

# The "Sons Of God"

**Introduction.** Genesis 6:1-4 speaks of the universal degeneration of man into ungodliness prior to the universal Flood of Genesis 6-9. What, then, is the significance of these verses to the beliefs of the Christian? As will be discussed in detail below, these verses either present a historical account, or make the writer of Genesis a perpetrator of myths; they either provide sufficient warrant for the Flood, or they mock it; they either are consistent with biblical teaching, or they contradict it and promote false doctrine.

Almost without exception, those scholars who have little regard for the inerrancy and divine inspiration of the Bible, reach one conclusion, and those who respect scripture come to quite a different conclusion. Most of this controversy surrounds the meaning of "sons of God" in verses two and four, and so after we consider outline the background of the passage, we will examine some possibilities for the meaning of the phrase "sons of God."

## I. **Background To Genesis Six**

- A. Genesis 4:3-4 discuss the offering of sacrifices by Cain and Abel. Cain offered an unacceptable to God, for it is recorded that the Lord had no respect for Cain's offering (vs. 5). In verses six and seven, God reproached Cain for the inadequacy of his sacrifice, and admonished him to "do well." It appears, however, that Cain did not react to such guidance with a penitent attitude, for he murdered Abel (vs. 8).
- B. God's response was to exile Cain (vss. 12-16) to a land away from his parents. The generations of Cain, which are listed in verses 17-24, include Lamech, who had already committed polygamy, and who boasted of his violence (vss. 23-24).
- C. Meanwhile, Adam and Eve bore another son of note named Seth. With the arrival of Seth and his son Enosh (4:26a), the writer notes: "Then began men to call upon the name of the Lord" (4:26b), as if there was now a renewed spirit of devotion toward God. Seth's descendants (5:6-32) included Enoch, who was truly righteous (5:24). The concept of "walking with God" means that Enoch was in spiritual communion and favor with God.
- D. Finally, Lamech is seen to rejoice in the birth of his son Noah, in whom he saw the hope of comfort in their work and toil (5:29). Later, Noah became the one who "found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (6:8). But the state of affairs had reached such a point that when God viewed mankind, He was grieved over the total wickedness and unrepentant state into which people had fallen (6:5). Noah is instructed by God to prepare a means of rescuing a component of humanity and the living world from a Flood that will destroy all life on land (6:17). What

changed the spiritual condition of humanity to such a degree that God would bring about a universal destruction?

## II. ***The Interpretation Of Genesis 6:1-3***

### A. First hypothesis.

#### 1. Discussion.

- a) The fact that "sons of God" and similar forms occur in the Old Testament and extra-biblical literature, and often refer to angels or minor deities, respectively, provides one with a strong incentive to conclude that the "sons of God" in Genesis 6:2, 4 also must refer to spiritual beings. In this case, the "daughters of men" would then be females of the human race or mankind in general. However, having defined the phrase in the preceding manner, there is still a considerable problem of interpretation.
- b) Somehow one must explain why angels left their heavenly abode, and why their marriage to human females precipitated God's judgment. A whole story must therefore be fabricated so as to offer a solution to these problems. In fact, the "story," found in the pseudepigraphal apocalyptic Book of Enoch and various myths of the Near East, goes something like this: Once upon a time, some angels were in heaven looking at the women of the world and, noticing how beautiful they appeared, those angels became full of lust [or had a desire to reproduce themselves, or desired to exalt themselves, depending on the version of the story]. They left their proper abode (heaven) and rightful duties, took on the form of men, and chose the wives they desired from among the population. In the course of these events, Enoch tried to intercede on behalf of what is now corrupted humanity, prophesying the destruction of man by a great flood unless the demons departed. Needless to say, Enoch did not succeed in ridding mankind of these fallen angels, and thus God found it necessary to destroy all life, except for righteous Noah and his family.

#### 2. Refutation.

- a) The Book of Enoch is given credit as the "earliest interpretation" of this passage, and the early Christians such as Tertullian, Irenaeus, Origen and Clement of Alexandria are supposed to have been influenced by these writings. Even Jude and Peter are purported to refer to Enoch as if it was scripture. However, the validity of Enoch is highly questionable, and its interpretation cannot be given credence as the inspired Word of God for the following reasons.

(1) While the book may be named after Enoch, it was not written

by him. It probably was written by a number of people in early-Maccabean to late pre-Christian times. Enoch is believed to reflect events surrounding the Maccabean revolt, and was used extensively by Essenes.

- (2) Because of the inconsistencies and contradictions that permeate Enoch and the other pseudepigraphal books, their canonicity was accepted by neither the New Testament writers nor the early Christian writers. Jude 14-15 may be a reference to Enoch and the Assumption of Moses, although the latter cannot be checked because the book no longer exists and its origin is unknown.
- b) In further support of the angel explanation, writers quote Jude 6-7 and 2 Peter 4-5, both of which discuss rebellious angels and their consignment to a dark prison until the day of judgment. It is apparent, however, that if Jude and Peter are referring to Genesis 6, it is only on the assumption that the passage is in fact about fallen angels. In fact, these New Testament passages nowhere refer to angels partaking in earthly marriages and having children.
- c) Attempts to substantiate a second fall of angels (in addition to that which can be inferred from the appearance of Satan in Genesis 3:1-6) violate scripture in every way, apart from the violence done to Jude and Peter. An explanation can be acceptable only if it is logically consistent with biblical teaching on angels. Note the following:
  - (1) Prior to Genesis 6:1-4, no mention is made of angels -- not even their creation (although this does not mean to say they were not included in the creation of Genesis 1-2).
  - (2) Jesus taught (Matthew 22:30, Mark 12:25, Luke 20:34) that angels neither marry nor are given in marriage. While they often take on a male form while acting as messengers of God on Earth, they do not function as physical or sexual beings.
  - (3) The judgment in verse three specifically refers to men and not "sons of God" or angels. It is inconsistent to argue that God would punish the tempted and not the tempters. If Genesis 6:1-4 is paralleled to chapter three, one can see that Satan (the tempter) is judged or cursed first, and then Adam and Eve (the tempted). For the sentence to be universal, those who are judged must refer to all humanity.
  - (4) Angels never are called "sons of God" anywhere else in the Pentateuch. The reference to angels as "sons of God" in Job 1:6 is contrasted with Satan; good spiritual beings are contrasted with evil spiritual beings, not with earthly beings.

d) While interpreting "sons of God" as divine beings may at first seem an obvious and attractive option (especially given the references in Job), this view cannot be substantiated with regard to the total biblical teaching on angels. Neither does it provide a good explanation in the context of these first few chapters of Genesis.

## B. Second hypothesis.

### 1. Discussion.

- a) Early Targums and certain orthodox Jewish authorities considered that the "sons of God" were an aristocratic class of rulers who, believing themselves to be autocratic, married whom they wished from the people of lower orders called the "daughters of men."
- b) The references in verse four to "men of renown" is ascribed to these rulers, whose evil supposedly was evident in their lust for a name of glory.

### 2. Refutation.

- a) There are some problems with the interpretation. First, distinction between royalty and commoners does not occur in Genesis 1-11, and second, nowhere does the Old Testament forbid marriage between these two classes of people.
- b) A few kings practicing tyranny, and advocating polygamy and paganism, hardly seems warrant for a global Flood that destroyed every living thing. If this interpretation were applied, it would give no adequate cause for the occurrence of a universal destruction.

## C. Third hypothesis.

1. The first hypothesis described above rests its case almost entirely on a defense of the definition of "sons of God" as angels. However, such an interpretation can be shown to be inconsistent both contextually and doctrinally, and the definition an unnecessary imposition. The key to this passage, therefore, is to determine its relationship to the characteristics of the generations described in preceding chapters, and the ensuing judgment in the form of the Flood.
2. Notice the contrast between the descendants of Cain and the descendants of Seth. Through their activities, it can be seen that the Cainites possessed characteristics of cleverness, culture and civilization. Furthermore, by the ungodly behavior of Lamech, they generally are portrayed as earthly, selfish and sensual.
3. Of course, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the professions associated with the Cainites, and Lamech is the only one (apart from Cain) specifically cited as sinful, but note that nothing positive is said of them in a spiritual sense. One therefore cannot help but

- notice the contrast given in 4:26 with the arrival of Seth. The Sethites were noted by their devotion (4:25), consecration (26), fellowship (5:22), testimony (Hebrews 9:5), service (5:29) and righteousness (6:8) in the sight of God.
4. Thus, after the generations of Cain and Seth have been outlined in chapters four and five, and 6:2 then speaks of two groups of people, is it not reasonable to conclude that this earlier division is being carried on into the later discussion? If this is the case, the "sons of God" expression is used in a spiritual sense, that is, referring to those who possessed characteristics of faithful service to God. The "daughters of men" would then be those of a worldly disposition. Given the contrasting nature of the two lines of descendants described previously, the "sons of God" were the godly Sethites, while the "daughters of men" were the worldly, ungodly Cainites. If this explanation is applied, the events of those times fall logically into place.
    - a) One could conclude that the judgment was delivered purely on the basis of mixed or indiscriminate marriage on the part of the Sethites. However, it probably is better to consider that the judgment was given not merely on the basis of mixed marriages, but also on the failure of the "sons of God" and the "daughters of men" to maintain their spiritual integrity despite those marriages. Thus, universal destruction is prescribed for universal sinfulness.
    - b) Through intermarriage, the Sethites would have become included racially and morally: it would be easier for the Sethites to descend to the moral level of their newly acquired relatives than for the converse to occur (1 Corinthians 15:33).
    - c) God already had promised a way of overcoming sin through a descendant of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:15), and hence must have decided that unless He intervened in a miraculous way, the integrity of the messianic line would be defiled, and man would have no chance of redemption. Therefore, the "sons of God" departing from their mission and marrying in an improper manner, leading to an overwhelming apostasy, provides the appropriate connection between the parallel genealogies of Genesis 1-5 and the Flood of Genesis 6-9.

### III. ***The "Nephilim" Of Genesis 6:4***

- A. Probably because the Septuagint translates the word "nephilim" as "giant," and the KJV followed that definition, the majority of scholars are inclined to the view that these were men of gigantic stature. This also appears consistent with the only other occurrence of the word in Num-

bers 13:33, where the returning spies describe themselves as "grasshoppers" in comparison with the "nephilim."

1. The word itself generally is considered to be derived from the verb *naphal* meaning "to fall." From this, liberal critics interpret "nephilim" to mean "those fallen from heaven," in reference to their progenitors' angelic origins. Thus, in this line of thinking, the "nephilim" must be a fantastic race of some description because they are the offspring of the mythological marriages described in verse two.
  2. Or, extrapolating in the reverse direction, it is argued that the "sons of God" must be angels because the word "nephilim" means "fallen from heaven." In either case, no one proposes that Goliath or the sons of Anak had angelic ancestors, so why suggest it here? Note also that the "from heaven" part has to be provided artificially.
- B. The full explanation may lie beyond a mere physical interpretation. The whole problem with verse four is relating the allusion to these men who were mighty or strong and "men of renown [name]" to the context of the degradation of humanity. An answer may lie in the reference to "nephilim" in Numbers 33.
1. When the spies returned from Canaan, they reported that the people were strong and the cities fortified, and the descendants of Anak lived there (vs. 28). But when Caleb challenged the people to possess the land, the spies resorted to hyperbole, saying the "nephilim," sons of Anak were there and the Israelites were as grasshoppers in their sight (vss. 30-33).
  2. So, while these "nephilim" could have been tall and strong, their obvious military prowess may have struck fear into the Israelites. This encounter could have been an early reference to the Philistines who occupied that region, who often were portrayed as fearsome fighters, and later included the champions Goliath and Saph.
- C. Thus, "nephilim" may not have been a reference to a racial group as such, but rather to those of a fearsome character. The "nephilim" were a group of people who were violent attackers and invaders, based on the idea that *naphal* might be interpreted "to fall upon." This would also be consistent with the description of the "nephilim" in the latter half of verse four in terms often used for military heroes or champions, warriors, and tyrants.
- D. One should consider not so much the fact of the "nephilim," but the effect they had on the population. Moses, writing through inspiration, may be making a comparison between the influence of the godless before the Flood, and their influence at the time when the Israelites were supposed to occupy the land. The result in the former was a universal Flood, and in the latter, God's chosen people were condemned to forty

years' wandering in the wilderness. On each occasion, perhaps, these fierce warriors caused the faithful to stumble through lack of courage, rather than trusting in God.

**Conclusion.** While Genesis 6:1-4 possesses many difficult aspects of interpretation, its general meaning may be ascertained by the examination of the peripheral context and doctrinal principles in both the Old and New Testaments. The overall context suggests that the "sons of God" and "daughters of men" exist as an antithetical parallelism, and refer to the godly Sethites (Genesis 4:26) and worldly Cainites (4:11), respectively. The unsanctioned and improperly motivated marriages between these two groups (6:2) led to the total moral breakdown of the existing world order (6:5), the exception among them being Noah and his family (6:8).

Further, the "nephilim" should not be considered the strange, mythological offspring of this union, but rather as a class of tyrannical warriors who maintained a faith-breaking reign of terror. In this respect, they serve as a deliberate parallel to the "nephilim" of Numbers 33, who also caused God's people to stumble. The cleansing Flood of Noah was brought about to maintain the sacred messianic lineage, and thus a single generation was left to repopulate the earth (9:1). Although man still was capable of evil and a life devoted to ungodliness (e.g., 9:22), God promised that there would never be a flood to destroy the Earth again (9:11). Through the descendants of Noah's son Shem (9:26), Jesus Christ the Son of God came to complete the redemptive theme of the Old Testament (Matthew 5:17).

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