evidence remains unclear, it cannot have undue influence in our reading of the Genesis account.

2. Alternatively, Jewish interpreters have understood the “sons of God” as human judges or rulers (aristocrats). The word *’ēlōhîm* has broader usage than the common meanings “God” and “divine.” There is ample evidence for taking *’ēlōhîm* as human “judges” in the Old Testament. Psalm 82:1, 6–7 speaks of human rulers as *’ēlōhîm* (82:6a), and, more importantly, the parallel member (82:6b) refers to them as “the sons of the Most High” (*bēnê ’elyôn*), a description analogous to *bēnê hā’ēlōhîm* in Gen 6:2. The psalmist, as in Gen 6:3, stresses the mortality of the judges despite their lofty assignment. In this view the Nephilim (v. 4) are not regarded the children of their marriages but were their contemporaries.

A variant of this view interprets *bēnê hā’ēlōhîm* as a class of polygamous warriors or despotic kings who acquired large royal harems by coercion (rape?). They fathered the “Nephilim” and “the heroes of old” (i.e., “Gibborim,” 6:4) who were infamous for their cruel tyranny. “Sons of God,” in this view, reflects the ancient Near Eastern conception of sacral kingship in which monarchs were believed to be deities or divine sons who ruled in behalf of the gods. In the Ugaritic myth of King Keret, for example, Keret is identified as “the son of El” (*bn ’il*). As stated earlier, Hebrew tradition as well understood that divine rule was carried out by appointed (human) magistrates. Related to this is the biblical motif of royal “sonship” in Davidic theology (2 Sam 7:13–16; Pss 2:7; 89:27). Thus it is contended that *bēnê hā’ēlōhîm* is best rendered “the sons of the gods,” a reference to antediluvian kings whom the ancients believed were divine.

Moreover, it is argued that the account of Cain’s dynasty (4:17–24), especially Lamech, is the proper background for 6:1. With Cain’s lineage we have the origins of city organization, polygamy, and violent tyranny. Thus 6:1–8 describes how this emerging Cainite kingship achieved its evil endeavors and God’s judgment. In essence the “sons of God” refers to the Cainites. The Sumero-Akkadian tradition presents a cultural parallel: *Atrahasis* prefaces the flood by describing the origins of divine kingship in association with the founding of urban life. Genesis does the same in 6:1–4, which prepares the reader for the ensuing flood story.

Although this interpretation avoids the obvious problems created by the angel view, it fails to square with the contextual requirements since the larger passage does not speak of kingship. Though individual kings were referred to as “son of God,” no evidence can be marshaled for groups of kings in the ancient Near East bearing the name “sons of the gods.” The idea of polygamy derived from the phrase “any of them they chose” is only inferential at best. Also there is no sense that coercion is taking place. The NIV rightly renders *lāqah* (“took”) as “married” since the term is the common Hebrew expression for wedlock.

3. Church Fathers, such as Augustine, as well as the Reformers (Luther, Calvin) interpreted the “sons of God” as a reference to “godly men,” that is, the righteous lineage of Seth. Although this view has its share of difficulties, we find that it is the most attractive. We already have shown how chaps. 4 and 5 contrast the two lines of descent from Adam—the Cainites and Sethites. Genesis 6:1–8 relates how the two lines intermarry, resulting in a community of unprecedented wickedness. The flood account, we have shown, is actually embedded within the Sethite genealogy, which is not completed until the notice of Noah’s death (9:29). This provides the appropriate interpretive key for understanding 6:1–8. During this period of amazing Sethite expansion (chap. 5), the Sethite family marries outside its godly heritage, which results in moral decline.

Ēlōhîm can be rendered as a genitive of quality, meaning “godly sons,” referring to the heritage of the Sethites. We already observed that *bēnê hā`ēlōhîm* has analogues pointing to human referents. Also important is the weight of the Pentateuch’s testimony, which identifies the Israelites as the children of God (e.g., Deut 14:1; 32:5–6; cf. Exod 4:2; Pss 73:15; 80:15); this resonates well with taking the “sons of God” in 6:2 as an allusion to godly (covenant) offspring (cf. also Isa 43:6; Hos 1:10; 11:1; John 1:12–13). It has been charged that such a reading is inappropriate before the founding of Israel, since there is no designated people of God. However, this disregards the author’s efforts at connecting the prepatriarchal fathers (chaps. 1–11) and the founders of Israel (chaps. 12–50). Genesis typically invites Israel to see itself in the events of their parents by employing the language and imagery of institutional life and of events later experienced by Israel. Mosaic law codified the prohibition against marriage outside the covenant community; Genesis illustrates how religious intermarriage resulted in calamity for the righteous (e.g., 28:1; 34:1ff.; 38:1ff.).

Although we have said that the “sons of God” refers to the Sethites, we do not insist that the “daughters of men” (*bēnôt hā`ādām*) refers exclusively to Cainite women. Verse 1 speaks of human procreation in general by the collective use of “men” (*hā`ādām*), meaning “people,” as in 5:1b–2 (cf. 6:5). “Daughters of men,” then, in v. 2 again refers to women regardless of parentage, but among these “daughters” are the offspring of Cain. “Any of them they chose” accentuates the Sethites’ crime of inclusiveness. Their unrestricted license accelerated the degeneracy of the whole human family. The patriarchs traditionally married within their family (endogamy). Instructions in the Mosaic community prohibited intermarriage with Canaanite neighbors (e.g., Exod 34:16; Deut 7:3), and special regulations carefully governed foreign marriages (e.g., Deut 23:7–8; cf. 25:17–19). Moses’ generation had tasted the bitter fruit of foreign entanglements, which resulted in their seduction into sinful practices (e.g., Num 25). Old Testament history illustrates all too well how interreligious unions spelled disaster for Israel. This Sethite incident of intermarriage with the ungodly leads to the deterioration of the godly family; as a forewarning it alerts the holy seed of Israel not to neglect God’s prohibition.

The actions of the “sons of God” are described in language reminiscent of Eve’s sin (3:6): she “saw” (*rā`ā*) that the fruit was “good” (*tôb*; here, NIV’s “beautiful”) and “took” (*lāqah*, NIV’s “married”). While no sin or condemnation is specified in the text, the allusion to the garden rebellion suggests that the marriages are in some way tainted. As we already noted, there is no indication of sexual molestation since the common idiom for marriage occurs here. Silence on the part of the “daughters” may well reflect a willing complicity.

“Any of them they chose” does not necessarily mean polygamy. Diversity may be intended here; the “sons of God” selected wives from any family, including Cainite women. If so, the godly lineage exercised a freedom that goes afoul when they embrace the unrighteous. Although

not explicitly stated in Genesis as a prohibition, there is much that is embryonic in Genesis but stated explicitly in Mosaic command (e.g., “clean” and “unclean,” 7:2). Later Israel could well have read this incident in light of Mosaic restrictions concerning intermarriage with the non-Israelites. Since 6:2 deliberately echoes the garden temptation, perhaps this expression reflects the sinister trap of the serpent in 3:1. There the serpent challenges God’s veracity regarding the freedom of the woman to eat from any tree (as in 2:16). As a consequence of believing the snake, she rebels by unlawfully choosing the forbidden fruit. Similarly, these “sons of God” stumble by choosing wives from the forbidden lineage.

Although we commend the Sethites as the “sons of God,” no view escapes troubling criticism. The mysterious identity of the “sons of God” continues to humble the expositor.

FOOTNOTES

80 “Niphilim” and “Gibborim” are transliterations; the NIV agrees with many English Versions by transliterating the former but translating גִּבּוֹרִים “heroes” (as English Versions; so NASB’s “mighty men”).

82 For the “assembly of the gods,” Ug. sources have the diverse expressions *phr bn ’ilm*, *phr ’ilm*, *mphrt bn ’il*, and *dr bn ’il*. El is identified as the “father of the sons of El” (*’ab bn ’il*).

83 E.g., von Rad comments that the original story was “to account aetiologically for the origin of heroes from such marriages” (*Genesis*, 115). But we might raise the objection why, if such an obviously mythic element, it would have been appropriated by the Hebrew author? An etiological explanation does not satisfy the contents of the whole paragraph (6:1–4).

84 E.g., Cassuto, who considers 6:1–4 the Torah’s explanation for the origins of the Nephilim in Canaan (Num 13) and a response to the pagan stories that spoke of giants (*Genesis*, 299–300). Sarna comments that the original story is shaped by the biblical author “to combat polytheistic mythology” (*Genesis*, 45). R. Maars, while accepting its pagan origins, concludes that the story was adapted by the biblical author to demonstrate that Yahweh controlled all creation, including the divine realm, and that the semidivine Nephilim were no threat to his rule (“The Sons of God [Genesis 6:1–4],” *ResQ* 23 [1980]: 220).

85 E.g., F. Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1888), 226; A. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 182.

86 E.g., B. S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1960), 49.

87 Westermann observes that the purpose of 6:1–4 (and 11:1–9) “is to describe the overpowering force of human passion that brings people to overstep the limits set for them” (*Genesis I–II*, 381–82).

88 W. A. van Gemeren presents a detailed exegetical study defending the traditional “angel” view in “The Sons of God in Genesis 6:1–4: (An Example of Evangelical Demythologization?),” *WTJ* 43 (1981): 320–48.