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Is the "Sons of God" Passage in Genesis 6 Adapted Pagan Mythology?

Lee Anderson Jr., Answers in Genesis, PO Box 510, Hebron, Kentucky 41048.

Abstract

The identity of "the sons of God" (בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים) in Genesis 6 is commonly regarded as one of the most difficult interpretive cruxes in all of the Old Testament. Compounding the exegetical challenges in this passage, critical scholarship commonly charges that the text's references to the sons' of God cohabitation with "the daughters of men" is an example of the biblical author importing an ancient myth from a pagan source into the Scriptures, which implicitly undercuts both the inspiration and inerrancy of the biblical text. This paper aims to present a detailed overview of interpretations offered by conservative biblical scholars on the identity of "the sons of God" in Genesis 6, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each position. Its primary goal is to demonstrate that there are plausible alternatives to viewing the sons of God passage as a mythological story that has intruded into its present context. This paper concludes that the Genesis 6 account of the "sons of God" is not a product of the pagan ideas circulating in its day. In addition, this paper encourages Bible-believing advocates of all interpretations of Genesis 6:1–4 to together learn to appreciate the strengths of the different positions—positions which, though sometimes vastly different, are united in their goal of striving to see the trustworthiness of Scripture upheld.

Keywords: angels, daughters of men, demons, dynastic rulers, mythology, Nephilim, Seth, sons of God

Translation

And it came about, when mankind began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were beautiful. And they took for themselves wives from any they chose. And YHWH said, "My spirit will not remain with man indefinitely, in that he is flesh; his days will be one hundred twenty years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—whenever[1] the sons of God went in to the daughters of men, who bore to them *children*. They were the mighty men of antiquity, men of renown.

Introduction

The significance of "The sons of God" in Genesis 6

The identity of "the sons of God" (בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים) in Genesis 6:2 is commonly regarded as one of the most difficult interpretive cruxes in all of the Old Testament (Eveson 2001, 148; Walton 2001, 291).[2] In fact, Victor P. Hamilton argues concerning the identity of "the sons of God" that "the evidence is ambiguous and therefore defies clear-cut identifications and solutions" (Hamilton 1990, 265). Compounding the exegetical challenges in Genesis 6:1–4, critical scholarship regularly parades the account's references to the sons' of God cohabitation with "the daughters of men" as an example of the biblical author importing an ancient myth from a pagan source into the Scriptures, which implicitly undercuts both the inspiration and inerrancy of the biblical text (contra Psalm 119:160; John 17:17; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20–21). Moreover, they claim that the sons of God passage fails to exhibit a genuine connection to the surrounding text, perhaps having been forced into its present position by the biblical author in an effort to elucidate YHWH's reasoning for sending the *Mabbûl* in Genesis 7–8.

As an example of this observation concerning critical scholarship, Hermann Gunkel posited that the sons of God passage represented an earlier myth that had been "mutilated" so as to "remove the strongly mythological content of the tradition which scandalized the narrator" (Gunkel 1910, 59; cited in Coleran 1941, 502). Claus Westermann offers a similar perspective, saying, "The original setting of the narrative that lies behind [Genesis] 6:1–4 is the setting where it began and was handed down as

[1] In defense of reading וְיָלְדוּ . . . יָבֹאוּ as speaking of a recurring event, see the comments by Wenham (1987, 143), Skinner (1930, 147), and Gesenius (2006, 315).

[2] Granted, not all interpreters regard this issue as challenging, and a few offer their conclusion on the subject as a clear-cut, incontrovertible solution. See, for instance, the arguments and conclusion of H. C. Leupold (1942, 250). However, the great majority of exegetes consider the identity of the בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים an issue complex enough to warrant a thorough consideration of all possible views.

myth. One can take as certain that it did not originate in Israel" (Westermann 1984, 369).[3] S.R. Driver likewise comments that this passage represents an example of "Hebrew legend" or "unassimilated myth," and then proceeds to argue, "The Hebrew narrators stripped off the mythological colouring of the pieces of folk-lore which they record; but in the present instance, it is still discernable" (Driver 1926, 83). Driver compares Genesis 6 to the ancient tales of "giants" from Phoenicia, Greece, and other cultures. Similarly, E.A. Speiser calls Genesis 6:1–4 an "isolated fragment" that smacks of "undisguised mythology," and is "controversial in the extreme" (Speiser 1964, 45).[4] Ralph H. Elliott says, "The author has perhaps used a fragment of mythology as a literary vehicle to 'convey the sense of what theologians call the "demonic," i.e., the potentialities of the human race for heroic good and spectacular evil'" (Elliott 1961, 62–63).[5] He concludes therefore the idea of these marriages was "borrowed from mythology as a means of underscoring the evil and demonic in man and *was not intended to be taken literally*" (Elliott 1961, 63). This sort of approach clearly devalues the text as a divinely-inspired record of early history. Additionally, Walter Brueggemann maintains that Genesis 6:1–4 "participates as fully in the common mythological tradition of the ancient Near East as any Old Testament text" and that its original meaning is obscured to the point that "the effort taken in understanding it will not be matched by gains for exposition in the listening community" (Brueggemann 1982, 70–71).

Ronald S. Hendel presents a slightly different perspective on the passage, but still views the account as myth. He contests the commonly held liberal notion that the author of Genesis had attempted to "sanitize" the myth embedded in 6:1–4, saying, "What could be more mythological than the sexual mingling of gods and mortals and the birth of semidivine offspring? Surely if the Yahwist were averse to myth as such he would simply have omitted Gen 6:1–4" (Hendel 1987, 14). In this Hendel has a valid point, but his assumptions remain problematic. He goes on to say, "That the Yahwist included it [Genesis 6:1–4] in the Primeval Cycle of Genesis 2–11 indicates that he did not find it objectionable and that it is indeed an authentic Israelite myth. The story is, however, somewhat disjointed in its Genesis context. The Yahwist retained the story in his composition, yet declined to present it in a full narrative form" (Hendel 1987, 14).

Other proponents of reading Genesis 6:1–4 as an adapted myth which is only imperfectly integrated into the surrounding context include David L. Petersen (1979, 47, 49ff.),[6] Robert Alter (1996, 26), Gerhard von Rad (1972, 115), John Skinner (1930, 139–40),[7] and David Melvin (2011, 23–32).[8] In all of these examples, the principle problem is the denigration of the inspiration and inerrancy of the biblical text in that it is argued that the biblical writer depended on source material that was plainly *mythological* (read *false, untrue*) and *pagan*—which is to say, contrary to the character of the God who claims to be the Author of the Genesis account and contrary to the character of the surrounding text that relentlessly attacks pagan mythology in pro-YHWH polemics (e.g., Genesis 1, 6–9).[9]

Certainly, the presentation of a viable, non-mythical interpretation of this text is essential to the defense of the truth of the entirety of

[3] Westermann (1984, 369) also notes, "The passage 6:1–4 shows incontestably that ancient Israel became familiar with the myths of the surrounding world in the course of its development and took notice of them. Israel itself could not of course be fertile ground for myth and, as far as we know, was the source of no myths at all; but it certainly became familiar with myths from the surrounding world." The point that is truly and especially significant, however, is Westermann's sweeping claim to follow: "It is certainly not true, as has often been said, that when an Israelite encountered a myth he proceeded at once to demythologize it. When some myth or other from the surrounding world became known in Israel and was recounted…there must have been some point of interest in it." Again, this sort of perspective casts aspersions on the unique character of the biblical text as inspired by the living God (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20–21), and therefore true and trustworthy (Psalm 119:160; John 17:17). It is diametrically opposed to the doctrine of bibliology required by Christian orthodoxy.

[4] Speiser suggests a Hittite origin for the original myth, suggesting that the author adapted it and situated it immediately prior to the Flood narrative in order to demonstrate that YHWH's motive for sending the deluge was ultimately a moral one. (See also Speiser 1956, 126–29.)

[5] The word "perhaps" is key to Elliot's quote, for he does not offer any proof of literary dependence. Indeed, this sort of speculation (which is nonetheless taken as certainty) is rampant among liberal interpreters. There is no actual evidence that this account was dependent on mythology.

[6] Petersen remarks that, interpreted as a myth, Genesis 6:1–4 functions to set up or reestablish boundaries, namely those between deity and humanity (p. 58).

[7] Skinner calls it an "obviously fragmentary narrative," and also suggests that the myth's contents would have figured largely in Hebrew folklore.

[8] Melvin attempts to identify the content of Genesis 6 and portions of the Gilgamesh Epic as originating from a common source.

[9] On the use of such polemics in Genesis 1 and 6–9, see John D. Currid (2013, 33–63). Notably, there are instances when a biblical author draws upon extrabiblical material (including material from pagan mythology), but never in such a way so as to endorse a pagan worldview.

Scripture. Indeed, if the inclusion of mythology in the biblical text is permitted at this point, it is impossible to evade some measure of doubt being cast upon the trustworthiness of Scripture as a whole. Accordingly, while the sons of God passage is obscure, it is nonetheless significant from an apologetic standpoint. Therefore, in arguing against the claim that Genesis 6:1–4 contains imported myth, any suggested interpretation of the passage and the identity of "the sons of God" must not only be exegetically robust; it must also be able to demonstrate how it fits consistently within the theological framework of the Old Testament text, namely with respect to what Scripture teaches about monotheism and the uniqueness of YHWH (Deuteronomy 4:35, 39; Isaiah 44:8; 45:5, 6, 14, 21, 22; 46:9; Joel 2:27). It must likewise be demonstrated how the passage relates to the broader context of Genesis 5–6, with lexical, thematic, theological, and/or conceptual linkages established between it and the preceding genealogy, or the following account of Noah and the *Mabbûl*, or (preferably) both.

Consequently, this paper aims to present a detailed overview of interpretations offered by conservative biblical scholars on the identity of "the sons of God" in Genesis 6:2, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each position. This paper will attempt to survey the arguments given for the different interpretations, whether they be lexical, grammatical, contextual, intertextual, or theological. However, its primary thrust will be to clearly show that there are plausible alternatives to viewing the sons of God passage as a mythological story that has intruded into its present context. In the process, this paper will also show how this relatively short passage bears ramifications for understanding the cause of the Genesis Flood, as well as the character of God in relation to the nature of His holiness and judgment.

Examination: *Various understandings of "The sons of God" in Genesis 6*

To date, several views have been set forth to explain the identity of "the sons of God" in Genesis 6:2. Most of these views may be grouped into three main categories: (1) views which assert that "the sons of God" were members of the godly line of Seth (cf. Genesis 5:3ff.) who married ungodly "daughters of men" (likely from the line of Cain, the reprobate); (2) views which hold that "the sons of God" were dynastic rulers who may have been considered semi-divine and who acted in wickedness by marrying of "the daughters of men" "all which they chose" (KJV), which is taken to mean that polygamy was rampant; and (3) views that maintain that "the sons of God" were fallen angelic beings who, in rebellion, took to themselves human wives and bore offspring. Each one of these positions has given rise to secondary views, some of the more prominent of which shall be discussed below. In addition, there have been a handful of lesser-known views which do not fall cleanly into any of the main categories.

Godly line of Seth

The interpretation that "the sons of God" were godly members of the line of Seth has been a common understanding since the early centuries of the Christian church, with Julius Africanus (c. 160–c. 240) ([1886] 1994, 131) being the first of the church fathers to promote the view.[10] This view later was popularized by Augustine (354–430) ([1887] 1994, 304), and eventually adopted by the reformers Luther (1483–1546) (1958, 129) and Calvin (1509–1564) ([1843] 1979, 238).[11] According to this position, the sin involved in this passage which incurred God's judgment in a global Flood (Genesis 7–8) was intermarriage between those faithful to YHWH (ostensibly the line of Seth recorded in Genesis 5:3–32), and the unfaithful "daughters of men," with the "unrestricted license" of the Sethites accelerating "the [moral] degeneracy of the whole human family" (Mathews 1996, 331). This would have been, within the historical context of fifteenth-century BC Israel, a warning against neglecting God's stipulation not to intermarry with the Canaanites (cf. Exodus 34:6; Deuteronomy 7:3)

[10] Julius Africanus writes, "What is meant by the Spirit . . . is that the descendants of Seth are called the sons of God on account of the righteous men and patriarchs who have sprung from him, even down to the Saviour Himself; but that the descendants of Cain are named the seed of men, as having nothing divine in them, on account of the wickedness of their race and the inequality of their nature, being a mixed people, and having stirred the indignation of God."

[11] Luther regrettably shows utter disregard for Jewish scholarship and downplays the lexical aspects of this interpretive issue, maintaining, "By 'sons of God' . . . Moses means the male descendants of the patriarchs who had the promise of the blessed Saviour. In the New Testament they are called believers who call God their Father and by Him are called His children. The Jews foolishly explain this expression to designate evil spirits from whom came the generation of the ungodly. The Flood did not come upon men because [of the sins] of the generation of the wicked, but because of the generation of the righteous that lapsed into idolatry, disobedience, voluptuousness, impurity and tyranny." It seems, therefore, that Luther was disposed to interpreting the passage in the light of his own experience with the corruption of the Catholic Church. Calvin, like Luther, interprets "the sons of God" in Genesis 6:2 in light of the New Testament doctrine of adoption and summarily dismisses all other positions (especially the *fallen angels view*) on the basis of their alleged absurdity.

(Mathews 1996, 330–31).[12] It highlights the sad consequences of religious syncretism.

In addition to this position's nice compatibility with the historical context, several other arguments have been set forth in its favor. First, while advocates of this view acknowledge that the precise formula בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים (cf. Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7) is never used of humans, they observe that *similar* language is used throughout the Old Testament to describe human followers of the LORD. For instance, in Deuteronomy 14:1, Moses says to the children of Israel, "You are sons (בָּנִים) of YHWH your God." Later, after Israel had sinned, Deuteronomy 32:5 says that they are "not His sons (לֹא בָנָיו)." In Hosea 1:10 (MT 2:1), the biblical author says the people of Israel are "sons of the living God (בְּנֵי אֵל־חָי)" (cf. Psalm 73:15; Isaiah 43:6).[13] Accordingly, James E. Coleran maintains, "This prevalence of the idea of divine sonship in the Old Testament should prepare us for finding the expression *sons of God* used of men, and should warn us against a too hasty rejection of the possibility of such a usage in texts that might be doubtful" (Coleran 1941, 495).[14] Relatedly, in contesting the notion that "the sons of God" must have been fallen angels, C.F. Keil argues, "If the title 'sons of God' cannot involve the notion of physical generation, it cannot be restricted to celestial spirits, but is applicable to all beings which bear the image of God [i.e., humans]" (Keil [1866–1891] 2011, 81).[15]

Second, interpreting "the sons of God" as the descendants of Seth fits within the confines of the broader context of Genesis. Genesis 4:19–24 highlights the evil line of the reprobate Cain, culminating with the wicked Lamech, and then contrasts that with the line of Seth (Genesis 4:26ff.) Moreover, such an interpretation matches with the reasons offered in Genesis 6 for God's resolve to send a global catastrophe to wipe out mankind: "And YHWH saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth…" (v. 5; cf. vv. 11–13). Accordingly, this view connects Genesis 6:1–4 to the following narrative by putting the blame for God's judgment squarely on the shoulders of the wicked human race. As Sven Fockner keenly observes, "Because of the way the narrative is designed from Genesis 4 to Genesis 10, the reader expects the passage to deal with the two lines of humanity and the vanishing of one of them.… The flood resulted from the wickedness of the people. Before ch. 6, only the unbelievers were depicted as wicked (Lamech). Then the sons of God joined this group" (Fockner 2008, 455). This argument is central to the *Sethite view*.

Third, interpreting "the sons of God" as the descendants of Seth allows the interpreter to retain the normal sense of וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם נָשִׁים, which simply means to "take (to themselves) wives" or—by extension—"to enter into marriage" (cf. Genesis 11:29; Judges 3:6; Ruth 1:4), and corresponds well to Christ's remark that "in the days of Noah" people "were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage" (Luke 17:26–27; NIV). The simplicity of this statement paired with the basic sense of the expression in Genesis 6:2 seems to suggest there was nothing outside of the ordinary related to the nature of this event, except that it was wicked. Accordingly, as Leupold intimates, *there is no basis for finding in Genesis 6:1–4 the presence of imported mythology* (Leupold 1942, 252–53).

However, there are some critical problems with this view which deserve to be illustrated. First, although it is demonstrable that the Old Testament does speak of divine sonship in relation to man, the *Sethite view* cannot adequately explain why the biblical author would take a precise formula that is elsewhere restricted to describing angelic beings (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7) and use it to speak of a particular line of men. Second, the *Sethite view*, though appearing to fit well with the context, actually creates problems

[12] Mathews' argument is worth citing at length. In his commentary, he conveys the following: "Also important is the weight of the Pentateuch's testimony, which identifies the Israelites as the children of God (e.g., Deut 14:1; 32:5–6; cf. Exod 4:2; Pss 73:15; 80:15); this resonates well with taking the 'sons of God' in 6:2 as an allusion to godly (covenant) offspring (cf. also Isa 43:6; Hos 1:10; 11:1; John 1:12–13). It has been charged that such a reading is inappropriate before the founding of Israel, since there is no designated people of God. However, this disregards the author's efforts at connecting the prepatriarchal fathers (chaps. 1–11) and the founders of Israel (chaps. 12–50)." Mathews goes on to make a point which may appear questionable: "Genesis typically invites Israel to see itself in the events of their parents by employing the language and imagery of institutional life and of events later experienced by Israel. Mosaic law codified the prohibition against marriage outside the covenant community; Genesis illustrates how religious intermarriage resulted in calamity for the righteous (e.g., 28:1; 34:1ff.; 38:1ff.)." It is not clear to this author that Genesis actually forges a link between Israel and the line of Seth, such that they might both be called the "covenant" community. Israel is a unique nation, and apart from the covenant made between God and Noah, no mention of a covenant appears in Genesis prior to that made between God and Abraham (cf. Gen. 15, 17, etc.) However, Mathews still makes an excellent point in demonstrating how understanding "the sons of God" as the offspring of Seth bears significance within the historical context.

[13] See further discussion on this point by H. C. Leupold (1942, 250–51), and also Ronald Youngblood (1991, 82). Youngblood rightly notes that the concept of men being referred to as "sons" of God receives even better support in the New Testament (Luke 20:34–36; 1 John 3:1, 2, 10).

[14] Coleran, in addition to pointing out relevant instances in Scripture, also looks at examples in extrabiblical literature where the concept of divine sonship appears in reference to men who have a relationship with the true God. The main question, of course, is whether these examples ought to have a bearing on how Genesis 6:2 is read.

[15] It does not appear that Keil is employing the phrase "image of God" in a technical sense.

with the context. Throughout Genesis 5, it is stated nine times that the line of Seth engendered "other sons *and daughters*" (vv. 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, 26, 30). Consequently, when Genesis 6:2 announces that "the sons of God saw the daughters of men" the reader would be compelled to assume that the "daughters" in question were those just mentioned, not those of the line of Cain (or any other line for that matter) (note mainly Van Gemeren 1981, 320–48). Third, the *Sethite view* does not read the text consistently; in Genesis 6:1 it reads אָדָם as pertaining to mankind as a whole, but in verse 2, it read אָדָם as relating to a particular group of men, namely, the line of Cain (or at least *not* the line of Seth). Although it may be granted that a similar sort of contrast appears in Judges 16:7; Psalm 73:5; Isaiah 43:4; and Jeremiah 32:20 (all of which set "men" against a subgroup of men), these parallels are not exact.[16] Furthermore, in all of these instances, the contrast is plainly evident from the context; such is not so in Genesis 6:1–2. Fourth, the *Sethite view* does not offer an explanation for the origin or nature of the mysterious *Nephilim* (נְפִלִים) mentioned in verse 4, essentially severing verse 4 from the preceding context and leaving it as a parenthetical remark about an unusual people group who are mentioned elsewhere only in Numbers 13:33. (For a detailed and balanced discussion on this point from a proponent of the *Sethite view*, see Mathews [1996, 335–39].) Fifth, the *Sethite view* raises a series of questions about some problematic oddities in the text when viewed from a practical standpoint. For instance, why does the text mention only the godly *men* from the line of Seth who married ungodly *women*? What about the "daughters of God" and the "sons of men"? Also, if "the sons of God" were in fact *godly* men, why did they continue to seek out and marry women of *ungodly* character? Were there no attractive women who were also godly? This question may appear trite, but it still deserves an answer. Additionally, why in this view was the intermarriage between these two groups enough of a problem to warrant the Flood judgment sent on the earth in Genesis 7–8? These are questions deserving continued research; however, the fact remains that this view offers a possible alternative to seeing the Genesis 6 account as myth.

Dynastic rulers

The second major interpretive view on the identity of "the sons of God" is that they were men in positions of high authority, dynastic rulers who were accorded "divine" accolades by their subjects. Meredith G. Kline, one of the principle supporters of the view, states, "*The sons of God* could be translated 'the sons of the gods'. Ancient texts attest to an ideology of divine kingship; human kings were called sons of various gods." Kline goes on to suggest, "This blasphemous cult was a culmination of Cainite name-lust (*cf.* 4:17)" (Kline 1970, 87; cf. 1962, 187–204). In this view, the sin which was engaged in by "the sons of God" was polygamy, as indicated by the phrase, "whomever they chose" or "all which they chose" (כֹּל אֲשֶׁר בָּחָרוּ) (Kline 1970, 87). This interpretation first arose in ancient Jewish writings (in the Aramaic Targums), and continued in popularity among Jewish interpreters in the middle ages down to the present day (Birney 1970, 47; Kline 1962, 194; cf. Zlotowitz 1988, 180–82.). The view is, however, a relative "newcomer" to Christian interpretations of the identity of "the sons of God."

Like the *Sethite view*, the *dynastic rulers view* attempts to navigate a challenging lexical situation, explaining how בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים may be taken to refer to human rulers. Leroy Birney argues that magistrates or administrators of justice are called אֱלֹהִים in Exodus 21:6; 22:8, 9, 28. He also notes that the same term is used of them in Psalm 82:1, and the expression בְּנֵי עֶלְיוֹן ("sons of the Most High") is used of the magistrates in verse 6 of the psalm, and this "despite the fact that they are accused of wrongdoing in verses 2–5 and 7" (Birney 1970, 47). He thus concludes that "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" (Birney 1970, 47). Notably, the practice of using "divine" epithets to refer to human rulers has a long history among pagan nations; it would not be surprising that such a practice appeared in the times before the Genesis Flood as well (Birney 1970, 47–48; Kline 1962, 192). This position also accords decently well with the broader context of Genesis, which attests to ruling tyrants (Genesis 10:8–14) and to other powerful men who practiced polygamy (Genesis 4:19–24). Furthermore, this view gives a viable explanation for the origin of the *Nephilim*: they were the offspring of the "divine" kings who resided in royal courts and who "extend[ed] their fathers' sway by tyrannical injustice" (cf. Genesis 6:11) (Kline 1970, 87–88). In this view, the Hebrew phrase הַגִּבֹּרִים ("the mighty ones"), is probably best taken as a reference to the political dominance of these tyrannical princes (Kline 1970, 87).

The *dynastic rulers view* has given rise to several sub-views. John Walton, for example, suggests that the sin involved was not polygamy, but was instead a far more despicable practice. He writes, "An alternate understanding may be found in a practice noted in the Gilgamesh Epic as the prime example of Gilgamesh's

[16] In Judges 19:30ff., the name "Israel" describes a subset of the tribes of Israel, that is, all the tribes except Benjamin. However, this is the sort of exception that proves the general rule.

tyranny, namely, his exercising of the right of first night with a new bride: 'He will couple with the wife-to-be, he first of all, the bridegroom after.' This practice accommodates the marriage terminology [in Genesis 6:2] and in Gilgamesh it is clearly both oppressive and offensive behavior" (Walton 2009, 43–44; cf. 2001, 293; Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas 2000, 36). Other interpreters, recognizing the apparent weakness of the *dynastic rulers view* from a lexical standpoint, have attempted to couple it with the *fallen angels view* (see below), arguing that the rulers in question were demon possessed (Ross 1996, 181–83; 1985, 36; Waltke with Fredricks 2001, 117). Regardless, the *dynastic rulers view* guards against any notion of Genesis 6:1–4 being imported mythology, with the event in question being explained largely or entirely in "natural" terms.

As with the preceding position examined, there are problems with this view. Interpreting "the sons of God" as dynastic rulers creates the same conundrum with the phrase בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים that was encountered by the *Sethite view*. An equally strong argument against this position resides in that while groups of rulers are occasionally referred to as "gods" (אֱלֹהִים) in Scripture, they are never referred to corporately as "*sons* of God" (בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים) (Hamilton 1990, 264). Also, as John J. Davis notes, there is no biblical evidence to suggest that the system of government envisioned by the proponents of the *dynastic rulers view* had yet been established (Davis 1975, 113).[17] Additionally, there is no convincing evidence to suggest that polygamy would have compelled the LORD to send the catastrophic Genesis Flood. Monogamy is presented in Scripture as the ideal for marriage (Genesis 2:24; cf. Matthew 19:4–6), but that does not mean that polygamy was not tolerated. Many prominent figures in Israel's history practiced polygamy, including Abraham, Jacob, David, and others. (And if it is assumed, as per the arguments of Walton, that the sin was the oppressive practice of the "right of first night" it is worth noting that there is *no clear attestation* to any such practice in Scripture.[18] Furthermore, it is not clear how combining the *dynastic rulers view* with the *fallen angels view*—thereby making "the sons of God" demon possessed rulers—offers any advantage over the *fallen angels view* on its own.) All of these issues are deserving of further investigation. However, like the preceding position, this view offers a possible alternative to seeing the Genesis 6 account as myth.

Fallen angels

The oldest exegetical position on the identity of "the sons of God" is that they were fallen angels. This is the view assumed in the earliest Jewish exegesis, for example, in 1 Enoch 6:2ff. and in Jubilees 5:1. Similarly, certain variants of the Septuagint, including Codex Alexandrinus, translate בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים as ἄγγελοι τοῦ θεοῦ ("angels of God").[19] The Jewish historian Josephus (37–c. 100) also assumes this view in *The Antiquities of the Jews* ([1736] 1987, 32), as does the Jewish philosopher Philo (c. 25 BC–c. AD 50) in *De Gigantibus* ([1854] 1993, 152). This interpretation likewise appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls,[20] as well as in the writings of several notable early church fathers—including Justin Martyr (100–165) ([1885] 1994a, 164; [1885] 1994b, 190), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215) ([1885] 1994, 446), Athenagoras (c. 133–c. 190) ([1885] 1994, 142), and Tertullian (c. 155–c. 240) ([1885] 1994, 32). This position remained the dominant interpretation until the *Sethite view* was popularized by Augustine (see above). More recently, the *fallen angels view* has the support of many prominent Christian and Jewish exegetes.[21]

The *fallen angels view* has strong lexical support, in that *all* other usages of בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים in the Old Testament (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7) refer to angelic beings. In Psalms 29:1 and 89:6, a similar phrase, בְּנֵי אֵלִים ("sons of the Mighty"), also refers to angels. Likewise, in Daniel 3:25, the related Aramaic phrase בַּר־אֱלָהִין ("son of God/the gods") certainly has in view a heavenly being, whether an angel or, perhaps, the preincarnate Son of God.[22] Thus, it may be concluded that the *plainest lexical sense* of בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים in Genesis 6:2 is that it refers to angelic creatures. The significance of this point must not be underestimated. Kidner goes so far as to say that if the fallen angels

[17] Davis also writes, "It is difficult to understand why something as familiar as kingship should be expressed so indirectly" (cf. Kidner 1967, 84).

[18] Additionally, Genesis 6:2 states that they "took wives." As such, it refers specifically to marriage, not to a single, isolated, illicit action of lust-driven oppression.

[19] For discussion on this point, see Tim Chaffey (2012, 54–55).

[20] Note the references in the discussion by Gordon J. Wenham (1987, 139).

[21] See, for example, Van Gemeren (1981, 320–48), Kidner (1967, 84), Boice (1982, 244–48), Cassuto (1961, 291–94), and Sarna (1989, 45). The significance of this view receiving support among modern Jewish interpreters (including Cassuto and Sarna) is that it shows that the position has ample support from the Old Testament text alone. This suggests that the fallen angels view is robust even though, as will be shown below, the New Testament evidences presented in its favor are questioned by proponents of other interpretive positions.

[22] The Babylonian king would not have understood the possibility of this individual being the preincarnate Christ; the point, however, is that in his understanding, the בַּר־אֱלָהִין was clearly an inhabitant of the heavenly realm; the king could in no way be speaking of a mere human being.

view "defies the normalities of experience," then the *Sethite view* "defies those of language," a problem that, he suggests, runs contrary to the effort that the interpreter must put forth to understand the meaning intended by the author (Kidner 1967, 84). Additionally, this view preserves the logical consistency between Genesis 6:1 and 6:2 with respect to the meaning of אָדָם ("man, mankind"), instead of forcing אָדָם to refer to all of mankind in verse 1 and then to a subset of mankind in verse 2. Looking also at the broader context of Genesis, this position has much to commend it. In particular, it accounts for the origin of the *Nephilim* in Genesis 6:4 (they are the offspring of the illicit angel-human relations), and it aids in explaining why a judgment as utterly disastrous as the great *Mabbûl* was sent in Genesis 7–8.[23]

The *fallen angels view* also has an array of supporting evidence from the New Testament. For instance, in 1 Peter 3:18–20, the Apostle gives a unique perspective on the post-resurrection ministry of Jesus Christ, maintaining that He was "put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark" (NASB). Peter seems to be saying that subsequent to His resurrection, Christ went to proclaim His victory over sin and death to the angelic beings who sinned in Noah's day.[24] In like fashion, 2 Peter 2:4 mentions "angels" who sinned and were subsequently "thrown into Tartarus" (ταρταρώσας), being committed "to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment." Jude 6 also speaks of "angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode" who the LORD is keeping "in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day" (NASB). Though some have argued that these passages refer to the original fall of the angelic beings who followed after Satan, that leaves a difficult question unanswered: Why, if these verses refer to the original sin of angels, were some angels punished by being confined and others free to roam the earth (cf. Ephesians 6:11–12)? Relatedly, why was Satan himself not among those confined (cf. Job 1–2)?[25] It is better, therefore, to take these passages as referring to some event other than the initial fall of the angels, which leaves the *fallen angels view* of Genesis 6 as the prime candidate to account for the background behind the statements of Peter and Jude. The Old Testament knows of no other event involving angels that might fit with what Peter and Jude describe.[26]

Several objections have been marshalled against the *fallen angels view*, which deserve to be examined. Most conspicuously is that Christ stated in Matthew 22:30 that at the resurrection, the redeemed "neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Leupold 1942, 253). But this passage is not arguing that angels (at least when they appear physically) are sexless or incapable of reproductive functions. Rather, it indicates that marriage (and, by extension, reproduction) is not something in which the holy, heavenly angels participate. The verse likely has no bearing on the way that fallen angels without regard for God's natural order might choose to behave. Similarly, if it is objected that angels (fallen or otherwise) do not have the *physical ability* to reproduce (e.g., Davis 1975, 112),[27] it is worth

[23] Going beyond the scope of the narratives immediately adjacent to the sons of God passage, it is possible that the sinful desire later exhibited by the men of Sodom to engage in illicit sexual relations with the angelic beings who visited Lot (Genesis 19) is a reflection upon the terrible situation in Genesis 6.

[24] This is the view defended by Edwin A. Blum (1981, 243) and Thomas R. Schreiner (2003, 185–89). Schreiner observes that the Greek word πνεῦμα ("spirit") when used in the plural almost invariably refers to angels and not to humans. The one exception appears in Hebrews 12:23, but in that instance the context functions to clarify who is in view. He also points out that the Greek φυλακή ("prison"), while commonly used to indicate a place where humans are imprisoned on earth (e.g., Acts 5:19; 8:3; 2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:23), "is never used to denote a place of punishment for humans after death" (p. 187). Other, less acceptable views on the identity of the "spirits" in 1 Peter 3:18–20 are that they were (1) the departed souls of humans, contemporaries of Noah who perished in the Flood and to whom Christ, during the time between his death and resurrection, preached the message of salvation, or (2) the men of Noah's day to whom the preincarnate Christ, through Noah, preached salvation. The first of these alternative views is markedly unorthodox; the second has some support within the evangelical community; for example, in John S. Feinberg (1986, 303–36). As noted by Schreiner though, it faces exegetical challenges.

[25] Both these questions are proposed by Charles C. Ryrie (1986, 182).

[26] The relationship between Genesis 6 and the New Testament writings is important. On the connection to Jude 6, Boice writes, "Apart from the language of Jude the connection could simply be that of two obvious examples of great judgment. But Jude seems to say more when, after having spoken of judgment on the angels for sin, he goes on to say, 'In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves to sexual immorality and perversion' (v. 7). In this verse the comparison is not in the matter of judgment itself. Jude does not say, 'In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah were judged.' The comparison is rather in the area of the sin that occasioned the judgment, and this, as Jude shows, was a sexual sin of a particular kind. In some modern versions this is hidden by such translations as 'sexual immorality and perversion' (NIV, PHILLIPS) or 'unnatural lust/s' (RSV, NEB). But the Authorized Version is closer to the Greek text when it speaks of the [men of Sodom] as 'giving themselves over to fornication and going after *strange flesh* [*sarkos heteras*].' The men of Sodom did this in desiring sexual relations with the angels who had come to visit Abram and Lot (Gen. 18, 19). The implication would be that in doing so they recapitulated the sin of the angels in Genesis 6, who 'in a similar way' had desired relationships with women" (Boice 1982, 247).

[27] It deserves to be noted that this matter plays into the reasons given by both Ross (1985, 181–83) and Waltke (2001, 117) for incorporating the fallen angels view into a modified version of the dynastic rulers view (see above). This view attempts to remain true to the normal sense of the phrase בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים as it is used in the Old Testament without introducing the perceived biological difficulties associated with sexual relations between humans and fallen angels.

considering that when angels are mentioned in other locations in Genesis (e.g., Genesis 18–19), they appear in human form, they partake in a meal, they are lusted after, and they physically seize people by their hands to drag them out of a doomed city. The text does not give indications about angels' reproductive capabilities in these passages, but it also does not hint that they physically differ from human beings in this respect.

Another objection argues that the *fallen angels view* implicates God as unfairly punishing man for wrongs instigated and carried out by demons. Surely, had angels been to blame for the gross wickedness described in Genesis 6, there would also be mention made of their inclusion in the judgment that followed (Thomas 1946, 66). However, this argument wrongly assumes that angelic wickedness in Genesis 6:1–4 is incompatible with the text's assessment of the brutal wickedness of mankind in Genesis 6:5–7. Regardless of the extent of angelic activity, mankind was evil in its own right; the LORD was fully justified in sending the *Mabbûl* on account of *man's sin* even if the full extent of wickedness on the earth *also* involved angels.[28] Furthermore, assuming that 1 Peter 3:18–20; 2 Peter 2:4; and Jude 6 refer back to angels who sinned in Genesis 6, then the biblical text is hardly silent on the punishment of the angels; it simply was not the author's purpose to focus on angels any more than necessary in the prologue to the Flood narrative.

It is also objected that the *fallen angels view* is not necessary to account for the rise of the *Nephilim* in Genesis 6:4, and that the presence of such hybrid offspring before the Flood creates tension with Numbers 13:33, which mentions *Nephilim* dwelling in the land of Canaan long after the Flood (e.g., Sailhamer 1990, 79).[29] However, to insist that the *Nephilim* were not the offspring of the unions described only two verses prior is essentially to sever Genesis 6:4 from the context, leaving the purpose of its content ambiguous. With respect to the later mention of the *Nephilim* in Numbers 13, it need not be assumed that the *Nephilim* survived the Flood—which is certainly contrary to the biblical text (Genesis 7:21–23). In view of the fact that the statement in Numbers 13 is from the unfaithful spies who told Israel not to go into the Promised Land, there is reason to suspect that the remark may have been an exaggeration. Sarna takes this view, saying, "The reference in Numbers is not to the supposedly continued existence of Nephilim into Israelite times; rather, it is used simply for oratorical effect, much as 'Huns' was used to designate Germans during the two world wars" (Sarna 1989, 46). However, in view of the narrator's explanatory note in Numbers 13:33 ("the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim"), it is perhaps better to suspect that the unsanctioned angel-human relations that were rampant before the Flood continued on a limited scale after the global catastrophe. This would explain the author's pointed remark in Genesis 6:4 that the *Nephilim* were on the earth prior to the Flood—"*and also afterward*." It would also explain the grammatical arrangement found in Genesis 6:4, involving the imperfect (יָבֹאוּ) and the perfect preceded by *waw* (וְיָלְדוּ), which most naturally expresses an event which occurred repeatedly. (The idea, thus, is that the *Nephilim* arose "whenever" there were sexual unions between humans and fallen angels.) Accordingly, the sin of unsanctioned angel-human relations and the propagation of the Nephilim appears to have continued even after the Flood.

The last and arguably most serious objection to the *fallen angels view* is that it opens the door for mythology and polytheism to invade the biblical text.[30] However, this is not necessarily so; in fact, it can be maintained with equal tenacity that the *fallen angels view* militates forcefully *against* any sort of suggestion that the biblical author was dependent upon or otherwise amenable toward pagan mythology. The polemical elements of the Genesis text so plainly evident in both the Creation and Flood accounts surface again in Genesis 6:1–4. Here the text aims to show that the בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים, elevated so often to the status of demigods in ancient Near Eastern mythology (for example, the *bn ilm* of Ugaritic mythology[31]) are not "gods" at all (Cassuto 1961, 299–300).[32] They are certainly evil, and they have, with their human female consorts, contributed greatly to the increasing wickedness on earth (cf. Genesis 6:5, 12). However, neither "the sons of God" nor the evil human race can oppose יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים, the one true God, who, in the verses to follow, exercises His sovereign prerogative

[28] Hamilton (1990, 263) also notes, "This is not a conclusive argument, for in the very next event recorded in Scripture, the Flood, we are told that the sin of man (6:5) results in the divine annihilation of not only man but beast, creeping thing, and birds (6:7)." Something must be noted at this point of man's dominion over the creation that brought the judgment on the creatures under his care; however, the point is that judgment for sin can adversely affect those who are not directly involved.

[29] Sailhamer maintains that the sense of הַנְּפִלִים הָיוּ בָאָרֶץ בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם in Genesis 6:4 suggests that the Nephilim were already present in the land before the unions between "the sons of God" and "the daughters of men." Likewise, he argues that וְגַם אֲחֲרֵי־כֵן אֲשֶׁר requires that the Nephilim could not have been the offspring of the unions described. However, this view is inadequate for the reasons discussed above.

[30] Leupold (1942, 252–53) makes this point with great boldness: "Such an approach introduces the mythological element as well as polytheism into the Scriptures and makes the Bible a record of strange and fantastic tales."

[31] Concerning the *bn ilm* in Ugaritic mythology, see the discussion in Hendel (1987, 16).

[32] This point bears a close connection with the limit of 120 years pronounced in Genesis 6:3.

to judge the earth and put an end to the wickedness perpetrated by the fallen angels. As such, the sons of God passage does not endorse myth; it is the antimyth.[33] In summary, therefore, while this position certainly deserves further discussion, it accounts well for all the biblical evidence; moreover, it stands up remarkably well to the claim that the Genesis 6 account is myth.

Other views

In addition to the three main positions already discussed, there have been a couple of other views on the identity of "the sons of God" that deserve to be mentioned. One that is particularly interesting was proposed by Lyle Eslinger, who states that "the daughters of men" in Genesis 6:2 refers to the female descendants of *Seth* (instead of Cain, as per the *Sethite view*), with "the sons of God" being the descendants of Cain (Eslinger 1979, 65–73). The main basis for Eslinger's argument is that Genesis 5 repeatedly mentions the offspring of Seth as having "other sons and daughters," and that Genesis 4 describes the descendants of Cain who took to themselves wives (e.g., vv. 19–24). However, as Wenham rightly observes, Eslinger does not offer a viable explanation for how the wicked Cainites could be called "the sons of God" (Wenham 1987, 140). This interpretation, therefore, appears to be without adequate support and can be dismissed.

Another view proposed by both John H. Sailhamer and Philip H. Eveson is that Genesis 6:1–4 functions as a summary to the content of chapter 5. As Sailhamer puts it, this brief episode serves as an interlude before the Flood narrative, indicating that the sons and daughters of Adam had multiplied greatly, marrying and continuing to have children (Sailhamer 1990, 76). The passage supposedly tells about nothing out of the ordinary; rather, it indicates that the routines of life went on as usual, as alluded to by Christ in Matthew 24:38–39. The problem was not with *what* mankind was doing per se, but the way in which he was going about it—that is, in utter disregard of his Creator. As Eveson surmises, "Life at that time went on normally, 'but in arrogant independence of God'" (Eveson 2001, 152). That said, if this position were correct, it would be fair to say that the biblical author managed to describe the most mundane facts in the most cryptic language imaginable. Indeed, it appears that this interpretation does not in fact seek to explain the language of the text, but rather to *explain it away*. It offers nothing definitive about the author's purpose for using the phrases "sons of God" or "daughters of men." For that matter, it has nothing to offer concerning the origin or identity of the *Nephilim* either. Consequently, this view can also be dismissed.

Conclusion: *The preferred interpretation of "The sons of God" in Genesis 6*

This paper has surveyed the major interpretive options surrounding the sons of God passage in Genesis 6 and has demonstrated multiple plausible answers to the liberal charge that the account finds its origin in pagan mythology. Of course, the sons of God passage is but a small section of the Genesis account; it does not have riding on it any major doctrines, per se. Accordingly, there ought to be substantial room made for humility and graciousness in defending the position. Kidner, while endorsing the *fallen angels view*, offers this counsel: "But where Scripture is as reticent as here, both Peter and Jude warn us away. We have our proper place as well! More important than the details of this episode is its indication that man is beyond self-help, whether the Sethites have betrayed their calling, or demonic powers have gained a stranglehold" (Kidner 1967, 84). Again, what is of utmost importance is defending the Scriptures against the accusation of dependence upon mythology, which would compromise tremendously the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy. All the views evaluated in this paper (at least in the versions presented) are resistant to the notion of Genesis 6 being adapted myth. They make no room for Scripture's alleged acquiescence to the prevailing pagan ideas of its day. Although this study finds the *fallen angels view* to be the view most consistent with the biblical data, Bible-believing advocates of all the interpretations of Genesis 6:1–4 can appreciate the strengths of the different positions—positions which, though often vastly different, are united in their goal of striving to see the trustworthiness of Scripture upheld.

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[33] For further argument against interpreting Genesis 6:1–4 as imported myth, see Van Gemeren (1981), and especially his series of proposals (pp. 343–45). His conclusion is the same as that offered in this paper: the fallen angels view does not encourage interpreting Genesis 6:1–4 as mythology of any sort.

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