

THE SONS OF GOD OF GENESIS 6:



DEMONS
DEGENERATES
or
DESPOTS ?



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THE SONS OF GOD AND DAUGHTERS OF MEN

In the history of the exposition of Scripture few texts have caused as many problems as Genesis 6:1-4. This passage has been the delight of novices and the despair of theologians. The text reads as follows:

And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. And the Lord said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh; yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years. 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.

Since these verses form a part of the inspired word, any attempt to understand them meets with God's approval and is well worth the effort. It will not do, as some have done, to simply write this off as an inscrutable account "of unknown origin and uncertain purpose."¹ God had a definite purpose in disclosing this problematic event. It is the believer's duty to try and understand it.

THE PROBLEMS THAT ARE INVOLVED

The Identification of the Persons Involved

The proper interpretation of the passage revolves around the identification of the "sons of God" and "daughters of men." An impressive array of scholars has suggested that the "sons of God" were simply

¹G. Henton Davies, Genesis. The Broadman Bible Commentary (Nashville, Tennessee: The Broadman Press, 1969), p. 149.

men of the godly line of Seth who intermarried with the "daughters of men," that is, women of the ungodly line of Cain. An equally imposing list of scholars has marshalled evidence that the "sons of God" are to be understood as fallen angels who cohabited with women of the human race. Both of these views, however, are beset with seemingly insurmountable difficulties. The result has been an Excedrin headache of monstrous proportions for students of the problem.

Identification of the Promiscuity Involved

If the "sons of God" are angelic beings, then their sin is one of perversion. Two worlds, the angelic and the human, are mixed through a most heinous sin. On the other hand, if the "sons of God" are the Sethites then their sin is one of pollution of the godly line. It is an indiscriminate marriage without regard to spiritual status.

Identification of the Progeny Involved

Some see the "giants" (nephilim) who were "in the earth in those days" as men of great stature or heroes which were living at that time or were the product of the intermarriage of the two religious communities. Others see the nephilim as the unnatural offspring of fallen angels and mortal women.

The "men of renown" (gibborim) of verse 4 are either seen as a reference to the offspring of the union of the "sons of God" and "daughters of men" or they are considered as explanatory of the nephilim. The "men of renown" would therefore be identical with the nephilim.

THE PROPOSALS THAT HAVE BEEN OFFERED

Angelic Creatures

The explanation of the view. According to this view, fallen angels assume human form, seduce mortal women, and produce an offspring of giants or monsters. As a result of this satanically inspired attempt to corrupt the human race and thus the Messianic line, God was forced to send the universal deluge preserving only righteous Noah and his family.

The evidence for the view. Proponents for the "angel theory" point first of all to the antiquity of the view. Probably the oldest written reference to this theory is found in the pseudepigraphal (i.e. written under an assumed name) Book of Enoch, around 200 B.C. The Book of Enoch, a book of Jewish apocalyptic, says that 200 angels in heaven saw the beautiful women on earth, lusted after them, and took them for wives with the result that they became pregnant and bore giants. For the first time sinning angels are associated with Genesis 6. Furthermore, this view seems to have been the common Jewish interpretation. The famous Jewish historian Josephus (born 37 B.C.) wrote: "Many angels accompanied with women, and begat sons that proved unjust" (Antiquities, 1:3:1). Likewise, the common Bible of the Jews at the time of Christ, the Septuagint version of the Hebrew scripture in the Greek language in the third century B.C. reads in Genesis 6:2 "angels of God" instead of "sons of God."

Advocates of the angelic view point out that the Hebrew term rendered "sons of God" in the English Bible is used exclusively of angels in the Old Testament. The term "sons of God" occurs three times in that sense in Job (1:6;2:1;38:7). A similar phrase, "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 which speaks of "a son of the gods" is also sometimes cited in support.

Then too, the early church held the position that angels are referred to in Genesis 6 and understood the New Testament passages of 1 Peter 3:18, 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6 as references to an angelic sin of Genesis 6. Jude 6 and 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.

Coder observed: "There was something strange and terrible in those ancient unions, because their progeny were monstrous. This is a fact difficult to explain if the text refers merely to godly men taking ungodly wives."²

Moreover, it has also been pointed out that references in ancient mythology to intermarriage between gods and men must have their ultimate origin in a historical event. Unger, who very cogently argues for the angel view, notes:

One thing is certain, ancient classic writers obtained their conceptions of the gods and demigods, whose amorous propensities for members of the human race led to births half human and half divine, from some source originally pure and uncorrupted. It is not impossible that this might explain the origin.³

Finally, it is also contended that this view best explains the progeny of the union of Genesis 6, namely "giants" and "men of renown." This unnatural union produced an unnatural race of monstrosities which had to be destroyed by the flood. This view also holds that the sons of Enak (Num. 13:33, the only other place the word "giant" occurs) could

²S. Maxwell Coder, Jude: The Acts of the Apostates (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), p. 38.

³Merrill F. Unger, Biblical Demonology (Wheaton: Scripture Press, 1952), p. 49.

also refer to another intrusion of fallen angels into the human realm.

The evaluation of the view. Even those who advocate this view admit that it is "vexed by serious questions."⁴ The chief objection usually stated is that the concept of sexual activity involving angels is foreign to the Bible. Nowhere else in the context of Genesis 6 are angels mentioned, nowhere else in Scripture is there an analogy for the idea of intermarriage of angels and men, and Christ specifically states that angels do not marry (Matt. 22:30; Mark 15:25; Luke 20:34-36). However, advocates of the angel view point out that Christ is specifically speaking of good angels and that man does not possess a full knowledge of fallen angels.

The appeal to the Septuagint reading of "angels of God" should be tempered with an acknowledgment that it is only the Alexandrian manuscript which so reads. The critical Septuagint text by Rahlfs does read "sons of God" and therefore does not reflect an ancient "angelic" understanding of Genesis 6.

Opponents to the angelic view ask, "Why should judgment fall upon those who were tempted? Why are only the humans judged and punished in the Genesis account?" If the evil angels were the initiators of the sin, then God should have dealt firmly with them, as he did with the serpent in Genesis 3. After all, it was the "sons of God" who initiated the sin. Yet absolutely nothing is mentioned of judgment on the angels anywhere in the context of Genesis 6.

Some would appeal to 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6 to support a judgment on these angels. Yet in these two passages nothing is said of

⁴Ibid., p. 50.

angelic marriages. To argue that the "in like manner" of Jude 7 equates the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah with that of the angels of Genesis 6 is saying too much, for sodomy is not the same as marrying wives, which is what happened in Genesis 6:2. The phrase in Genesis 6:2, "took them wives," means to marry in a formal way and does not carry the connotation of incestuous cohabitation. Besides, the Jude passage simply means that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah are a warning example "in like manner" as the angels. Here are the two verses concerned:

And 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 and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the punishment of eternal fire (A.S.V.).

The punctuation of the Authorized Version has much in its favor: "Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, AND THE CITIES ABOUT THEM IN LIKE MANNER, having given themselves over. . . ." C. Fred Lincoln elaborates on this interpretation:

The phrase "in like manner" of Jude 7 does not compare the sin of the angels with that of the men of Sodom and Gomorrah, but says that the cities about Sodom and Gomorrah (i. e., Admah and Zeboim, Deut. 29:23 and Hos. 11:8) "in like manner" with the other two Sodom and Gomorrah committed this sin of lasciviousness.⁵

The sin of the angels (v. 6) and the sin of the cities (v. 7) are held up as warning examples of heinous sins resulting in eternal judgments.

The angel theory confuses the prehistoric fall of angels, mentioned in Jude 6, with the sin of Genesis 6. "The angels which kept not their first estate" are now in permanent torment. What was their first estate? Unconfirmed creaturely holiness. This they lost by

⁵C. Fred Lincoln, Covenant, Dispensational and Related Studies (unpublished manuscript), Dallas Theological Seminary, p. 42.

rebellling against God's authority. Apparently the ringleaders are now in chains. Only Satan, the arch-enemy of God, is still temporarily free.

In a similar fashion as in Jude 6 and 7, Peter gives three examples of divine judgment of the wicked: First, "the angels that sinned" (v. 4); second, the pre-flood era (v. 5); third, Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 6). The examples read as follows:

- (1) "For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment;
- (2) "And spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly;
- (3) "And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomarrha into ashes, condemned them with an overthrow, making them an example unto those that after should live ungodly"

J. Sidlow Baxter notes concerning this passage:

Now if, as the angel-theory advocates say, number 1 happened at the same time as number 2, why not 2 at the same time as 3? Is it not the more reasonable thing to see that Peter here speaks in correct order, of three events which ocured successively, and not simultaneously? It is; and that means, of course, that this fall of angels happened before Noah's time.⁶

It is very interesting to notice, but frequently ignored, that the marriage among the sons of God and daughters of men in Genesis 6 is referred to in Matthew 24:37-39 and Luke 17:26-29 as a sign of ungodliness and wickedness of the human race at the time of the Lord's coming. The corruption of mankind will be similar to that of the time of the flood ("But as the days of Noah . . . marrying and giving in marriage . . . so shall also the coming of the son of man be"). If, then, the sin of Genesis 6 is an intermarriage of evil angels and human women, it

⁶J. Sidlow Baxter, "Who Were the Sons of God?" Studies in Problem Texts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), p. 164.

follows that such a demonic invasion must again take place.

"Sons of God" is said to refer always to angelic beings elsewhere. Actually, the phrase occurs only in Job 1:6, 2:1 and 38:7. Similar phrases are found in Psalm 89:6, Daniel 3:25 and Psalm 29:1. In every one of these passages, however, it is used only of unfallen creatures and used in a general way to specify those voluntarily submissive to the will of God. To call a fallen creature a son of God would be pointless (Cf. John 8:44, "ye are of your father the devil"). It is true that Satan is mentioned in the first two Job passages; nevertheless, it must be noted that in both passages he is presented as an intruder, and appears to be distinguished from the sons of God (" . . . the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them").

One might also wonder why Moses did not say "angels" if this is what was meant here. Surely it was a part of his vocabulary. No less than 15 times in the Pentateuch does he refer to angels, and they are always called angels, never once called "sons of God."

The angel view assumes that these creatures left one habitation and came to earth for a specific purpose. Baxter, who probably gives the best refutation of the angel view, writes:

There is not a single word or even the faintest hint that these "sons of God" somehow came to the earth for the purpose, much less is there the slightest suggestion that they were fallen angels committing a staggering monstrosity. Surely had the latter been so, the writer would at the very least have said that they "came" or "descended" or "appeared," instead of simply "saw" and "took"!⁷

Not only do the terminology and context of Genesis 6 seem to militate against the possibility of any reference to angelic creatures,

⁷Ibid, p. 174.

but there is one other difficulty which makes the angel theory untenable. Whatever the "giants" and "men of renown" might have been, they were not the product of an unholy union between angels and women. From a psycho-physiological viewpoint, a cohabiting of angelic creatures with human women is unthinkable. And yet, if such a sexual union did take place, it could have occurred, as the great commentator Keil so aptly discerns, in only three possible ways. Angels could produce offspring because (1) either by nature they possess material bodies; or (2) they have intrinsic rebellious power to create for themselves material bodies; or (3) they are capable of procreating without natural bodies.⁸ All three ideas are utterly impossible and Lincoln's statement is much to the point:

Though angels were at times made visible to chosen men, such occurrences were under God's direct supervision and limitations. What became of those bodies, if they were temporary physical or material abodes, is not revealed in Scripture. The Angel of Jehovah, though He appeared to men in Old Testament times in a form visible to men, had to be born of a virgin in order to have a normal body "prepared for Him." Heb. 10:5⁹

What, then, do the advocates of the angel view say to these objections? They try to easily dismiss them by simply asserting "To deny such a possibility (of angels cross-breeding with human beings) is to assume, it would seem, a degree of knowledge of fallen angelic nature which man does not possess."¹⁰ Actually, it is the angel proponents who demonstrate a more intimate knowledge of angelic nature than the Bible

⁸C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament The Pentateuch, Vol. 1. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), pp. 132-133.

⁹Lincoln, op. cit., p. 40.

¹⁰Unger, op. cit., p. 50.

would warrant. The Bible appears to be clear enough on the nature of angels. Baxter addresses himself at length to the psychological and physiological difficulties involved in such a union and states:

Let us be frank and explicit. The angels are bodiless, purely spiritual beings, and sexless. Being bodiless and sexless means that they are without sex organs, and that they are therefore absolutely incapable of sensuous experiences or sexual processes; nor are they capable of procreation or reproduction in any way whatever. There is no need to refer to this or that or the other text: the whole teaching of the Bible concerning the angels stands solidly behind that affirmation.

As for the suggestion that these evil angels somehow took human bodies to themselves and thus became capable of sex functions, it is sheer absurdity, as anyone can see. Both on psychological and physiological ground it is unthinkable. We all know what an exquisitely delicate, intricate, intimate, sensitive inter-relation and inter-reaction there exists between the human body and the human mind or soul. This is because soul and body came into being together through the wonderful process of a human birth, and are mysteriously united in one human personality. Thus, and only thus, is it that the sensations of the body become experiences of the mind. This psycho-physical parallelism of the human personality is a mystery; but it is an absolute and universal reality.

Now if angels merely took bodies and miraculously indwelt them for the time being, their doing so could not have made them in the slightest degree able to experience the sensations of those bodies, even if those bodies themselves could have been capable of real sensations, which is greatly doubtful; for the angels and those temporarily occupied bodies, not having come into being together by a real human birth as one personality, there could not be any such inter-reaction as that which exists in the case of the human mind and body. Indeed, the bodies could not have been real bodies of flesh and blood at all, when we come to think of it; for without being inhabited by the human spirit, the human flesh-and-blood body dies. Bodies occupied by angels simply could not be normal human bodies of flesh and blood.¹¹

Finally, what can be said concerning extra-Biblical traditions of intermarriage between celestial and terrestrial beings? Do they not rest on some historical basis? And did not the events of Genesis 6 give origin to these grotesque myths? For one thing, "extra-canonical considerations may never be pitted against the evidence which scripture

¹¹Baxter, op. cit., p. 152.

itself determinatively provides."¹² It should be emphasized, as Green has done, that "the whole conception of sexual life, as connected with God or angels, is absolutely foreign to Hebrew thought."¹³ Green points out that there is no Hebrew word for goddess, that the idea of deities having sexual functions is rejected as a heathen notion in the Bible, and that there is no analogy in the Bible for the idea of intermarriage of angels and men.

Apostate Sethites

Although this view generally identifies "the sons of God" as the godly line of Seth, it seems more appropriate to refer to these individuals as apostate Sethites, considering their unusual sin and their unprecedented judgment.

The explanation of the view. In contrast to the first view, the "sons of God" are identified as men, and the "daughters of men" are women. Usually (although some avoid this distinction) the "sons of God" are specifically identified as the godly descendents of Seth and the "daughters of men" are the ungodly line of Cain. The sin involved is thus that of "mixed marriage," that is, of believer's marriage to unbeliever.

The evidence for the view. Impressive support may be arrayed in favor of this position. The immediate context certainly speaks of men: "Men began to multiply" (v. 1); "the wickedness of man was great on the earth" (v. 5); therefore, God said, "My spirit shall not always strive

¹²John Murray, Principles of Conduct (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), p. 244.

¹³Leroy Birney, "An Exegetical Study of Genesis 6:1-4," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, XIII, Winter 1970, p. 45.

with man" (v. 3). If the angel hypothesis is right, why should the spirit of God strive with men rather than angels? It is quite beyond comprehension that the spirit should strive with men for a sin which the angels committed.

Another strong argument is based on the general context. It is argued that the context preceding Genesis 6 favored this view. Specifically, the descendents and achievements of Cain are listed in 4:1-24, while those of Seth appear in 4:25-5:32. Without question, two lines are contrasted here and they are distinct. Cain and his descendents were ungodly. Cain's line begins with improper worship and murder and ends in polygamy and an arrogant boast of self-defense. That the "daughters of men . . . were fair" (6:2) is in keeping with the meaning of the names of the women in the line of Cain: Adah means "ornament" or "beauty," Zillah means "shade," and Naamah means "pleasant."

In connection with Seth's line, it is said "then began men to call upon the name of the Lord" (4:26). Enoch, of this line, "walked with God" (5:24), and Noah was "perfect in his generations," and also "walked with God" (6:9). The Seth line were the true worshipers of God and the title "sons of God" befitted them.

Furthermore, the understanding of "sons of God" to refer to the godly line

. . . is consistent with the Biblical concept that Israel is the son of God, and the chosen people are His children. This concept occurs in Ex. 4:22; Deut. 14:1; 32:5,6,18,19; Hos. 1:10; Isa. 1:2; 11:1; 43:6; 45:11; Jer. 31:20; and Psa. 73:15.¹⁴

Another argument for this view comes from the Lord Himself. On the basis of Matthew and Luke the marriages of Genesis 6 must be of the

¹⁴Ibid., p. 46.

same nature as those among the ungodly in the future. The Genesis marriages must be the same as those of Matthew 24:37-38 and Luke 17:26-27. In these New Testament passages there is nothing to suggest that Christ had anything more than human marriages in mind. If Genesis 6 records what angels did, there is no parallel at all between the antediluvial age and the days of the end of the age.

In view that the "sons of God" are the godly line fits in well with the pronounced aversion of the book of Genesis to marriage between the godly and the ungodly, as seen in the cases of Isaac (24:3-4), Jacob (27:46; 28:1-3), Esau (26:34-35; 28:6-8) and Dinah (ch. 34). "In this context, Gen. 6:1-4 furthers the practical aim of preventing indiscriminate marriage without regard to spiritual status."¹⁵

In summary, the view that the "sons of God" were men of the godly line Seth is tenable because the group is already distinguished from the ungodly line of Cain in the context. Also, the designation is consistent with the Biblical concept of spiritual sonship; it fits the theme of Genesis which warns the godly against intermarriage with the ungodly; and it is consonant with the context which demonstrates the progressive corruption and ultimate destruction of the human race.

The evaluation of the view. While the view has much to commend itself, it should be noted that it is also beset by certain difficulties. Unger, interestingly, calls it "naive and perfectly orthodox."¹⁶ If the "sons of God" and "daughters of men" represent respectively the godly Sethite and ungodly Cainite lines which intermarried, with the

¹⁵Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁶Unger, op. cit., p. 47.

result that the godly line was broken down, then serious textual objections may be raised. This view takes the term "men" in two different senses in verses 1 and 2. In verse one the "men" are understood as mankind generically ("When men began to multiply . . . daughters were born unto them"). In verse two the "men" are taken to be specifically of the Cainite line ("The sons of God saw the daughters of men"). That such a sudden shift in meaning is not intended is evident from the fact that the "men" of both verses are the fathers of the "daughters" of the two verses. And the "daughters" of both verses are certainly identical. In verse 1, daughters were born to men in general. In verse 2, the "daughters of men" must also be of mankind rather than specifically of the Cainite line.

To overcome the difficulty, it has been suggested that "men" in verse 2, as in verse 1, is to be understood as generic. There would then be no specific reference to women of the Cainite line. The sin of the "sons of God," of the Sethite line would be an indiscriminate choice of marriage partners out of women in general, both Cainite and Sethite, to satisfy their own unbridled desire. They selected mates out "of all that they chose" (v. 3). The Sethites were characterized by careless regard of the holy principles governing the selection of a mate.

Several glaring difficulties beset the position which makes the "sons of God" Sethites. One such problem is the untenable assumption that the "sons of God" must mean the godly line of Seth. This would be in variance with the general use of that expression in the Old Testament where it appears to be restricted to angels (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7).

Gaebelien rightly notes the designation is never applied in the Old Testament to believers, whose sonship he rightly observes as distinctly

a New Testament revelation.¹⁷ While some Old Testament passages indicate that Israelites are God's sons (Deut. 14:1; 32:5; Ps. 82:6, etc.), the exact term "sons of God" is never once used for believers. To see a reference to individual spiritual sonship in Genesis 6 would be anachronistic. It would ignore the fact of progressive revelation.

A more serious problem for this prevalent view is posed by verse 4. From all appearances, the giants (nephilim) and mighty men (gibborim) are the offspring of the marriages of the "sons of God" and the "daughters of men." As Kline says:

It is not at all clear why the offspring of religiously mixed marriages should be Nephilim-Gibborim, however these be understood within the range of feasible interpretation . . . But his (the biblical author's) reference to the conjugal act and to childbearing finds justification only if he is describing the origin of the Nephilim-Gibborim. Unless the difficulty which follows from this conclusion can be overcome, the religiously mixed marriage interpretation of the passage ought to be definitely abandoned.¹⁸

To summarize the problem: Why does one find the kind of offspring mentioned in verse 4 if these are just religiously mixed marriages?

The difficulties of this view have driven many to adopt the angelic interpretation. And, as Kline suspects, the continuing dominance of the angelic interpretation of the passage has been due to the absence of a satisfactory alternative.¹⁹ Kline forcefully and cogently suggests such a satisfactory alternative interpretation, based primarily on findings in ancient Near Eastern literature, and studies of the term "sons of God" in cognate languages.

¹⁷Quoted by Unger, op. cit., p. 47.

¹⁸Meredith G. Kline, "Divine Kingship and Genesis 6:1-4," Westminster Theological Journal, XXIV, Nov. 1961-May 1962, p. 190.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 188-189.

Ambitious Despots

The explanation of the view. 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. 11:4)! Their sin was "not intermarriage between two groups--whether two worlds (angels and man), two religious communities (Sethite and Cainite), or two social classes (royal and common)--but that 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

The evidence for the view. Five major lines of evidence seem to support this view. The first line of evidence is that of ancient interpretation. This view lays claim to antiquity also. In an excellent article presenting this view, Kline writes that this view 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

²⁰Birney, op. cit., p. 49.

²¹Kline, op. cit., p. 196.

"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" (Ex. 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 = rulers or judges or magistrates (Ps. 82:6; cf. Ex. 22:8-9). Thus it was not uncommon to use divine epithets to refer to magistrates, and "sons of God" in Genesis 6:1-4 could refer to magistrates or rulers.

A third line of evidence is the contextual support. It is 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 ante-diluvian history that accounts for the focusing of attention on the marriages of the royal בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים [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 בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים [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

²² Kline, op. cit., p. 194.

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 Gen. 6:1-4 resumes the thread of the history where it was dropped at Gen. 4:24. Structurally, the accounts of Lamech (Gen. 4:19-24) and of the בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים [sons of God] (Gen. 6:1ff.) 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. Gen. 6:1ff. 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 favor 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, to bring it right down to where the rubber meets the road, how would Moses' son have understood the title "sons of God," had he looked over his father's shoulder as ancient Moses penned these words?

As a matter of fact, archeological 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.

²³Kline, op. cit., pp. 194-195.

In Egypt the king 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 or the son of god. Thus, on the basis of Semitic usage, the term be ne 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 affect 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 associated 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 בְּנֵי-אֱלֹהִים [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:

²⁴Birney, op. cit., pp. 47-48.

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

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 the 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, Moses' contemporaries 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

One other area of discussion remains. Who were these 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 product of these marriages. Exegetically, both interpretations are possible. It is probably best to

²⁶Kline, op. cit., pp. 192-193.

²⁷Birney, op. cit., p. 48.

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 בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים [sons of God] were the Nephilim-Gibborim (vs. 4), the mighty tyrants who Lamech-like esteemed their might to be their right. So as man abounded on the face of the earth (vs. 1) God saw that the wickedness of man abounded in the earth (vs. 5). By reason of the polygamy and tyranny practiced by the dynasty of the בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים [sons of God] in the name of divine-royal prerogative and justice, the earth became corrupt before God and filled with violence (vss. 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. It is quite possible, as Cornfeld suggests, that:

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.

²⁸Kline, op. cit., p. 196.

²⁹Birney, op. cit., p. 51.

³⁰Cornfeld, op. cit., p. 25.

The word gibbor is used of Nimrod in Genesis 10:8. Kline has some suggested comments on the fact that Nimrod belongs to the category of the gibborim:

That Nimrod was a king is clear from Gen. 10:10 (which locates his dominion in the land of Shinar, cf. Gen. 11:2), and this supports the interpretation of the Gibborim of Gen. 6:4 and their fathers, the בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים [sons of God] as a royal dynasty. If one bears in mind the divine ordinance of Gen. 9:5,6, by which the civil power was authorized to destroy manslaying beasts as well as human murderers, it will be seen that Gen. 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 אִישׁ צַיָּד [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 founded and apportioned to particular

³¹Kline, op. cit., p. 201.

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 extra-biblical accounts is further corroborating evidence that this interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 is correct. As Kline remarks:

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 paper 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 Principle of Context

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

³²Kline, op. cit., pp. 197-198.

³³Kline, op. cit., p. 199.

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.

The Principle of Culture

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 of Solomon's practices centuries later. Power had corrupted them; their only desire was for more power.

The Principle of Complexity and Simplicity

Bernard Ramm, in his standard work, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, 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 very important questions to the angel proponents.

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.

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

³⁵Ibid., p. 121.

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<u>Position:</u>	ANGELIC CREATURES	APOSTATE SETHITES	AMBITIOUS DESPOTS
<u>Persons:</u>	Fallen angels cohabit with beautiful women.	Ungodly Sethites marry depraved Cainites.	Despotic chieftains marry a plurality of wives.
<u>Perversion:</u>	Perversion of human race by intrusion of angels.	Pollution of godly line by mixed marriage.	Polygamy of Cainite princes to expand dominion.
<u>Progeny:</u>	Monstrous giants.	Wicked tyrants.	Dynastic rulers.
<u>Proofs:</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The antiquity of the view -The reference to angels in Job as "sons of God" -The N.T. references to the angelic sin of Gen. 6 (1 Pet. 3:18; 2 Pet. 2:14; Jude 6) -The resultant unnatural race of monstrosities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The emphasis on men in the context -Human sin as the reason for the Flood -The thematic development of Genesis 4-5 -The aversion in Genesis to intermarriage between godly and ungodly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Antiquity of this interpretation -Biblical usage of "god" for rulers and judges -Reference in context to development of wicked dynasties. -Near Eastern practice to call kings "sons of God" -Reference in ancient accounts to origin of kingship just prior to Flood
<u>Problems:</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The words of Christ that angels do not marry (Matt. 22:30) -The psychological and physiological impossibilities of angelic marriages -The usage of "sons of God" for only unfallen creatures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Textual difficulty in making "men" of Gen. 6:1 different from "men" of Gen. 6:2 -Absence of exact term "sons of God" for believers in the O.T. -Failure to explain the origin of the giants and mighty men through simply religiously mixed marriages 	<p style="text-align: center;">This view</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -fits in most normally with the context. -takes into account the practice in Near Eastern culture. -leaves the least number of questions unanswered.
<u>Proponents:</u>	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, Matthew Henry, C. I. Scofield, C. F. Lincoln, John Murray, J. S. Baxter, G. Scroggie, H.C. Leupold	Walter Kaiser Leroy Birney Meredith Kline Gaalyahu Cornfeld