

Who Are the "Sons of God"?

The question of who are the "sons of God" in Gen 6:2 & 4 has vexed scholars and commentators for ages. Four different proposals occupy the field, but none has found universal acceptance.

1) **They were 'angelic' beings.** The chief strength of this proposal over the others is its biblical support: the Hebrew expression *bene ha'elohim* used here is also found in Job 1:6 & 2:1, where it refers to angelic members of the heavenly court, the most outspoken of which was the Satan. The alternative but synonymous expression (without the article) *bene 'elohim* is also found in Job 38:7 (in which it parallels the 'morning stars') and Dan 3:25 (singular here) in which the sense of heavenly beings is the most natural reading. Less certain but very highly probable support also comes from Psm 29:1, 82:6; 89:6 (Heb, v7). Based on these evidences, angelic beings would have been the most natural reading for this verse. This was how, also, most of the ancient commentators have understood it. The LXX, one of the earliest translations of the Hebrew Bible into another language, translates *bene ha'elohim* in Job 1:6 & 2:1 as *angeloi tou theou*, 'the angels of God,' and, therefore, understood the expression to refer to angelic beings. It finds support further in the earliest Jewish literature, such as 1 Enoch, Jubilees, Philo, Josephus and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Additional support has been sought in comparative linguistics and religion. *Bene ha'elohim* is philologically identical to Ugaritic *bn il*, 'the sons of El.' In Canaanite mythology, *bn il* are major gods who serve in the pantheon headed by El.

Its strong grounding in Scriptures and context, however, has not prevented it from being dismissed.

A) The most common response of people to this reading is to think it bizarre; the idea of angelic beings having sexual intercourse with humans smacks of pagan superstition and the dark side of magic and

sorcery. Our feelings, however, is no ground to stand on in this matter. Forced to the conclusion on linguistic grounds that it has to refer to angels, Friedrich Delitzsch says, "We must therefore, at least as exegetes, accept this paradoxical and scandalous idea."¹

B) A stronger argument against it comes from the teachings of Jesus that angels do not marry (Matt 22:30; Mk 12:25). Some have retorted that what Jesus meant was that angels do not marry among themselves. This, however, stretches the point too thin and draws its strength only from silence. But it is not when we notice that the dead will neither marry or be given in marriage because they will be like angels "in heaven." Jesus's point is that there is no marriage in heaven, not among the angels and neither among the saints resurrected. Marriage is God's gift to humans to enable them to fulfill the creation mandate to "be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and rule over it" (Gen. 1:28). Marriage and sex are relevant for life on earth, they are neither needed nor relevant in heaven. That angels could have committed intercourse with the "daughters of men" is, therefore, not a contradiction to anything Jesus has taught.² It could well be argued that, precisely because marriage was absent in heaven that the—presumably rogue—"sons of God" were tempted to try it upon the "daughters of men" on earth as here in 6:2.

C) A further argument against it comes from the question, if these were angels, why were humans punished? This argument, though often repeated, carries no weight.

a) While humans did suffer, what greater punishment could the *bene ha'elohim* have paid than to have all their wives and children wiped out? Additionally, we read and are only given to read what happened as a result on the human plane; we cannot assume that the angels—if the 'sons of God' were in fact that—were not punished. We are simply not told *that* side of the story. The Old Testament, especially, is conspicuously reticent about what happens on the invisible preternatural side of reality. Reports of what angels do are confined mostly to the missions upon which they were sent. Scenes such as we find in Job 1:6-12 and 2:1-7 (and Zec 3:1-2) are rare exceptions. At the same time, 2 Pet 2:4-5 asserts that angels did sinned and, in the order of the events mentioned there, suggests that their sin preceded, and may have been the cause of, the flood in Noah's time. The argument that humans were the (only) ones to pay for the crime is, therefore, hollow.

b) It should also be noted (as we argue in the main commentary) that the *bene ha'elohim* were not the only culprits. A careful reading of the texts shows that humans were willing conspirators to their act of commingling. They were punished but not because of the sins of "the sons of God," but for their own willing participation in the affair. It should also be noticed that in the larger scheme of things, the so-called 'punishment' of the human race for this act of subversion was salvific after all; the flood excised the cancerous tumour resulting from those illegitimate intercourses. And, to stress the point once more, there could not have been a more drastic punishment for the culprit angels than the total annihilation of their offspring and the utter ruination of their wicked intentions in the flood.

In concluding this discussion on the "sons of God" as angels, or members of the heavenly court, we take heed of W. van Gemeren's warning against the danger of seeking only a 'rational explanation' to our question.³ "If the modern reader finds this story incredible," adds Gordan Wenham, "that reflects a materialism that tends to doubt the existence of spirits, good or evil."⁴ These warnings are not meant to muscle readers, I am sure, but it is easy to reject this reading simply out of 'unbelief.'

2) They were tyrannical rulers. According to one view of this reading the story is essentially about the sin of wanton polygamy such as we see in Lamech (Gen 4:19). A variation of this view takes the story to be about the origin of the *gibborim*, 'heroes' who were the fruit of these sexual engagements (v4). These tyrants, though human, were often acclaimed to be gods or 'sons of god'. The pharaohs of Egypt, e.g., received five "great names" upon his enthronement, the first of which is that of Horus, thus representing the reincarnation of the falcon god. Similar practices were also found all over the other ancient Near Eastern civilizations. As late as the 3rd-2nd Cent BC, e.g., the Seleucid kings named themselves Soter (Saviour) and Epiphanes (Manifestation [of God]) in recognition of their unity with the gods. Ancient Israel shared similar ideas too, it is claimed. In Psm 2, one of the so-called enthronement psalms or 'coronation psalm', e.g., Yahweh's decree is proclaimed, "you are my Son; today I have begotten you" (NRS, NKJ). Against such a background, the 'sons of God' here in Genesis have been understood as referring to such persons who, perhaps tyrannically, get their way upon the women by their power of

domination. A slight twist is Bruce Waltke's take that the "sons of God" were demon-possessed kings whose intercourse with the "daughters of men" produced the *gibborim* and "probably" the Nephilim too.⁵

This solution claims to be consistent with Jesus's teaching that angels do not marry and with the argument that it was the humans who paid the price for the sin. But as we have argued above, both of these objections lack cogency (see B & C above). Exegetically, the identification has no basis in Scriptures: "Singular 'son of a god/son of God' can refer to a heroic or royal figure, but this usage does not elsewhere occur for the plural, and elsewhere in the First Testament and in other Middle Eastern writings, the sons of God/s are heavenly beings . . ." ⁶ Finally, it also requires an extra step in mental processing before the meaning of the expression becomes apparent and is, therefore, not likely to be the first thought that would come to mind for the ancient Hebrew audience.

3. A third view holds that **the "sons of God" were the descendants of Seth while the daughters of men were the descendants of Cain.** This view began to find expression in Jewish thought about the 3rd Cent AD. Augustine of Hippo argued this view based, not on exegesis, but on his idea about the earthly and heavenly cities. The expression "sons of God" he read as signifying 'election.' The "sons of God," therefore, has to be the godly line of Seth recounted in Gen 5. This then leads naturally to the identification of the "daughters of man" as the daughters of Cain (Gen 5), and to explaining their sin as the deliberate defilement of the godly line whom God intended to keep apart (cf., the idea of not being "unequally yoked"). Since then, this view has been adopted by scholars such as John Calvin and Martin Luther.⁷

This interpretation provides a rather satisfying theological take on the cause of the flood, especially if one is of the view that it was humans who paid the price for the sin. On the other hand, it requires a certain amount of exegetical arm-twisting.

A) There is no precedence in Scriptures for the descendants of Seth being called "sons of God." The identification is, therefore, arbitrary.

B) The births of daughters have so far been reported in Seth's line only (Gen 5); all of Cain's offspring were male.

C) This interpretation requires that we change the meaning of the word 'men' (*ha'adam*) in "the daughters of men" to mean Sethites when the same word in v1 ("when men began to increase") means "humans,"

i.e., both Cainites and Sethites. To give the same word two different meanings within the same context is, again, arbitrary to say the least.

D) A casual reading of the verses suggests that the culprits in this episode are the "sons of God" however their identity is understood. And this is how the passage is traditionally understood. Here the culpability flows rather from the other direction, from the "daughters of men," the daughters of the banished Cainites. There is no warrant for such a contrary manoeuvre.

4. **They were the sons of Cain.** Lyle Eslinger lists the following five observations to argue that the "sons of God" refer to the Cainites:⁸

1. The description of the increase [*lrb*] of men and daughters in 6:1 suits the Sethites of ch.5, whose multiplication is indefinitely large—the total number of Cainites in ch.4 is only 13.
2. The birth of daughters to anyone occurs only amongst the Sethites of ch.5.
3. The Cainites had been banished (lit. "cursed") from the face of the [*'adamah*] in 4:11-14. In 6:1 the multiplication of man and his daughters occurs on the face of the [*'adamah*], increasing the likelihood that they are Sethites.
4. The action of taking wives for oneself (6:2) is paralleled only by the Cainite Lamech who takes two wives for himself 4:19.
5. The description of the actions of the *bene ha'elohim* in 6:2 is very similar to that of the woman's actions in her bid for God-like knowledge in Eden.

3:6 And the woman saw how good [*ki tob*] the tree was to eat, desirous to the eyes, and desirous to make one wise, and she took some fruit and ate.

6:2 And the sons of God saw how good [*ki tobot*] the daughters of man were and they took wives for themselves from all whom they chose.

These, by themselves, do not say much. Eslinger goes on to make a case for his identification. He argues that between Adam and Eve, Adam was the more obedient while Eve never accepted her creatureliness. The

hubris of eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil owed mainly to her initiative. "The woman's reasons for eating the fruit are given; Adam's motivation, on the other hand, is only visible in the fact that the woman gives the fruit to him."⁹ Eslinger then goes on to suggest that Eve's character and transformation can be seen reflected in the births of the two children, Cain and Seth. With Cain, she says, "I (Eve) made/created a man ['ysh] with the help of Yahweh" (4:1). In Cain's birth, says Eslinger, Eve reasserts herself by putting herself before Yahweh, essentially exulting in her own abilities to create. With Seth, however, Eve finally accepts her place in God's scheme of things; "God appointed another progeny to me," she says (4:25).


Cain, argues Eslinger, bears the cast of Eve's self-assertion not just in his name but also in his character which eventually leads to the rejection of God's rejection of his gift and the murder of his brother Abel. Seth and his line, on the other hand, reflects Eve's acceptance of her place, and they take the "stance of a humble suppliant who petitions God" calling "on the name of the Lord" (4:26). The "sons of God" may therefore be identified with the Cainites who, bearing Eve's hubristic character, now lead the "daughters of man"—the Sethites who bear the innocence of a reformed Eve, and bearing the more obedient character of Adam ('the man')—in another attempt at rebellion against God.


Eslinger's proposal, it has to be said, is highly suggestive and attractive. He is a careful exegete. If there is a flaw with it it is that the identification of the "sons of God" with the Cainites is neither intuitive (in modern jargon, it is not 'user-friendly') nor is it transparent (it has a 'steep learning curve'). In the nature of any reading the initial observations would have triggered some immediate though tentative recognition of how things would fall together in the direction of what it means. This is not the case here. Reaching his conclusion requires considerable theological sophistication and literary and rhetorical dexterity. It is, therefore, hardly likely to be what the ancient audience would have understood the "sons of God" to be on reading the text. It contravenes an essential principle of exegesis, i.e., of parsimony at every turn.

In conclusion we note that all four views can be defended from the Hebrew grammar, and all have credible scholars for their advocates. As we have noted in passing, it seems that acceptance or rejection of any view involves more than just clear exegesis, but often on subjective assumptions that the acts of the "sons of God" was oppressive-coercive

and the humans were their victims pure and simple, that the conclusion is "bizarre," and so on. The fact that capable scholars can continue to hold different views on the matter means that we cannot be dogmatic. The most anyone can appeal to is to re-read the text of Genesis with an openness that recognizes one could be wrong. I once read a novel in which the author painted a committee of Israeli generals in conference over a life-n-death crisis. The author very interestingly made up (or perhaps he was privy to actual Israeli practice) a policy that governed their discussion. If eleven out of the twelve at the table concurred on a matter, the last has to come up with reasons why they were wrong. It is a way of thinking well worth embracing. That said, where do I stand? As explanations go, 2 & 3 sit very comfortable with me but I find the exegetical support for them inadequate. I am highly attracted by 4, especially as it is expounded by Eslinger. But also, especially as it is expounded by Eslinger, it requires a literary erudition more than can reasonably be expected of a 'normal' reader. 1 makes me uncomfortable—the idea of angels copulating with women sits uneasy with my rational materialistic inclination.¹⁰ Yet, in the end I find I have no way out but to go with it. It is exegetically the most coherent, and it is consistent with the flow of the narrative (for which see the commentary on the text), not to say also that it is most likely how the ancient audience would have understood it. Against myself I am driven to believe that this is the most likely interpretation. It is scandalous, I know, but, like the virgin birth of our Lord and his death on the Cross, it is a scandal of the Word.

Notes:

1. Friedrich Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), I:130.
2. To read the commentary on Matt 22:29-33, click here .
3. W. A. van Gemeren, "The Sons of God in Genesis 6:1-4 [An Example of Evangelical Demythologization?]," *WTJ* 43 (1981): 320-48.
4. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 140. Wenham's additional remark that "those who believe that the creator could unite himself to human nature in the Virgin's womb will not find this story intrinsically beyond belief," however, has to be taken with a pinch of scepticism. The incarnation is an act of God; the sexual intercourse of the "sons of God" is not.
5. Bruce W. Waltke with Cathi Fredericks, *Genesis. A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 117.

6. John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*. Vol 1: Israel's Gospel (Downers Grove:InterVarsity Press, 2003), 161, n48.
7. A rather full exposition in support of this view is found in John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 243-49. 
8. Lyle Eslinger, "A Contextual Identification of the *bene ha'elohim* and *benoth ha'adam* in Genesis 6:1-4," *JSOT* 13 (1979): 65.
9. Eslinger, 66.
10. The "bizarre" things I have witnessed during deliverances of persons 'possessed' by demons may have softened my materialistic edges but not honed them away. Unfortunately, most Western commentators and scholars can only think and speak out of the bookish contexts of their academic vocation and discount anything to do with the spiritual world as outlandish.

Resources & Further Reading

In addition to the standard commentaries, see:

- David J. A. Clines, "The Significance of the 'Sons of God' Episode (Genesis 6:1-4) in the Context of the 'Primeval History' (Genesis 1-11)," *JSOT* 13 (July 1979): 33-46.
- G. Cooke, "The Songs of (the) God(s)," *ZAW* 76 (1964): 22-47.
- Lyle Eslinger, "A Contextual Identification of the *bene ha'elohim* and *benoth ha'adam* in Genesis 6:1-4," *JSOT* 13 (July 1975): 65-73.
- M. Kline, "The Sons of God (Genesis 6:1-4)," *WTJ* 24 (1962): 187-204.
- A. R. Millard, "A New Babylonian 'Genesis' Story," *TynB* 18 (1967): .
- J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957.
- R. C. Newman, "The Ancient Exegesis of Genesis 6:2, 4," *GTJ* 5 (1984): 13-36.
- David L. Petersen, "Genesis 6:1-4, Yahweh and the Organization of the Cosmos," *JSOT* 13 (July 1979): 47-64.
- W. A. van Gemeren, "The Sons of God in Genesis 6:1-4 [An Example of Evangelical Demythologization?]," *WTJ* 43 (1981):320-48.

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