



The Sons of God in Genesis 6:1-6

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Abstract

Genesis 6:1-6 has been a subject of debate for centuries, most scholars considering it to be one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the Pentateuch. Genesis 6:1-4 captivates many Bible readers because of the enigmatic individuality of both the “sons of God” and the Nephilim. Many contemporary theologians pay little attention to the passage because they have the opinion that the “sons of God” refers to the godly line of Seth. Additional contemporary intellectuals contend that the “sons of God” refers to a royal line. Most of the early church fathers interpreted the sons of God to be angels, probably because of certain manuscripts of the Septuagint. Thus, the subject matter here is the identity of the sons of God.

Introduction

Genesis 6:1-4 speaks of the universal degeneration of man into ungodliness prior to the equally universal, worldwide Flood of Genesis 6-9. What, then, is the significance of these verses to the beliefs of the Christian? As will be discussed in detail below, these verses either present a historical account, or make the writer of Genesis a perpetrator of myths; they either provide sufficient warrant for the Noahic Flood, or they mock it; they either are consistent with biblical teaching, or they contradict it and promote false doctrine. On a contrary, this view was met with resistance from rabbinical circles, for their position was more commonly that the sons of God were human judges. In fact, there was a curse pronounced on anyone taking the angel view (Genesis Rabba 26.5). Later, in the medieval period and especially in the Roman church, there was a preference for the interpretation that the sons of God were Cainites, and the daughters of men, Sethites.¹ Meanwhile, in the modern period, critical scholarship is more apt to interpret the sons of God as lesser gods in the heavenly pantheon, taking the passage as a remnant of a Canaanite myth. Thus, since there are several views, interpretation and opinions of scholars surrounding the meaning of “sons of God”, this research work seeks to discuss and weigh the opinions in order to come up with a viable point of view.

Explicating the term “Sons of God” from the Bible

The word “son” (*ben*) has a wide meaning in Hebrew than it does in contemporary English use, and occurs some 4,850 times in the Hebrew Bible.² The most common meaning is of a son, as in

¹J. M. Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary. Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 98.

²H. Haag, “Son,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G.J. Botterweck and H. Riggren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 147.



the male offspring of his parents (e.g., Genesis 5:4), but in general terms the word refers to a variety of relationships in which a person or object belongs to, or is influenced by, someone or something. A son could be a citizen of a city (Psalm 147:13), a student (Proverbs 1:10), or an arrow (Job 41:28).

To the common mind "the Son of man" is a title designating the human side of Jesus' person, "the Son of God" seems as obviously to indicate the divine side. But scholarship cannot take this for granted; and, indeed, it requires only a hasty glance at the facts to bring this home even to the general reader, because in Scripture the title is bestowed on a variety of persons for a variety of reasons.³

1. It is applied to angels, as when in Job 2:1 it is said that "the sons of God came to present themselves before Yahweh"; they may be so called because they are the creatures of God's hands or because, as spiritual beings, they resemble God, who is a spirit.⁴
2. In Luke 3:38 it is applied to the first man; and from the parable of the Prodigal Son it may be argued that it is applicable to all men.
3. It is applied to the Hebrew nation, as when, in Exodus 4:22, Yahweh says to Pharaoh, "Israel is my son, my first-born," the reason being that Israel was the object of Yahweh's special love and gracious choice.
4. It is applied to the kings of Israel, as representatives of the chosen nation. Thus, in 2 Samuel 7:14, Yahweh says of Solomon, "I will be his father, and he shall be my son"; and, in Psalms 2:7, the coronation of a king is announced in an oracle from heaven, which says, "Thou art my son; this day have I begotten thee."
5. In the New Testament, the title is applied to all saints, as in John 1:12, "But as many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on his name." When the title has such a range of application, it is obvious that the Divinity of Christ cannot be inferred from the mere fact that it is applied to Him.

It is important to note that the explication of the term "sons of God" from the general context of the Bible (both Old and New Testament) gives room for several opinions, arguments and understanding of the phenomenon. Thus, a certain interpretation and designation might seem difficult from this angle; this therefore makes the argument of this discourse in the succeeding part of the research relevant.

Background to the Text - Genesis 6:1-6

The selected (Gen 6:1-6) which is the subject matter of this work fascinates many Bible readers because of the mysterious identity of the sons of God and the Nephilim. This passage precedes the story of the flood (Genesis 6:9–9:17), as God saw that "the wickedness of man was great" and that "the earth was filled with violence." God therefore decided to send a flood to wipe out humanity (Genesis 6:5, 11). But why were men all of a sudden so violent? Was it because the godly line mixed with the ungodly line? Or was it, at least in part, because humanity had mixed with spirit beings? These questions forms the background to the text.

³<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/son-of-god-the/> [Encyclopedias - International Standard Bible Encyclopedia - Son Of God](#) (Accessed on 14^h February, 2019).

⁴ Ibid.



Since the passage is relatively brief, it would be useful to quote it in its entirety (from the New International Version in this case):

¹When human beings began to increase in number on the earth and daughters were born to them, ²the sons of God saw that the daughters of humans were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose.³ Then the LORD said, "My Spirit will not contend with humans forever, for they are mortal; their days will be a hundred and twenty years." ⁴The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward when the sons of God went to the daughters of humans and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown. ⁵The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. ⁶The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.⁵

Notes on the Selected Text

With regards to this translation, the following notes on key words and phrases (as the case may be) are to be taken into cognizance.

- i. "Men" is translated from *ha'adham*, and "daughters" from '*benoth*.' The critical questions here are as follows: Are these the same men and daughters mentioned in the succeeding verses? and, are the "daughters" merely female offspring, or does the word convey a broader meaning?
- ii. The expression "sons of God" is taken from *bene-ha'elohim*, while "daughters of men" is derived from *benoth ha'adham*.⁶ While few would argue with the common rendering of the latter phrase, some would say that the former should read "sons of the gods" or "lesser gods."⁷ Although a reference to a plurality of gods or god-like characters may be inferred, the word '*elohim*' in the Old Testament most often refers to the One God of the Israelites, and hence the former usage cannot be used to affirm the pagan definition as the only option. The word "fair" (referring to "daughters of men") can be equally translated "beautiful" (as in the more modern versions). Maars further suggests that this could mean "sexually appealing."⁸
- iii. "They took them wives" (referring to the actions of the sons of God) is tantamount to the common Hebrew expression for marriage.⁹
- iv. "Any of them they chose" probably is intended to mean the indiscriminate selection of mates.¹⁰ Most versions capitalize the word "Spirit," clearly indicating their translators' belief that it refers

⁵ New International Bible was translation used for the reading.

⁶ Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), 125- 127.

⁷ R.S. Hendel, "Of Demigods and the Deluge: Toward an Interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4," in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, (1987),106.

⁸ R. Maars, "The Sons of God (Genesis 6:1-4)," *Restoration Quarterly Journal*, (1980), 23:218-224.

⁹ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 1:131.

¹⁰ H.C. Leupold, "Exposition of Genesis: Vol. 1," *Barnes' Notes* (Baker Book House, Grand



to the Holy Spirit, although this is not necessarily the case. Meanwhile, the “spirit” may refer to the God-given breath of man (Genesis 2:7), over which Gods ultimate control presides (Numbers 16:22). The word *yadhon* has been rendered variously as contend, strive, or abide; the etymology is uncertain. It is usually taken to mean that “God will not forever bear the consequences of man’s sin.”¹¹

Genesis 6:1-6: Identifying the Sons of God

The expression of the ‘sons of God’ occurs occasionally in the Bible, and it doesn’t always refer to the same type of beings. Sometimes, “the sons of God” refer to the mortal people of God (Mt 5.9; Rom 8.14; Gal 3.26). Twice, this expression refers to the future, resurrected, and thus immortal people of God (Lk 20.36; Rom 8.19). The “sons of God” can refer to angels (Job 1.6; 2.1; 38.7).

The phrase “sons of God” elsewhere in the Old Testament refers to spirit beings/angels. There are those linguists who claim that in the Old Testament the phrase “sons of God” continuously refers to angels. The expression is found in Hosea 1:10 where it refers to persons, but supporters of the angels interpretation contend that this phrase does mean the same thing as it does in Genesis 6 because the prophet Hosea used the singular form of the word “God,” (El). In Genesis 6 the plural form, Elohim, is used.

The “sons of God” (Genesis 6:2, 4) is a phrase used three other times in the Bible outside of Genesis 6; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7. In all of these instances the “sons of God” are spirit/angelic beings, including Satan himself.

Fallen Angels and Humans

The view that the sons of God were angels is very ancient. In the first century A.D., Flavius Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (1:3:1) held the position that angels co-habited with women. Later authors such as Philo of Alexandria (early first century A.D).Furthermore, many Christian interpreters also took this position. These include: Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Ambrose. The evidence offered to argue that these beings were fallen angels is primarily based on the grammar of the phrase sons of God (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7). Matthew 22:30 notes that angels do not marry, but those who hold to this view suggest Genesis 6 is different since these would be fallen angels and that Matthew 22:30 refer to marriage in heaven. Second, just because other places in the Bible use “sons of God” to refer to angels does not require that the same usage is necessary here. The larger context must also be taken into account, a context that seems to suggest sin taking place among humans, not angels.¹²

Therefore, with this view there is a material distinction between supernatural beings (the sons of God) and human beings (the daughters of men).¹³ The angelic view fell into disrepute among

Rapids, Michigan, 1942), 253.

¹¹ H. Stigers, *A Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1976), 98.

¹² Robert. Letham, *Genesis: An Interpretation for the Soul* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishing. 1960), 121.

¹³ Ibid, 121.



Christian interpreters from the fourth to the eighteenth century. Saint Augustine's rejection of the angel interpretation (*De Civitate Dei* 15, written c. A.D. 413-426, had enormous influence. Those who rejected the supernatural angelic reading did so because of theological objections that arose to angels cohabiting with humans.

Genesis 6:1-2 contrasts the “sons of God” with “man,” implying that these are non-human beings. Genesis 6:1 says that “*man* began to multiply” and “daughters were born to them.” The Hebrew word for “man” (*adam*) is the generic term for mankind, as used in Genesis 5:1-2.¹⁴ Nothing in the text suggests that only “some” men (either ungodly men or kings) were having children in Genesis 6:1. Rather, the “sons of God” (v. 2) are contrasted with “man”— thus the “sons of God” were distinct from “man” and were marrying daughters of *all mankind*.

Godly Line of Seth and the Ungodly Line of Cain

The Sethite view is probably the second-most-popular view. It appeals to the context of Genesis 5, just before the mention of the sons of God and Nephilim. So, it has good support with regards to the literary context. The popular view among evangelicals today is that the sons of God are the godly male descendants of Seth. The “daughters of men” are generally thought to be the ungodly female descendants of Cain.

The intermarriage of the good line and the evil line caused such a perversion in the human race that it eventually brought about their destruction. C. Leupold asserts that the popularity of this teaching is not based on strong support in the text; it is almost as much of a stretch as the view that the sons of God were sons of princes. This view is popular because the only other choice is that the sons of God are fallen angels and such a mixture seems so bizarre and outside our experience that most people cannot fathom it today.¹⁵

In lieu of this, interpretation identifies the sons of God with the godly line of Seth who intermarriage promiscuously with the ungodly line of Cain and anyone else. These two groups were human beings—the difference between them was theological. One group was righteous while the other was unrighteous. When the righteous line married the unrighteous line, the result was an unrighteous offspring.¹⁶

Ancient Rulers and Commoners

The third interpretation holds the sons of God were sons of great ones who were rulers at that time. The daughters of men were mere commoners.¹⁷ The union between the two caused a race of people who were in rebellion against God—hence the reason for the Flood. This view holds a social difference between the two groups. This theory posits that the “sons of God” were dynastic rulers. The appeal of this position is that it eliminates the difficulty of the passage rather easily.

¹⁴ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis, Vols 2.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950) 258.

¹⁵ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis, Vols 2.*, 259.

¹⁶ J. D. Greene, *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 76.

¹⁷ J. D. Greene, *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality*, 77.



The “daughters of men” would be commoners, thus the reason for God’s judgment was the sin of polygamy. The Aramaic targums favor this interpretation. It thus identifies the sons of God with humans who were possessed by demons. These demon-possessed men married godly women and the result was a race of people in rebellion against God. Their offspring was not half-human, half-angelic, yet they were antagonistic to God. Contrary to the angelic view, this position holds that we are dealing entirely with humans, not angels.¹⁸

There is a minority view that sees the distinction between the sons of God and the daughters of men as one simply between men and women. Those holding this view do not see Genesis 6:1-4 as a prologue to the Flood but rather as an Epilogue to chapter 5 which talks about the history of ten great men. The sons of God simply refer to men, and the daughters of men refer to women. Men married women as the Bible commanded. Therefore, there is nothing sinister in this account.¹⁹

Conclusion

This paper surveyed the major interpretive options surrounding the identity of ‘sons of God’ in Genesis 6. The sons of God passage is but a small section of the Genesis account; it does not have riding on it any major doctrines.²⁰ Thus, when we take the sons of God to be fallen angels, everything looks like falling into place: because that interpretation agrees with the textual reading, the doctrine of fallen angels in the Bible, and with parallel statements elsewhere in the Bible. But the interpretation of the sons of God as godly male descendants of Seth is more appropriate because it is due to the sin of men and not of angels.

In view of this, the research concludes that the overall context of the text (Genesis 6) in question suggests that the “sons of God” and “daughters of men” exist as an antithetical parallelism; referring to the godly Sethites (Genesis 4:26) and worldly Cainites (4:11), respectively. The improperly motivated marriages between these two groups (6:2) led to the moral breakdown of the existing world order (6:5), the exception among them being Noah and his family (6:8). Meanwhile, the Nephilim should not be considered the strange, mythological offspring of this union, but rather as a class of tyrannical warriors who maintained a faith-breaking reign of terror. In this respect, they serve as a deliberate parallel to the Nephilim of Numbers 33, who caused God’s people to stumble. Genesis 5:1–3 states that Adam was created in God’s image and that Seth was created in the image of Adam. This infers that the line of Adam through Seth founds the sons of God. The line of Seth view upholds that the “sons of God” talks about the descendants of Seth, while the “daughters of men” refers to the offspring of Cain. Thus, the moral line of Seth intermarried with the wicked line of Cain which has caused in the corruption of humanity.

¹⁸ Donald. Macleod, *The Message of Genesis* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press. 1998), 132.

¹⁹ J. J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison: Studies in Genesis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1998), 126.

²⁰ Lee Anderson, <https://answersingenesis.org/genesis/is-sons-of-god-passage-genesis-6-adapted-pagan-mythology/> (Accessed 03/11/2017).

²¹ Waltke, B.K. (2001). *Genesis*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 116.



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