

Who Are The “Sons of God” in Genesis 6:1-4?

Introduction

The identity of the “Sons of God” in the sixth chapter of Genesis is and always has been, as one OT writer has put it, “the subject of a longstanding debate among biblical scholars.”¹ Whichever view is taken of them, it cannot be doubted that even amid the extraordinary stories in Genesis 1-11, the first four verses of Genesis 6 are extremely enigmatic.

Why does the human author (Moses) use this term the “Sons of God”? Who are the “*Nephilim*” of v. 4? How is one to relate vv. 1-4 with the following pronouncement of judgment in the Flood? W.H. Gispen has said that the key to the understanding of these verses “lies in the contrast between “the Sons of God” and the “daughters of man.”² We agree with this statement.

In this essay we will give our personal opinion and explanation; but before we do, we will briefly outline the 3 main interpretations given for the passage. We shall then proceed to give reasons for our rejection of 2 of the 3 views. After this our preferred interpretation will be set down. We shall give our responses to the objections which are raised against it in the body of the essay.

A. The Different Viewpoints:

1. The “Sons of God” are angels/spirits.

Advocates include: G. Wenham³, Wood, Kalisch, Unger, Van Gemeren, Sauer, Yates, and Clines⁴.

Fallen angels/angelic beings cohabited with humans. These angelic beings made marriages with the fairest of the women. Their offspring are the nephilim/giants of v. 4.

2. They are Sethites.

Advocates: Calvin, Luther, Poole, Keil, Lange, J. Murray, Aalders, Sailhamer, Green, Scofield, and Scroggie.

What is involved is the mixing of the godly Sethite line with the ungodly line of Cain. This polluting of the line of the promised seed (which Balaam also later encouraged) is what provoked God to call for the Flood.

3. They are Princely Rulers/Dynastic Rulers.

Advocates: Kline, Millard, and Dexinger.

Men of noble birth or princely genealogy married below themselves. The *bene ha elohim* were “sons of the gods”, a term used of kings in extra-biblical sources⁵.

Because these verses are so cryptic, it is only wise to keep in mind the fact that everyone will

never, at least in this life, agree to the same interpretation. For ourselves, though, we think one view is stronger than the others, but we do not believe that the interpretation of this passage is one which we should expend vast amounts of energy trying to persuade others about or bringing others over to our view. Before we discuss it however, we give our reasons for not accepting the other explanations.

B. Brief Reasons for Rejecting View 3 - Dynastic Rulers.

- Our first reason for not accepting this view is that it relies too much upon extra-biblical data. The answer must either be in Scripture itself or else, we believe, it is lost to us.
- Why should the circumstance of kings marrying below their rank and station provoke God to flood the earth?⁶
- The expression the “Sons of God” is not used to describe kingly rulers anywhere else in Scripture.
- As Van Gemeren says concerning the contrast with “the daughters of men”, *adam* “denotes mankind generically-Hebrew grammar dictates that the daughters of man refer to the female offspring, regardless of the family relationship.”⁷
- Nowhere do we find a group or groups of kings and princes called “God’s sons”. We only see David’s son called by God “...my son” in 2 Samuel 7:14⁸.

C. Brief Reasons For Rejecting View 2 - Sethites.

- This is not what first suggests itself to the reader who has just finished reading chapter 5. This admission is made by both Keil⁹ and Murray.¹⁰
- In the delineation of the Sethite line in Genesis 5, we read repeatedly “he begat sons *and daughters*.” Contextually, if the “daughters of men” belong not to mankind but a specific group or line, that line must be that of Seth, not the line of Cain.
- Again, nowhere in the OT does the term “Sons of God” refer to an elect group of men. We agree with Van Gemeren that “the expression *bene ha elohim* is elsewhere a technical term referring to angels.”¹¹
- We believe that there is no exegetical foundation for making the word “men” in Genesis 6:1 generic while making it particular in v. 2. Surely this is a case of special pleading¹².
- What reason is there in assuming that: (1) the Sethite men married the Cainite women because of their beauty? and, (2) that there were no beautiful Sethite women to marry?
- There must be a connection between vv. 2 and 4: i.e. “the Sons of God”, the “daughters of men”, and the “*Nephilim*”, otherwise v. 4 “stands by itself”¹³.
- If Moses wanted to distinguish between the Sethite line of men and the Cainite women why did he not just say so? G. Wenham comments incisively “The alternative interpretation presupposes that what Genesis 6 really meant was that ‘the sons of some men’ married ‘the daughters of other men’. The present phrase ‘sons of God’ is, to say the least, an obscure way of expressing such an idea.”¹⁴ Moreover we could go further to ask “If God knew He would employ the term “the

Sons of God” in all other instances in the OT to refer to angels, why did He not use a different term here?”

- There is no prohibition of marriage between Cainites and Sethites. This is only assumed.
- It does not seem sufficient reason to bring the Flood¹⁵. Surely all the Cainites were not as wicked as Cain or Lamech? And were all the Sethites as godly as Seth and Enos? We know they were not.
- How can this view properly explain the “*Nephilim*” of Genesis 6:4 and Numbers 13:33? Rather, it isolates v. 4 from its context.

We believe that neither of the above viewpoints deal adequately with the contrast between the “Sons of God” and the “daughters of men”. In fact, after reading Murray’s arguments¹⁶ this writer feels compelled to ask with Willem Van Gemeren, “Is it possible that theology has taken the place of exegesis?”¹⁷

D. Our Preferred Interpretation: View 2 - Fallen Angels.

This interpretation is the oldest of the three¹⁸. Even if we are at risk of being associated with “that ancient figment” (Calvin), which is an “erroneous view” (Leupold) we are still persuaded that this view represents the intention of the Author of Scripture. We hold to the interpretation which identifies these “Sons of God” with fallen angels for the following basic reasons:

- The first reason is the designation of the “Sons of God” as angelic beings in Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7¹⁹. In Job 1 and 2, Satan is seen among them, which may indicate that they were not all ‘elect’ angels - though we do not press this point. These are the only other places in Scripture where the “Sons of God” appear.
- The LXX also lends it support in its reading at Deuteronomy 32:8, and is supported in this by a Qumran fragment.
- It is perfectly possible that Moses knew the story of Job. This would explain why he introduces the “Sons of God” so abruptly²⁰. Perhaps *bene ha elohim* was a synonymous term for angels?
- The identification serves to give us an adequate explanation of God’s drastic judgment in the Flood. The ‘godly’ Sethites have been mentioned in the fifth chapter. Something then is needed to explain the Deluge. The very brevity of the account convinces us that something utterly wicked and supernatural occurred. Satan was attempting to destroy the promised seed - perhaps provoking God to destroy all flesh on the earth? Such a nightmare vision of demonic wickedness in the world would necessitate a complete and thorough overturning and cleansing of the primordial ecology; hence, the Flood.
- It more adequately explains the “*Nephilim*” of v. 4. That they were still around after the Flood (cf. Gen. 6:4 with Num. 13:33) and perhaps were ancestors of the Emims and Zanzumims (Deut. 2:20) is mysterious to say the least. But we ought not to dismiss it because God has not seen fit to tell us more.
- There is a definite contrast made between the “Sons of God” and the “daughters of men”. This view is the only view which respects the contrast. In Genesis 6:1-2 the word *adam* surely cannot mean daughters of *mankind* one time and daughters

of *Cain* straight after²¹. And in reference to the “Sons of God” Van Gemeren quotes the respected Jewish scholar U. Cassuto who said “...an examination of the structure of the verses before us and of the usages of the Hebrew tongue make it evident that *bene ha elohim* can only mean angels.”²² Again quoting Van Gemeren, “Since the phrase (*adam* “man” 6:1-2) denotes mankind generically, Hebrew grammar dictates that ‘daughters of *man*’ refer to the female offspring, regardless of the family relationship. Any interpretation of *bene ha elohim* short of divine beings does not satisfactorily appreciate ‘balance contrast’ of these verses.”²³

- To cite Gordon Wenham, “Genesis is using the phrase in a similar sense to Ugaritic literature.”²⁴ The use one makes of this data is dependent upon one’s theological stance. While conservatives like Unger and Pember²⁵ believe that ancient stories contain within them remnants of the truth expressed in Genesis, more critical scholars, such as Speiser or Driver²⁶ assert that the author of this portion of the book is adapting myth to his own purposes²⁷. Conservative Christians may ask, “If stories of the Flood survive in ancient extra-biblical texts, why shouldn’t these myths about gods seeking sexual relationships with human women reflect a similar biblical truth?”
- It is the view which most readily asserts itself upon the reader. The striking contrasts involved; the cross-references to Job, etc., “does appear to lend support to the view that ‘the sons of God’ are non-human.”²⁸
- It is often protested on the basis of Matthew 22:30 that angels can not, or are specifically said not to indulge in sexual acts. We reply by simply pointing out that everywhere an angel appears in Scripture it appears as a man (See Daniel 9:221; Acts 10:3,4; Rev. 21:17). This would make sexual acts amongst them (and marriage) prohibitive, but perhaps not with women?
- The Lord easily prevented the seed of promise from being corrupted at Baalpeor. He could have done the same thing in Genesis 6 if all it was was a precursor to Balaam’s scheme. It just does not seem believable that God would destroy “all flesh” because of something so similar to what later happened in Numbers 25:1-9.
- Finally, Murray says that the phrase in v. 2 “is the common Old Testament expression for marriage.”²⁹ But Victor P. Hamilton³⁰ has shown that there are places where it refers to polygamy or “potential adultery” (e.g. 2 Sam. 11:4).

Conclusion:

For these reasons then, we come down on the side of the fallen angels explanation. We are not saying this position is free from difficulty, but it impresses us as the best solution. It also may help in explaining Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:4, though a relationship is far from clear³¹.

Afterthought: The Angels of Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:4

From Jude 6 (and 2 Pet. 2:4) we learn about some angels “which kept not their first estate”. These fallen angels are said to be confined “in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.” We do not think (unlike Grudem), that those verses can be applied to demons. We believe, rather, that they refer to a set of angels who sinned in a particularly

egregious way. Perhaps they are those “Sons of God” in Genesis 6 who cohabited with “the daughters of men”? We think this is the most likely explanation because Jude says that some angels “left their own habitation”, and Peter places their sin prior to the time of Noah.

¹ Sailhamer, *Expositional Biblical Commentary Vol. 2*, p. 78.

² Gispén quoted by Van Gemeren, *WTJ Vol. 43 No. 2*, p. 336.

³ Wenham much prefers the rendering “spirits” to “angels” (*WBC I*, p. 140), but as the “Sons of God” in Job *are* angels, there seems little point in the change.

⁴ Clines combines the “angelic” interpretation and the “Dynastic Rulers” view. He suggests the “Sons of God” were both angelic and human. cf. Wenham, p. 140, and Hamilton (*Genesis 1-17 NICOT*) p. 264.

⁵ Kidner does not even acknowledge this view in his comments upon the passage. He appears to favor the “angelic” view. Both Calvin and Poole discuss and reject the view.

⁶ M. Poole, *Commentary Vol. 1*, p. 16.

⁷ Van Gemeren, p. 340.

⁸ cf. Hamilton, p. 264.

⁹ Keil cited by Van Gemeren, p. 341.

¹⁰ Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, p. 244. See also Van Gemeren, p. 339, no. 52.

¹¹ Van Gemeren, p. 341.

¹² See Point iv under “Reasons For Rejecting View 3” above.

¹³ Van Gemeren referring to Kline’s opinion, p. 336.

¹⁴ Wenham, p. 139.

¹⁵ Sailhamer, p. 78, says Genesis 6:2 “...does not point to a particularly horrendous act.”

Whereas the corruption of the human race through fallen angels provides a cogent explanation

¹⁶ Murray. See especially pp. 244 and 246.

¹⁷ Van Gemeren, p. 320

¹⁸ cf. Sailhamer, p. 76; Wenham, p. 139.

¹⁹ Van Gemeren also cites Psalm 29:1, but this is a disputed reading.

²⁰ Although many evangelicals now prefer to date the book of Job to the Salomonic period, and neo-evangelicals to the 7th century B.C., there is still strong support for a Mosaic or even pre-Mosaic authorship. J. Hartley, though accepting the Isaianic date, provides forceful material for an early date in his *Commentary on Job (NICOT)* pp. 7-10.

²¹ Van Gemeren concludes, “The reference to ‘the daughters of man’ cannot be limited to the genealogy of Seth or Cain. They are the daughters of *man*. They belong to the category of human beings of the feminine gender.” (pp. 332.333).

²² Van Gemeren, p. 341 n. 56.

²³ Van Gemeren, p. 340.

²⁴ Wenham, p. 139.

²⁵ Unger’s *Commentary on the OT Vol. 1*, pp. 36, 37; Pember’s work *Earth’s Earliest Ages*, p. 210. See also Wenham’s comments in *New Bible Commentary 3rd Edition*, p. 65.

²⁶ See Speiser quoted by Van Gemeren, p. 324.

²⁷ Summary dismissals of this latter view are to be found in Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis Vol. 1*, pp. 252, 253, and in Van Gemeren, pp. 322-325.

²⁸ Murray, p. 244.

²⁹ Murray, p. 246.

³⁰ Hamilton, p. 265.

³¹ For further discussion of this question, see Hamilton, pp. 271, 272; Lenski, *The Interpretation*

of I & II Peter, pp. 309-311 (Lenski also argues for Sethites in Gen. 6:2); and J.N.D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, pp. 265, 257 (who argues for angels in Gen. 6).