



The Sons of God and the Daughters of Men

Conclusion
of this three-part suggested interpretation

By Manfred Kober

AMBITIOUS DESPOTS. A third interpretation of Genesis 6 is that the term "sons of God" refers to kings or nobles. The term "sons of God" in its Near Eastern setting was a title for nobles, aristocrats and kings. These ambitious despots lusted after power and wealth and desired to become "men of a name," that is, somebodies (cf. Gen. 11:4)! Their 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 . . . the sin was polygamy."²⁰ It was the same type of sin that the Cainite Lamech practiced, the sin of polygamy, particularly as it came to expression in the harem, the characteristic institution of the ancient Oriental despot's court. In this transgression the "sons of God" frequently violated the sacred trust of their office as guardians of the general ordinances of God for human conduct.²¹

Five major lines of evidence seem to support this view. The first is that of ancient interpretation. This view lays claim to antiquity also. In an excellent article presenting this view, Kline writes that it anciently rose among the Jews that the "sons of God" of Genesis 6 were men of the aristocracy, princes and nobles, in contrast to the socially inferior "daughters of men." This interpretation came to

expression, for example, in the Aramaic Targums (the Targums of Onkelos rendered the term as "sons of nobles") and in the Greek translation of Symmachus (which reads "the sons of the kings or lords") and it has been followed by many Jewish authorities down to the present.²²

Biblical usage supports this view as well. The Hebrew word "God" is used in Scripture of men who served as magistrates or administrators of justice. "Then his master shall bring him unto the judges" (Exod. 21:6); "God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods," i.e., judges or rulers (Ps. 82:1); ". . . Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High," i.e., gods equal rulers or judges or magistrates (Ps. 82:6; cf. Exod. 22:8, 9). Thus it was not uncommon to use divine epithets to refer to magistrates; so "sons of God" in Genesis 6:1-4 could refer to magistrates or rulers.

A third line of evidence is the contextual support. It's not difficult to demonstrate that the context of Genesis 6 has much in favor of this last interpretation. To underscore the importance that the context bears upon the interpretation of Genesis 6, an extended quotation from Kline is in order:

It is the genealogical nature of the treatment of the antediluvian history that accounts for the focusing of attention on the marriages of the royal [sons of God]. The precise character of these marriages and especially of the sin involved in them can best be seen if Genesis 6:1-4 is viewed in relation to the preceding context. The beginnings of the genealogical

history of the [sons of God] are found in the genealogy of Cain (4:16-24).

Significantly, at the very outset of Cain's genealogy the origin of city organization is noted (Gen. 4:17). It was precisely in the urban political unit that the stage was set for the emergence of kingship. What, therefore, begins as the genealogy of Cain becomes in the course of its development the dynasty of Cain.

In Cain's dedication of his city to the name of his heir there was foreshadowed the lust for a name that was increasingly to mark these city-rulers until, when the city-states began to be theocratically conceived, they esteemed themselves veritable sons of the gods, and so "men of name" (Gen. 6:4) indeed. Outstanding representative of the Cainite dynasty was Lamech. Concerning his court life it is recorded that he practiced bigamy (Gen. 4:19), and of his royal enforcement of law it is witnessed out of his own mouth that his policy was one of tyranny, a tyranny that reckoned itself through the power of the sword of Tubal-cain more competent for vengeance than God Himself (Gen. 4:23, 24).

With this portrait of the kingship of Cainite Lamech the dynastic genealogy of Cain breaks off so that the genealogy of Seth may be given (Gen. 4:25—5:32). But then Genesis 6:1-4 resumes the thread of the history where it was dropped at Genesis 4:24. Structurally, the accounts of Lamech (Gen. 4:19-24) and of the [sons of God] (Gen. 6:1 ff.) are much alike. In each case there are the taking of wives, the bearing of children and the dynastic exploits. The one passage closes with the boast of Lamech concerning his judgment of those who offend him; the other issues in the Lord's announcement of the judgment He purposes to visit on the earth which has become offensive to Him. Genesis 6:1 ff. simply summarizes and concludes the course of dynastic development which had already been presented in the individual histories of the several rulers, indicating how the evil potential of Cainite kingship, betrayed even in its earliest beginnings, was given such full vent in its final stages as to produce a state of tyranny and corruption intolerable to the God of Heaven.²³

The custom of Near Eastern titles for royalty also favors this interpretation. The crux of the problem passage of Genesis 6 is really this: How was the term "sons of God" understood in the cultural environment in which Moses wrote? Or how would the son of Moses have understood the title "sons of God" had he looked over his father's shoulder as ancient Moses penned those words?

As a matter of fact, archaeological discoveries of ancient Near Eastern texts throw much light on the problematic term "sons of God." Birney, in summarizing the evidence, speaks of 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. 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

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was called the son of *Re* (the sun god). 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. In one inscription he is referred to as "the king, the son of his god." The Hittite king was called "son of the weather-god," and the title of his mother was *Tawannannas* (mother of the god). 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. 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 ha elohim*; the "sons of god" or the "sons of the gods" very likely refers to dynastic rulers in Genesis 6.²⁴

An interesting stela of ancient Mesopotamia further proves the fact that the founders of the first dynasties actually claimed to be sons of God. The stela shows Naram-Sin, Sargon's grandchild of the dynasty of Accad, standing before a stylized mountain crushing his enemies by treading upon them. He does not appear to be merely a regal hero. His horned crown, such as adorns the gods, gives the impression that he claims divinity. Many inscriptions of Naram-Sin associate his royal name with the word for god (*ilu*) which precedes it. Moreover, Naram-Sin was considered to be the "God of Accad," that is, Accad's protective spirit and personal god.²⁵

On the basis of the volume of historical evidence that pagan kings were referred to as "sons of God," it is natural to draw the conclusion that the Genesis passage reflects this claim of heathen kings to divine paternity. The term "sons of God" was appropriated in Genesis 6 as a title for the antediluvian kings. It should accordingly be translated "the sons of the gods." Kline has some incisive comments on the reasons why Moses used this title:

By this simple literary stroke the author at once caught the spirit of ancient paganism and suggested darkly the Satanic shape that formed the background of the human revolt against the King of kings. For these "sons of gods" were of all the seed of the serpent most like unto their father. One brief title thus serves to epitomize the climactic developments in the history of man's covenant breaking during those generations when the judgment of God was impending by the world that then was perished. It has been a merit of some who have thought that they found in this passage a preternatural intrusion into earthly history, a sort of pseudo-messianic embodiment of demonic spirits in human flesh, that they have sensed more fully than the advocates of the traditional exegesis, the titanic, one might almost say the eschatological, character of this ancient crisis.²⁶

On the basis of these observations, contemporaries of Moses would have been very familiar with this title and would have seen it as a reference to antediluvian dynastic rulers and ambitious despots, claiming divine origin and divine rights. Birney has well summed up

the major arguments for this view:

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.²⁷

At this point, a very relevant question should be answered. Who were the mysterious "giants" and "men of renown" mentioned in verse 4? "There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown."

Interpreters differ whether these giants were contemporary with the polygamous marriages or were the products of these marriages. Exegetically, both interpretations are possible. It is probably best to see them as the progeny of the tyrants. Their relationship to the "sons of God" has been shown by Kline:

The princes born into these royal houses of the [sons of God] were the nephilim-gibborim (v. 4), the mighty tyrants who Lamech-like esteemed their might to be their right. So as man abounded on the face of the earth (v. 1), God saw that the wickedness of man abounded in the earth (v. 5). By reason of the polygamy and tyranny practiced by the dynasty of the [sons of God] in the name of divine-royal prerogative and justice, the earth became corrupt before God and filled with violence (vv. 5-7, 11-13) and so hastened to destruction.²⁸

These *nephilim*, according to etymology and context, were wicked tyrants who gloried in violence. Various translations of the word have been given:

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 translated "giants," and other old Greek versions translate "assailants" or "violent men." 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), to be aborted (unnaturally begotten by angels). The etymology offers little help. This context and the reference in Numbers would suggest merely that the nephilim were men known for their prowess.²⁹

These *nephilim* were especially prominent in the wickedness leading to the corruption and hence the judgment of mankind. Cornfeld's suggestion is quite possible.

We may perhaps link the nephilim of Genesis with the "mighty men that were of old," these semi-legendary heroes of prehistory whose memory and deeds are recorded in the ancient annals of Mesopotamia, Egypt

and other lands of antiquity. These were the founders of the first dynasties, lawgivers and the like. The word nephilim (in Arabic, *nabil*) means princes. So the nephilim need not be interpreted as a race of "giants," but "great men."³⁰

The "mighty men" (*gibborim*) are probably identical with the *nephilim*. The word *gibbor* is used of Nimrod in Genesis 10:8. Kline has some suggestive comments on the fact that Nimrod belongs to the category of the *gibborim*:

That Nimrod was a king is clear from Genesis 10:10 (which locates his dominion in the land of Shinar; cf. Gen. 11:2), and this supports the interpretation of the gibborim of Genesis 6:4 and their fathers [sons of God] as a royal dynasty. If one bears in mind the divine ordinance of Genesis 9:5, 6, by which the civil power was authorized to destroy manslaying beasts as well as human murderers, it will be seen that Genesis 10:9 need not be judged an interpolation which breaks the thematic unity of verses 8 and 10, simply because it specifies that Nimrod was [a mighty hunter]. Nimrod's hunting exploits were not mere sport but a function properly pertaining to his royal office and quite necessary in his historical situation.³¹

One final evidence for the validity of this interpretation of Genesis 6 as the culmination of an outrage of despots against God before the flood is the structural similarity between the Genesis account and the Sumero-Babylonian flood traditions. In these latter flood traditions, invariably the flood is preceded by the theme of kingship centering in cities under the hegemony of various gods. This kingship came from heaven and numbered a god among its representatives. The main introductory motif in the Sumero-Babylonian flood traditions is thus: that of royalty beginning in cities and claiming divine origin. Kline traces the same motif in the Gilgamesh Epic, the old Babylonian flood epic, commonly called after the hero, the Atrahasis Epic, and the Sumerian flood epic. Of the latter he writes:

A valuable contribution to our knowledge of the principal themes, particularly the introductory themes, of the ancient flood traditions is made by the Sumerian Deluge account, found on a fragmentary tablet at Nippur. The preserved portion of the first column deals with the creation. Then after a break the second column relates that kingship was lowered from heaven and that five cities were found and apportioned to particular gods. When the text continues on the third column after another lacuna, the subject is the flood itself.³²

In light of the fact that Genesis repeatedly parallels the themes of other ancient literature, the striking parallel of the themes of the Biblical and extrabiblical accounts is further corroborating evidence that this interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 is correct. Kline says:

The fact that an historical theme so prominently treated in the Sumero-Babylonian epic tradition finds no counterpart in Genesis 3—6 according to the standard interpretations is itself good reason to suspect that these interpretations have been missing the point.³³

The Principles That Should Be Considered

The last main point centers around principles that should be considered. It is the conclusion of this author that the angel view is completely untenable, and that the term "sons of God" must be understood as referring to men. Therefore, it is obvious that certain of the arguments favoring the second or Sethite view may also be used to support the third or despot view. Applying strict principles of interpretation to the passage, it becomes clear that evidence favors the view that the "sons of God" were ambitious despots.

The most basic rule of hermeneutics is that a passage be considered in its immediate and remote context. The angel view actually ignores the context which speaks only of men, their wickedness and God's punishment upon this wickedness. The Cainite view, while taking the context seriously, fails to explain adequately the wicked *nephilim* and *gibborim* as products of simply religiously mixed marriages. The third view, however, sees that the context really speaks more of the progression of wickedness in the Cainite line than the fusion of the godly and ungodly line. The themes of city-building, tyranny and polygamy of Genesis 4 culminate in universal violence under the despotic rule of Cainite tyrants.

Another principle of interpretation states that the cultural background of any passage must be given primary attention. It has been demonstrated that the key term "sons of God," understood in its cultural context, would be most normally interpreted as a reference to dynastic rulers claiming divine origin who through polygamous marriages tried to expand their dominion, much in the same way as Solomon's practices centuries later. Power had corrupted them; their only desire was for more power.

Bernard Ramm mentions the principle of complexity and simplicity or "the principle of preference for the clearest interpretation." He explains it thus:

Frequently the interpreter is confronted with two or more equally probable interpretations as far as grammatical rules permit. One is a strain on our credulity; the other is not. One meaning is rather obvious, the other recondite. The rule is: choose the clear over the obscure, and the more rational over the credulous.³⁴

Because of this rule, Ramm favors the interpretation that the "sons of God" are men (although he suggests that they are godly Sethites). He directs some important questions to angel proponents.

"The Sons of God and the Daughters of Men"			
SUMMARY CHART			
Position:	ANGELIC CREATURES	APOSTATE SETHITES	AMBITIOUS DESPOTS
Persons:	Fallen angels cohabit with beautiful women	Ungodly Sethites marry depraved Cainites	Despotic chieftains marry a plurality of wives
Perversion:	Perversion of human race by intrusion of angels	Pollution of godly line by mixed marriage	Polygamy of Cainite princes to expand dominion
Progeny:	Monstrous giants	Wicked tyrants	Dynastic rulers
Proofs:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The antiquity of the view 2. The reference to angels in Job as "sons of God" 3. The N.T. references to the angelic sin of Genesis 6 (1 Pet. 3:18-20; 2 Pet. 2:14; Jude 6) 4. The resultant unnatural race of monstrosities 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The emphasis on men in the context 2. Human sin as the reason for the Flood 3. The thematic development of Genesis 4 and 5 4. The aversion in Genesis to intermarriage between godly and ungodly 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Antiquity of this interpretation 2. Biblical usage of "god" for rulers and judges 3. Reference in context to development of wicked dynasties 4. Near Eastern practice to call kings "sons of God" 5. Reference in ancient accounts to origin of kingship just prior to Flood
Problems:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The words of Christ that angels do not marry (Matt. 22:30) 2. The psychological and physiological impossibilities of angelic marriages 3. The usage of "sons of God" for only unfallen creatures 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Textual difficulty in making "men" of Genesis 6:1 different from "men" of Genesis 6:2 2. Absence of exact term "sons of God" for believers in the O.T. 3. Failure to explain the origin of the giants and mighty men through simply religiously mixed marriages 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This view fits in most normally with the context 2. It takes into account the practice in Near Eastern culture 3. It leaves the least number of questions unanswered
Proponents:	W. F. Albright; A. C. Gaebelein; W. Kelly; M. F. Unger; B. K. Waltke; F. Delitzsch; E. Bullinger; C. Larkin; G. Pember; K. Wuest; J. Gray; R. A. Torrey	Hengstenberg; Keil; Lange; Jamieson-Fausset-Brown; M. Henry; C. I. Scofield; C. F. Lincoln; J. Murray; J. S. Baxter; G. Scroggie; H. C. Leupold	W. Kaiser; L. Birney; M. Kline; G. Cornfeld

If we interpret *sons of God* as meaning angels, then we have on our hands a host of theological and scientific problems. Where do angels get bodies? How are such bodies able to copulate? What is the status of the children produced as far as the question of "in Adam" is concerned? If we take the expression to mean pious men . . . we are accordingly free from the nest of scientific and theological difficulties the other alternative creates for us.³⁵

It has been shown that the angelic interpretation defies the normalities of experience, while the Sethite view denies those of language. The interpreter's task is to find the writer's meaning. What did Moses mean, and how were his inspired words understood by his generation? That interpretation which fits in best with the Biblical and cultural context is

the view that the "sons of God" were ambitious antediluvian despots. This position does the least violence to the text and leaves the fewest questions unanswered. It is in all probability the true interpretation of Genesis 6.

²⁰Birney, p. 49.

²¹Kline, p. 196.

²²Kline, p. 194.

²³Kline, pp. 194, 195.

²⁴Birney, pp. 47, 48.

²⁵Gaalyahu Cornfeld, *Adam to Daniel* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), p. 27.

²⁶Kline, pp. 192, 193.

²⁷Birney, p. 48.

²⁸Kline, p. 196.

²⁹Birney, p. 51.

³⁰Cornfeld, p. 25.

³¹Kline, p. 201.

³²Kline, pp. 197, 198.

³³Kline, p. 199.

³⁴Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956), p. 120.

³⁵Ramm, p. 121.