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On The Proper Identification Of The Sons Of God In Genesis 6:1-4

In Genesis 6:1-4, we find a difficult passage whose proper interpretation turns on the meaning of the use of the phrase “sons of God” in the passage:

1 And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, 2 That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they *were* fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. 3 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. 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.
(KJV)

Allen Ross notes that this “section of Genesis has been the subject of debate for centuries, most scholars considering it to be one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the Pentateuch.”¹ Also commenting that “the identify of the ‘sons of God’ in Genesis 6:2 has been the subject of controversy from the earliest times to the present” and that the “debate will no doubt continue,” Robert Lightner wisely reminds us: “The identification of the ‘sons of God’ is not of major importance to one’s Christian life, but since Genesis 6 is a part of God’s Word, we should certainly seek to understand it properly. A Proper perspective, however, must be maintained lest we neglect other much more important things in the Bible.”² I will suggest

¹ Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide To The Study And Exposition Of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2000), 178.

² Robert Lightner, *Angels, Satan, and Demons* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers 1998).

below certain parameters any view should be measured against and then consider the four prevailing views, with particular emphasis on the views that the sons of God refers to humans or fallen angels. In my estimation, while every view that has been proposed has its problems, the view that makes the most sense of the passage with the least problems is the view that the “sons of God” were fallen angels that possessed the Nephilim and had sexual unions with women.

There are certain considerations or parameters that will help in measuring the validity of any interpretation of this passage. Those suggested by Robert Lightner are as follows:

(1) How does the view account for the rather unusual title “sons of God” in this context? (2) How does the view account for the Flood (which I believe was global) that followed the union of the “sons of God” with the “daughters of men”? (3) How does the view account for the strange progeny, the Nephilim or giants? (4) How does the view account for the confinement of some wicked angels in conjunction with the flood of Noah’s day (2 Pet. 2:4-5; Jude 6-7)?³

To these, I would add that the New Testament references to angels in 2 Peter 2:4-5 and Jude 6-7 are remarkable for their lack of detail, a point that suggests that the first century Jewish audiences had a ready understanding of the references without further elaboration. Accordingly, another parameter of consideration (really, a refinement of number 4 above) is consistency with prevalent first-century Jewish interpretation of the Genesis 6 passage. I would also note, with regard to the third parameter, that many expositors assert that the Nephilim are the offspring of the union, but the text does not actually say this, a point I will return to.

³ *Ibid.*

The four prevailing views are that the sons of God are (1) the godly line of Seth, (2) fallen angels or demons, (3) lesser gods within the pantheon, or (4) powerful rulers in rebellion to God.⁴ A fifth view would be that fallen angels possessed powerful men, specifically the Nephilim, for the purpose of sexual unions with women. Within evangelicalism, the first view is common. The view goes back at least as far as Chrysostom and Augustine,⁵ and Bruce Waltke even refers to it as the “traditional Christian interpretation since the third century, supported by Luther and Calvin...”⁶ In this view, Moses is referring to the righteous branch of early humanity, namely the line of Seth that is seen as replacing Abel (Genesis 4:25), as the sons of God. The daughters of man, in this view, are the ungodly line through Cain. Representative of this view are the comments of the Lutheran scholar H.C. Leupold:

Strictly speaking, “sons of God” is a title applied to the godly; grammatically, the very expression “sons of God” does not happen to be used in reference to them in that very form... We have had no mention made of angels thus far in Genesis. We have met with other sons of the true God, in fact, the whole preceding chapter [in Genesis], even 4:25-5:32, has been concerned with them. Who will, then, be referred to here? Answer, the Sethites, without a doubt.⁷

In his commentary on Genesis, James Dixon takes the view that the sons of God constitute the Sethites, noting that “if angels are meant, there is nothing in the

⁴ Ross, 181.

⁵ Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House 1976), 166.

⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2001), 116.

⁷ Robert Lightner, *The Epistles Of John & Judge* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers 2003), 148.

context of Scripture (to this point) to give the reader any knowledge that there are beings called angels...Angels appear later in Genesis without any prior mention of their existence, but are clearly called 'angels'."⁸ In his view, the immediate context of the passage does not support the view that the sons of God are angels, but instead stresses human sin, and God's response to it in Genesis 6:3 suggests it is human sin at issue.⁹ The principle, then, is much like that of Ezra 9:1-3 and 1 Corinthians 6:14 that the people of God should not intermarry with pagans.¹⁰

This view does at least do some justice to the immediate context of the passage. Bruce Waltke comments that it "superficially ...best fits the immediate context contrasting the cursed-laden line of Cain with the godly line of Seth, but it must be rejected for philological reasons."¹¹ Allen Ross is more critical, however, saying the view "does justice neither to the terms used nor to the passage as a whole."¹² Waltke explains why the view really only superficially makes sense of the overall context. In Genesis 6:1, the Hebrew term translated "men" more generally means humankind, and the term translated "daughters" would therefore refer to all of their female offspring, and not merely Cain's offspring.¹³ Moreover, nine times in the record of Seth's line it is recorded that daughters were born, so taking them to be Cain's daughters instead of Seth's is rather arbitrary. The competing naturalistic

⁸ James Dixon, *Expository Thoughts On Genesis* (Webster: Evengelical Press 2005), 156.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹¹ Waltke, p. 116.

¹² Allen Ross, p. 181.

¹³ Waltke, p. 116; also Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book Of Genesis* (San Antonio: Ariel Ministries 2009).

interpretation is that the sons of God were human despots, and all of the criticisms of the Sethite view below also apply to the human despot view, unless the despots are the Nephilim themselves.

Those holding the Sethite view, like Dixon, must acknowledge that the phrase sons of God is used elsewhere (Job 1:6, 2:1, 38:7) only of angels but argue against that interpretation here both contextually and as a reaction to the perceived problems with angelic/human unions.¹⁴ The fact is, as Henry Morris notes, that in the Old Testament the phrase sons of God (*bene elohim*) is used only in the subject passage and three times in Job, where it means angels every time.¹⁵ Moreover, the related *bar elohim* is used in Daniel 3:25 either of an angel or a theophany, the phrase *bene elim* is used in both Psalm 29:1 and Psalm 89:6 for angels, and the Septuagint translates the phrase as angels of God. Linguistically, there is no basis for rejecting the interpretation of sons of God as angels, that is, beings that were directly created by God and not born.

The Sethite view also does not adequately explain the relationship between this event and the flood. While some argue that the godly line was polluted, that view assumes all the Sethites were godly and all of Cain's line were not godly, and further, that only males from the Sethite line intermarried with females from Cain's line. Logically, if the Sethites were the godly line, why were they marrying the ungodly to begin with?¹⁶ And why did not the females in Seth's line also intermarry?

¹⁴ James Dixon, p. 155-56.

¹⁵ Henry Morris, p. 165.

¹⁶ James Dixon, p. 157, weakly suggests that this is because the men always sought wives rather than the other way around.

Would it not be that the Sethites were already corrupted if they married the ungodly women? But more importantly, while the Bible does in places stress the importance of believers not intermarrying with pagans, there is no place in Scripture where it is even remotely suggested that this particular sin is so grievous as to result in God's judgment by global flood. If it were that grievous, the Apostle Paul would not have taught the Corinthians that if they were married to unbelievers that could stay married to them.

The Sethite view also offers no adequate explanation for the Nephilim or men of renown in Genesis 6:4. This view assumes that the sons of God were not the Nephilim, but if the sons of God and daughters of men were both humans as this view posits, then the offspring would be human, which belies any notion that offspring were anything different than their parents (e.g., Nephilim) or that they would all be men of renown. James Dixon argues that the working of verse 4 does not allow for the Nephilim to be the offspring of the intermarriage, but instead, that the term simply means people of a great name.¹⁷ In his view, the Nephilim were righteous Sethites that had extended lives, but nevertheless were not able to contribute to the repentance of humanity.¹⁸ This is just sheer conjecture to try to find any explanation not wholly inconsistent with his interpretation of sons of God as Sethites rather than an interpretation that fits the immediate passage and the relevant New Testament references.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 158-59.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

The Sethite view also fails to give any account whatsoever of the references to fallen angels in 1 Peter 2 and Jude. Peter related the sin of the angels to the time of Noah, and Jude related it to sexual sin, which together must be addressed by any interpretation of the Genesis 6 passage. Further, if Peter and Jude did not have any particular Biblical reference in mind, how did they expect their audience to understand what they were talking about without providing more elaboration? Without a Biblical reference, there would at a minimum need to be an extra-Biblical understanding for the references to make sense. As I will show below, there was a well-established extra-Biblical understanding in the first century in Jewish thought, but it all related back to the passage at hand, viewing the sons of God as angelic.

One additional criticism can be stated here in reference to the human despot view, at least to the extent that some expositors take the Nephilim to be a reference to the offspring of the union. The despot view arises out of the fact that certain literature in the ancient Near East referred to their leaders as divine or demigods.¹⁹ The problem is that the ancient literature always saw the offspring of unions between humans and the divine as gods, and if the Nephilim are taken as the offspring in the subject passage, then the union in the mind of the ancients could not have been merely between humans. For this reason, Ross concludes that this view “does not... make enough use of the literary connections with pagan literature.”²⁰ Of course, this same reasoning is why some from the more liberal theological mindset take the sons of God to be lesser gods within the pantheon, with the

¹⁹ Allen Ross, p. 182.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Nephilim as the offspring. The problem with this view, which finds its roots in liberal scholarship that treats the pagan literature as peer-literature to the Bible, is that it finds zero support anywhere in the entire Bible and indeed is contrary to the Bible insofar as the Bible does not admit the existence of but one God. Moreover, the text at hand does not say the Nephilim are the offspring.

The better view is that the sons of God refers to fallen angels. First of all, this comports with the unambiguous use of the phrase in the book of Job to refer to angels. While some protest that it never refers to fallen angels, I may answer that in Job, Satan seems to be counted among the sons of God, and further, in the New Testament, demons are referred to as angels (e.g., Revelation 12:9). In addition, the literal meaning of the phrase, as Fruchtenbaum notes, is “to be created by God,”²¹ which itself suggests angels. The oldest Jewish view took the phrase as angels, as did the Septuagint, Josephus, Philo, the Midrashim, the Book of Enoch and the Dead Sea Scrolls documents from Qumran.²² The Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and seven books in the Pseudopigrapha interpret the verse as a reference to angels.²³ Also, other Semitic languages took the phrase not to refer to humans, such as in the Ugaritic Texts and the Canaanite *bn il*.²⁴ Commentator Thomas Schreiner, in his commentary on 1 Peter and Jude, describes the Jewish tradition that the sons of God referred to angels as “pervasive” in the literature and provides a detailed overview of the various ancient texts such as 1 Enoch and the Qumran scrolls that support

²¹ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book Of Genesis* (San Antonio: Ariel Ministries 2009).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

that view.²⁵ Moreover, the verse is quite specific that it is only the sons of God and daughters of men, not any daughters of God with sons of men. “The one-way use of the terminology implies that this intermarriage was not strictly within a human sphere.”²⁶

The view that the sons of God refers to fallen angels gives an adequate (but not sole) explanation for the global deluge. The greater context for the passage is the reasons for the flood and the events leading up to it, and the intermarriage of godly men with ungodly women does not seem to be a sufficient reason, but an unnatural cohabitation between angels and humans does. If, in fact, certain humans were willing participants in this endeavor, then we have another instance (like that with the Tower of Babel) of humankind overstepping its bounds and trying to be divine.

The angelic interpretation of sons of God also gives adequate explanation for the Nephilim. On the meaning of the term Nephilim, Waltke, who takes them as the offspring of the human/angelic union, comments that the Hebrew root means “to fall.”²⁷ This suggests their relationship, one way or another, to the improper unions, but commentators debate whether the Nephilim are the offspring of the union, or are involved in the union. If one takes it that the fallen angels were able to manifest in their own physical bodies in the likeness of human males and have intercourse with human females, then it is at least plausible that the offspring would be

²⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Broadman & Holman Publishers: Nashville 2003), 449-51.

²⁶ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book Of Genesis* (San Antonio: Ariel Ministries 2009).

²⁷ Waltke, p. 118.

something not quite human such as Nephilim. A potential problem with this view is that the text seems to say that Nephilim were present post-flood, and if this union is part of the reason for the flood we would expect it to have destroyed the product of the improper unions. There are fewer problems if we take it that the fallen angels possessed human males. In that view, we would expect only regular human offspring. There is no indication in the text that the Nephilim are the offspring of the union. Rather, the mention of the Nephilim more likely indicates the group of men that were possessed for these improper unions, perhaps because they were willing participants. This view gives a reason for the mention of the Nephilim without any statement that they are the product of the offspring, and also deals with any difficulties with the ability of angels to have sex since they actually did this with the use of human bodies.

Only this view does justice to the New Testament references. Specifically, Peter wrote: “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; 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.” (2 Peter 2:4-5). Jude wrote: “And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day. Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.” (Jude 6-7). As I have already observed, Peter related the event to the time of Noah and Jude related it to

sexual sin. Since these particular angels were placed in permanent bondage in tartarus, and we know that not all demons are so bound at the moment, then their rebellion must have been in addition to and after the original rebellion with Satan. If these two passages do not refer to Genesis 6, then there is no Biblical reference. In view of the pervasive Jewish literature at the time Peter and Jude wrote, and their failure to correct any mistaken theology in these passages, we are better to understand that they were building on the common understanding their audiences had of the Genesis 6 passage.

There are two primary objections to the viewpoint that the sons of God are demons. First, why are demons called sons of God? Robert Lightner takes the view that they are fallen angels, but calls this a “strong objection, to which I do not have an answer (unless ‘sons of God’ suggests the fact that they were created by Him).”²⁸ The best answers, already explained above, can be summarized: (1) demons are sometimes called angels in the new Testament so there is no problem with sons of God also being used for fallen angels as well as un-fallen angels, (2) sons of God does, literally, mean created by God, and God plainly created all the angels without exception, (3) sons of God in Genesis 6 has an unassailable understanding as fallen angels within the Jewish literature demonstrating that any prejudice against its use in that way is not well-founded, and (4) sons of God seems to specifically include Satan, a fallen angel, in Job 1 and 2. On balance, this objection does not overcome the weight of evidence that sons of God refers to angels.

²⁸ Robert Lightner, *Angels, Satan, and Demons* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers 1998).

The second objection is that Jesus taught that angels cannot marry, based on Jesus' statement in Matthew 22:30 that angels are not given in marriage. This objection can also be readily answered. First, angels always or nearly always appear in the Bible as men. While the angels certainly do not marry one another, this does not mean that they are incapable of having sex when they manifest in human form. As Fred Dickason comments, "angels have taken human form and performed other human functions, such as eating, walking, talking, and sitting...angels were mistaken for men and were sought for homosexual use by the men of Sodom."²⁹ Henry Morris comments, "this does not necessarily mean that those who have been cast *out of heaven* were incapable of doing so... these wicked angels were not concerned with obedience to God's will."³⁰ He further notes that the language translated "took them wives" could just as well be translated "took them women,"³¹ although Waltke comments that the phraseology necessarily means intermarriage and not fornication.³² Arnold Fruchtenbaum's comments are very helpful; he states that Jesus "was not speaking of angels in general, but specifically of angels *in heaven*: Good or holy angels *in heaven* neither marry nor are given in marriage."³³ Second, a reasonable view of the text, taken by Allen Ross, is that the Nephilim were not the offspring, but the ones possessed or otherwise controlled by the fallen angels, and

²⁹ C. Fred Dickason, *Angels, Elect and Evil* (Chicago: Moody Press 1995), 244.

³⁰ Henry Morris, p. 166.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

³² Waltke, p. 117.

³³ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book Of Genesis* (San Antonio: Ariel Ministries 2009).

thus the actual union was human with human.³⁴ Henry Morris takes the offspring to be the Nephilim, but still takes the view that the fallen angels possessed human men for the purpose of the sexual unions, likewise eliminating the problem.³⁵

While all of the viewpoints have their problems, the one that has the least problems, makes sense of the relationship between Genesis 6:1-4 and the flood, is consistent with the use of the phrase sons of God in Job and the use of related Hebrew phrases for angels elsewhere, gives meaning to the references to the sin of angels in Jude and 2 Peter, and comports with extra-Biblical Jewish understanding that was common at the time Jude and 2 Peter were written, is that sons of God refers to fallen angels. Most likely, these fallen angels possessed the Nephilim as a means of cohabiting with human women, probably because Satan wanted to pollute the human family because of the prophecy in Genesis 3:15. This tremendous crime resulted in the fallen angels being bound in chains as they await the judgment and provides another justification for the global deluge that followed the Genesis 6:1-4 event. This significance of all of this for the believer today is to realize the gravity of the sin of sexuality outside of the bounds set by God as well as a stern warning of the danger in any purposeful affiliation with demons.

³⁴ Allen Ross, p. 182-83.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169.