

AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF GENESIS 6:1-4

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Genesis 6:1-4 connects with the preceding context by the reference to multiplication of the human race, which sums up the nine occurrences in chapter 5 of the phrase "and begat sons and daughters." It connects with the following context by providing an explanation or an illustration of the wickedness on the earth which was the reason for judgment by an exterminating flood. The exact meaning of the details, however, is widely disputed, and the passage has suffered many interpretations. It is always worthwhile to seek to judge between various interpretations by means of an exegetical study.

Verse 1: "And it came to pass when mankind began to become too numerous upon the face of the land and daughters were born to them" (*wayehî kî hēhēl hā'ādām lārōb 'al penē hā'ādāmâ ūbānōt yulledû lāhem*). Since population increases geometrically rather than arithmetically, the rate of multiplication accelerates. Men were no longer a small community, but had experienced the first minor population explosion. We will now see a picture of the corruption of them all, apart from Noah and his family.

Verse 2a: "that sons of god saw daughters of mankind that they were fair" (*wayyir'û benē hā'ēlōhām 'et benōt hā'ādām kî tōbōt hēnnāh*) *hā'adam* in verse 1 obviously refers to mankind as a whole, not to any particular division of man.¹ Is there a good reason for assuming a more particular use of this word in the term *bānōt hā'ādām*, "daughters of men"? It is possible for a universal term to be restricted by the context. For example, note the restricted use of the word "people" in Genesis 14:16, "... and also brought back his brother lot, and his goods, and the women also, and the people,"² Those who take the term *bene hā'ēlōhām*, "sons of god," to mean the chosen portion of mankind, the Sethites, usually consider "daughters of men" by contrast to be the unbelieving Cainite women. Those who take the "sons of God" to be nobles or princes may take the "daughters of men" by contrast to be commoners. Those who take the "sons of god" to be angels take the "daughters of men" to be women in general. However, Kline has pointed out that even though the "sons of god" be a division of mankind, whether Sethites or princes, the term "daughters of men" could still refer to women in general; for the sin is not marriage between two classes of mankind, but marriage of "any

1. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, tran. James Martin (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), I, 127.
2. William Henry Green, *The Unity of the Book of Genesis* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), p. 58, cites this passage and Genesis 3:5; Leviticus 8:15; Judges 16:17; 19:30; 20:1-3; I Samuel 13:6-7; Psalm 73:5 and Jeremiah 32:20.

that they choose.”³ Since a possible contrast with the “sons of god” as a separate division of mankind would not *require* the limitation of the term “daughters of men” and since the universal usage of *hā’ādām* in verse 1 forms a presumption in favor of the same usage in verse 2, it is best to take the term “daughters of men” to mean women in general, not Caninite women or women commoners. We would be justified in restricting the term only if the context required it, but it does not.

The greatest debate is over the meaning of the term *benê hā’ēlōhīm*, “sons of god.” We will examine the merits of each possible interpretation of this term in turn.

The view that the “sons of god” means angels has been held by many. The pseudopigraphal Book of Enoch, compiled during the last two centuries B.C. says that 200 angels in heaven saw the beautiful daughters of men, lusted after them, and took them for wives with the result that they became pregnant and bore great giants.⁴ Two lines of support are adduced. One is the assertion that the books of II Peter and Jude accept the story in the Book of Enoch, and the other is that the usage of the term “sons of god” in the Bible favors this meaning.

II Peter 2:4 says, “But if God spared not the angels when they sinned. . . .” Jude 6-7 says, “The angels that kept not their own principality, but left their proper habitation, he hath kept in everlasting bonds under darkness unto the judgment of the great day. Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them, having in like manner *with these* given themselves over to fornication. . . .” Delitzsch says that this supports Enoch’s sinning angel interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4, “for *toutois*, [“with these”] ver. 7, refers back to angels.”⁵ Keil however notes concerning the passage in Jude, “There is nothing here about marriages with the daughters of men or the begetting of children, even if we refer the word *toutois* [“with these”] . . . in verse 7 to the angels mentioned in verse 6,” because Jude speaks of fornication while Genesis 6 speaks of actual marriage,⁶ as we shall see below. Actually, *toutois*, “with these,” can better be referred back to Sodom and Gomorrah, or to the inhabitants in them.⁷ Concerning the passage in Peter, Keil says, “Peter is merely speaking of sinning angels in general whom God did not spare, and not of any particular sin on the part of a small number of angels.”⁸ Besides, the Bible does not speak of more than one defection by angels, and that took place before the fall of man, since Satan tempted man in Eden.

3. Meredith G. Kline, “Divine Kingship and Genesis 6:1-4,” *The Westminster Theological Journal*, XXIV (May, 1962), 2:189-190.
John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) p. 247, gives a contrary view.
4. Murray, p. 243, quotes *The Book of Enoch*, tran. R. H. Charles (Oxford, 1912), VI, 1, 2, 5, 6, 7; VII, 1, 2, 3; cf. X, 1-15; XV, 1-12; LXIV, 1, 2.
5. Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, tran. Sophia Taylor (2 vols.; 5th ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1888), I, 225.
6. Keil and Delitzsch, I, 132.
7. *Ibid.*, I, 132-133.
8. *Ibid.*, I, 132.

The second line of support for the interpretation that "sons of god" means angels is the usage of that term in the Old Testament. Most agree that it occurs three times in that sense in Job (1:6; 2:1; and 38:7). A similar phrase, *benê 'ēlīm*, sons of god or sons of the mighty, in Psalms 29:1 and 89:7 is usually interpreted to refer to angels also. Daniel 3:25, *bar 'ēlāhīm*, is also sometimes cited. "Angels" is a possible meaning for the term "sons of god." Other possible meanings will be noted later.

What are the chief objections to interpreting "sons of god" as angels? One is that "the whole conception of sexual life, as connected with God or angels, is absolutely foreign to Hebrew thought."⁹ Green notes that there is no Hebrew word for goddess, that the idea of deities having sexual function is considered an unacceptable heathen notion in the Bible, and that there is no analogy in the Bible for the idea of inter-marriage of angels and men.¹⁰ Keil notes that there is no other reference to angels in the context and that Christ specifically stated that angels cannot marry (Matt. 22:30, Mark 12:25, cf. Luke 20:34-35).¹¹ Delitzsch's suggestion that it was angels working through demoniacs¹² does not alleviate the difficulty, for then "sons of god" is used of demoniacs, which has no parallel in Scripture. The lack of any analogy in Scripture for the idea of angels having sexual functions or being able to cross-breed with the human race makes that interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 untenable.

Perhaps an even greater objection to the view that "sons of god" means angels is that the judgment fell upon men alone, and it is the "sons of god" who were the initiators of the wrong.¹³ Since this passage gives the background for the near extermination of the human race by the Flood, and since the "sons of god" were the chief initiators of the wrong, they must have been a part of the human race. In summary, the interpretation that the "sons of god" were angels must be considered untenable because it is not supported by II Peter or Jude, it is contrary to the Biblical view of the nature of angels, and the punishment for their crime fell upon men rather than upon angels.

The most common view of orthodox interpreters has been that the "sons of god" were the men of the godly Sethite lineage. Usually this view considers the "daughters of men" to be women of the ungodly Cainite lineage, but in accord with our exegesis above, the "daughters of men" could mean women in general. Then the sin would be that the Sethite men were marrying without distinction to whether the women were believers or not, or that they were marrying polygamously (see the discussion on the exact nature of the sin below).

There are several factors strongly favoring the interpretation that the "sons of god" means men of the godly line. One is that it understands

9. Green, p. 54.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Keil and Delitzsch, I, 130-131.

12. Delitzsch, I, 226.

13. Murray, p. 245.

all participants in the sinful marriages to be human beings, which is more consistent with the immediate context and the teaching of Scripture as a whole.

Another factor is that the Sethite line appears as a distinct entity in the context of this portion of Genesis (as angels do not). It is in the context of the Sethite line that it says, "began men to call upon the name of Jehovah" (Gen. 4:25-26), and Enoch who "walked with God" (Gen. 5:24) was in the line of Seth. Then, "Quite naturally the title 'sons of God' can be taken as another specification of the discrimination already established."¹⁴

The interpretation that the "sons of god" are the godly line is also consistent with the Biblical concept that Israel is the son of God and the chosen people are His children. This concept occurs in Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 14:1; 32:5, 6, 18, 19; Hosea 1:10; Isaiah 1:2; 11:1; 43:6; 45:11; Jeremiah 31:20; and Psalm 73:15.¹⁵ This argument is weakened however by the fact that the exact term "sons of god" does not appear in the above passages. Thus, they cannot be considered to definitively establish the usage of that term. Delitzsch considers this usage of the concept in the Old Testament to apply only to the theocratic nation of Israel,¹⁶ and it would be very difficult to prove him wrong.

Perhaps the strongest factor favoring this interpretation is that the warning against marrying unbelievers is one theme of the Pentateuch, including the book of Genesis. In Genesis we see the concern that Isaac not marry one of the Canaanites (24:3-4), the concern that Jacob not marry one of the daughters of Heth in Canaan (27:46 and 28:1-3), the distress caused by Esau's marriage to Canaanitesses (26:34-35 and 28:6-8), and the problem of Dinah and the Shechemites (chap. 34).¹⁷ In this context, Genesis 6:1-4 furthers the practical aim of preventing indiscriminate marriage without regard to spiritual status.

Also, if the "sons of god" are the Sethite men, we see a progression of corruption leading to the Flood: the source of corruption in chap. 3, the degeneracy of the line of Cain in chap. 4, and finally the moral decay of the line of Seth in Gen. 6:1-4.¹⁸ This solves a question not answered by other views, namely, how it was that only Noah's family, of all the line of Seth, was saved.

In summary, the view that the "sons of god" were men of the godly Sethite line is tenable because that group is already discriminated in the context, the term is consistent with the Pentateuchal concept of spiritual sonship, it furthers the theme of Genesis which warns against religiously indiscriminate marriages, and it fits the purpose of the context

14. *Ibid.*

15. Green, p. 55.

16. Delitzsch, I, 224.

17. Green, pp. 55-56.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

by demonstrating the progressive corruption of the human race. Let us now examine a third and perhaps equally tenable view.

A third view is that the term "sons of god" refers to kings or nobles. This was the ancient Jewish interpretation, e.g., the Aramaic Targums and the Greek translation of Symmachus.¹⁹ Biblical usage may be adduced for this view also. The magistrates or administrators of justice are called *'ēlohām* in Exodus 21:6; 22:8, 9, 28. The same term is used of them in Psalm 82:1, and the expression *benê 'elyōn*, "sons of the most high," is used of the magistrates in verse 6 of the psalm, despite the fact that they are accused of wrongdoing in verses 2-5 and 7.²⁰ Thus, it was not uncommon to use divine epithets to refer to magistrates, and so "sons of god" in Genesis 6:1-4 could refer to magistrates or rulers.

Another factor in favor of the interpretation of "sons of god" as rulers is that this would show a thematic parallelism with the same motif in the Sumero-Babylonian antediluvian traditions. "For all who are familiar with the way in which Genesis is repeatedly found to share the formal thematic interests of other ancient literature, the parallelism noted should be persuasive evidence that our interpretation is in its basic orientation sound,"²¹ says Kline of his view that the "sons of god" are dynastic rulers in the Cainite line. On this view, Genesis 6:1-4 is seen to pick up the themes of city-building, tyranny, and polygamy found in the description of Cain's line in chapter 4. The purpose of the Sethite genealogy then would be to show how there came to be the righteous family of Noah in the midst of such corruption. In this case, the term "sons of god" would still refer to a group already discriminated in the context of Genesis, the Cainite tyrants as represented by Lamech in Genesis 4:19-24, the nearest previous passage with the same emotional tone as this one.

A third factor in favor of taking the "sons of god" as rulers is the widespread pagan custom of referring to kings as sons of various gods. This pagan usage could have been applied to the antediluvian kings to suggest their Satanic background.²² Or the term could have been applied simply because it was so widespread that everyone would immediately understand it to refer to rulers. In Egypt the king was called the son of *Re* (the sun god).²³ The Sumero-Akkadian king was considered the offspring of the goddess and one of the gods, and this identification with the deity goes back to the earliest times according to Engell.²⁴ In one inscription he is referred to as "the king, the son of his god."²⁵ The Hittite

19. Kline, p. 194.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

23. Ivan Engell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), pp. 4, 6, 12, 14.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 18, 23-24.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 42, n. 3, citing H. C. Rawlinson, *The Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia*, Pl. 5.1.38. Col. III.

king was called “son of the weather-god,”²⁶ and the title of his mother was *Tawannannas* (=mother-of-the-god).²⁷ In the northwest Semitic area the king was directly called the son of the god and the god was called the father of the king.²⁸ The Ras Shamra (Ugaritic) *Krt* text refers to the god as the king’s father and to king *Krt* as *Krt bn il*, the son of ’*el* or the son of god.²⁹ Thus, on the basis of Semitic usage, the term *be nê hā ’ēlōhām*, the “sons of god” or the “sons of the gods,” very likely refers to dynastic rulers in Genesis 6.

In summary, the view that the “sons of god” are rulers, probably Cainite tyrants, is tenable because that group is already indicated in chapter 4, the term is consistent with Biblical usage and the usage of the entire ancient Middle East, and it fits the context by carrying forward and culminating the theme of human corruption as the basis for the Flood.

Considering the view that the “sons of god” means angels to be untenable in Genesis 6, how do we choose between the view that the term means the line of Seth and the view that it means rulers? Considering how each view fits the themes of Genesis, dovetails with previous material in the context, adds to the progression of thought, and lays the basis for the Flood, there seems to be no appreciable difference in their merit. In terms of Biblical usage, the view that the “sons of god” are rulers seems to be slightly more likely. In terms of broader evidence of linguistic usage, and thematic parallels, the evidence also favors the view that the offenders in Genesis 6 were rulers.

Verse 2b: “and they took to them wives of all which they chose” (*wayyiqeḥû lāh em nāšîm mikkōl ’āšer bāḥārû lāqah ’iššāh*). The phrase *laqah ssah* (to take a wife) “is a standing expression throughout the whole of the Old Testament for the marriage relation established by God at the creation, and is never applied to *pornea*, or the simple act of physical connection.”³⁰ Thus the sin was not a matter of profligate fornication, but of some kind of marriages that were a violation of God’s law.

The nature of the violation is expressed in the next phrase—*mikkōl ’āšer bāḥārû*. Delitzsch considers the *min* in *mikkōl* to be generalizing and partitive, so that it means “whichever they chose.”³¹ This interpretation would favor the view that the sin was choosing wives without regard to their spiritual status (on the view that “sons of god” means Sethites) or without regard to their royal status (on the view that “sons of god” means rulers), but it would not rule out the idea that the sin

26. *Ibid.*, p. 58, citing Forrer, *Annuaire de l’Institut de philologie et d’histoire orientales et slaves*, 4:2, p. 709.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 135-136, 153-154, and 192, n. 16.

30. Keil and Delitzsch, p. 131.

31. Delitzsch, I, 222. He cites Genesis 7:22; 9:10; 17:12; Deuteronomy 15:17; Leviticus 4:2; and Song of Solomon 3:6.

included polygamy. Kline considers the *min* to be explicative, so that it means "even all that they chose."³² In this case the sin was polygamy. The "sons of god," whether Sethites or rulers, were taking in marriage as many women as they wished. As Kraeling says, "A polygamous situation is implied in these words."³³ The reference to the fact of mankind becoming numerous in verse 1 fits well with the idea that the sin is polygamy.³⁴ The sin being polygamy also fits well with the view that the "sons of god" were dynastic rulers, for we are prepared for this by the polygamy of Lamech in chapter 4, and it was usually kings who led the way in this type of sin in the ancient world. Viewing the sin as polygamy also removes the tension of trying to see the "daughters of men" as one division of mankind as over against the "sons of god," a tension which is probably imported into the text since the text itself offers no clear clue to the resolution of such a tension. This view also fits a theme of Genesis intended to discourage polygamy. The idea of monogamy was presented in Genesis 2:24, then there is this passage, then there are later accounts which dramatically portray the disadvantages of polygamy. Therefore in view of the above observations, grammatically and exegetically the best interpretation is that the sin was not intermarriage between two groups—whether two worlds (angels and men), two religious communities (Sethite and Cainite), or two social classes (royal and common)—but that the sin was polygamy.

Verse 3: "and Yahweh said, My spirit will not rule in mankind forever because he is flesh but let his days be one-hundred and twenty years (*wayyô'mer YHWH lô'-yādōn rūhî bā'ādām le'ōlām bešaggam hū' bāsār wehāyū yāmāyw mē'āh we'ésrîm sanāh*). Delitzsch takes *yādōn* to be jussive of *dōn* (= *dîn*), to rule, to act,³⁵ and he takes *rūhî*, my spirit, to be the breath of life by which man is animated as in Genesis 2:7. It is called "my spirit" because of its divine origin and kinship with divine nature or because it was a divine gift. When it is removed, man dies.³⁶

bešaggam is the preposition *be plus šē* (= *'āšer*) plus *gam* (also). It means "because," as *bā'āšer* means "because" in Genesis 39:9, 23.³⁷

bāsār, flesh, may already have an ethical connotation here, thinking of the increased tendency to decay which the presence of sin has brought to the corporeal nature of man.³⁸

32. Kline, p. 196, n. 28. He cites Genesis 7:22; 9:10; Leviticus 11:32. Of the citations by both Kline and Delitzsch, in my opinion all but Leviticus 4:2 and possibly Song of Solomon 3:6 favor the polygamy interpretation presented by Kline.

33. *Ibid.*, citing Kraeling, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, VI (October, 1947), 4:197. He also cites K. Robast, *Die Genesis* (Berlin, 1951) p. 32, in favor of this view.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Delitzsch, I, 227. He cites Zechariah 3:7 and the Qere of Job 19:29. He rejects the explanation *habitet*.

36. *Ibid.*, I, 227, 229. See also Keil and Delitzsch, I, 135.

37. *Ibid.*, I, 228-229.

38. *Ibid.*, I, 229. See also Keil and Delitzsch, I, 136.

“Let his days be 120 years” could refer to a more limited life-span or to the time until the Flood. It probably refers to the latter since the sons of Noah and all the patriarchs lived longer.³⁹

Verse 4: “The nephilim were in the earth in those days and also after that the sons of god went in to daughters of mankind and they bore to them those the mighty ones which were of old, men of renown” (*hannepilîm hâyû bâāreṣ bayyāmûm hāhēm wegam ’ahārē-kēn āšer yābō’û benê hā’ēlōhîm ’el-benōt hā’ādām wayyāledû lāhem hēm-māh haggibbōrîm ’āšer mē’ōlām ’anešē haššem*). There is a difference of opinion over whether the nephilim were contemporary with the marriages or were the product of the marriages. Should we translate *hâyû* “were” or “arose, came to be”? Both Kline and Delitzsch favor “arose.”⁴⁰ There are numerous occurrences of this verb which might be cited for either reading. Kline favors “arose” because of the reference to going in to the daughters of men and to their bearing children, with the idea that that the offspring were the nephilim. “This reference to the conjugal act and to child-bearing finds justification only if he is describing the origin of the Nephilim-Gibborim.”⁴¹ The meaning would then be that the mighty, renowned nephilim arose out of the polygamous marriages of the dynastic rulers. The sentence reads fairly well on this interpretation, its position following verses 1-3 favors the idea that it is a result, and if the nephilim were popularly considered wicked it contributes to the thought expressed in verse 5. A disadvantage is that it leaves only 120 years for the nephilim to have gained such renown. It also fails to explain the presence of the phrase “and also after that” in verse 4.

Keil favors the translation “were.” He says, “The words, as they stand, represent the *nephilim*, who were on the earth in those days, as existing before the sons of God began to marry the daughters of men, and clearly distinguishes them from the fruits of those marriages. *hâyû* can no more be rendered ‘they became, or arose,’ in this connection, than *hâyâh* in chapter 1:2. *wayyihyû* would have been the proper word.”⁴² Green maintains the same view,⁴³ as does Murray who says, “The natural connection is that they were already in the earth when these marriages took place. . . . There is no suggestion of genetic connection between the *nephilim* and the marriages concerned.”⁴⁴ This view takes the more natural connection of the words, and it accounts for the phrase, “and also after that.” Also verses 1-3 form a kind of a unit describing a sin and pronouncing coming judgment upon it. The statement above the nephilim in verse 4 adds information, filling out the picture of the general conditions of that time. On this view, the purpose of mentioning the nephilim

39. *Ibid.*, I, 230.

40. Kline, p. 190, n. 11; Delitzsch, I, 232. They cite Genesis 7:6, 10 and 15:17.

41. Kline, p. 190.

42. Keil and Delitzsch, I, 137.

43. Green, p. 58.

44. Murray, p. 247.

is to give a better picture of the conditions of wickedness at the time these polygamous marriages took place.

Either the meaning "arose" or "were" could be consistent with our exegesis of verses 1-3. It is very difficult to choose between the two possibilities, but because of the phrase "and also after that," it is probably better to accept the interpretation that the nephilim were in the earth throughout this period of corruption, not just during the last 120 years.

The word "nephilim" occurs only here and in Numbers 13:33. In Numbers it is used of the Anakim, who were of great stature. The LXX translates "giants," and other old Greek versions translate "assailants" or "violent men."⁴⁵ Various ideas have been tied to the root *NPL*, to fall, e.g. to fall from heaven (fallen angels), to fall upon others (tyrants or invaders),⁴⁶ to be aborted (unnaturally begotten by angels).⁴⁷ The etymology offers little help. This context and the reference in Numbers would suggest merely that the Nephilim were men known for their prowess.

However, it is possible that the nephilim are identified with the "sons of god" by the word *āser*. Verse 4 would then read, "The nephilim were in the earth in those days and after that as well, which sons of god went in to the daughters of men so that they bore to them; those were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown." On this view, the mention of the nephilim is an explanation of the situation which led to the polygamous marriages and an identification of the "sons of god." This fits the passage best.

The word *hēm̄mâh*, "those, or the same," could refer back to nephilim, or it could refer to the children of the marriages, or it could refer to the immediately preceding pronoun *hem*, which refers to the "sons of god." Whichever *hēm̄mâh* refers back to are described as *haggibbōrîm*, mighty ones. The same word is used of Nimrod in Genesis 10:8, who became a king according to Genesis 10:10-12. Hence it would seem most likely that the *hēm̄mâh* ("those") who are described as *haggibbōrîm* are the "sons of god," the dynastic rulers, referred to in the immediately preceding pronoun. In this case, the "sons of god" are identified as nephilim, as *gibbōrîm* (mighty kings), as men of the primitive age, and as the men of renown. Verse 4 is best seen as an identification of those who were especially prominent in the wickedness leading to the corruption and hence the judgment of the earth.

45. Green, p. 57.

46. Keil and Delitzsch, I, 137.

47. Delitzsch, I, 232.

In summary, we have concluded that the "daughters of men" were women in general, the "sons of god" were famous mighty rulers as shown by usage and described in verse 4, the sin was polygamy, and the judgment was that the breath of life would be taken away from man in 120 years. Verse 4 refers not to the products of the polygamous marriages, but to their perpetrators.

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