

THE R.U.S.H. BIBLE STUDY



THE GIANTS OF GENESIS SIX
KNOW WHAT YOUR TALKING ABOUT FAST

This is a thorough examination of the text in question and was prepared by Dustin Mace.

INTRODUCTION

The Hebrew text of Gen 6:1–4 has puzzled Jewish and Christian exegetes for centuries. Its four verses contain no less than nine exegetical and lexical concerns, one of which is the identity of the בני־האלהים (“sons of God”), the focus of this paper. Yet the meaning behind the narrative rests on an understanding of who this group of individuals is intended to represent. From even the earliest periods of exegesis, commentators and theologians have divided generally into three interpretive camps: the בני־האלהים are either 1) human rulers or aristocrats, 2) angels or celestial beings, or 3) the once-righteous descendants of the lineage of Seth. After a brief analysis of the first two interpretations, this paper will argue for the latter view. First, however, it is necessary to establish the literary context and function of Gen 6:1–4.

THE LITERARY CONTEXT AND FUNCTION OF GENESIS 6:1–4

Form critics have given to Gen 6:1–4 the category of misplaced myth, partly because of its admittedly mythical character and partly because of its seemingly awkward placement in the text.¹ How does it relate to what precedes and follows it? Close attention to the literary context reveals that our passage is integrally related to the story of Noah and, thus, the flood account. But it is just as closely linked with the preceding genealogical material of chapter five. Genesis 6:1–4 will thus be seen to be transitional in function, demonstrating how even the once-godly

¹ Critics have focused on the compositional issues surrounding the text. Skinner argued that the narrative is a “fragment” transported from its original context in J into the final form of Genesis 1–11. Its character is truncated and it is essentially out of place, having belonged to “a stratum of J which knows nothing of a flood.” J. Skinner, *Genesis* (ICC; New York: Charles Scribner, 1910), 141. Cf. Westermann, who views Gen 6:1–4 as a joining of two “originally distinct narratives.” C. Westermann, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 43. Gunkel follows Skinner in arguing that 6:1–4 originally had nothing to do with the flood narrative. H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (MLBS; Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1997), 59. The significance of these observations for our purposes is that Gen 6:1–4 does not contribute rhetorically to the editor’s intention, stated above, that the text’s purpose is to portray the spread of wickedness as extending even to Seth’s descendants.

descendants of Seth have fallen into disgrace and prompted God's watery judgment, leaving only righteous Noah behind.²

Our text falls into place within the larger narrative of Gen 6:1–8. This is demonstrated through two lexical connections between 6:1–4 and 5–8. First, just as the בני־האלהים “see” (ויראו) the beauty of the daughters of men (v. 2), God himself “sees” the evil of man (6:5). Second, in Gen 6:1, man had begun to “multiply” (לרבו) on the “earth” (האדמה), while in verse 5 God sees the “greatness” (גדולה) of the evil of man on the “earth” (האדמה). It seems likely, then, that the evil God “sees” (v. 5) is the evil of the “sons of God,” whoever they turn out to be, in their “seeing” and “taking” (v. 2).³ There is a thematic connection as well, for both narratives feature God's judgment in some measure (v. 3 and vv. 5–8). Clearly, there is a link between the two passages. As man multiplied, evil increased, leading to God's declaration of imminent judgment.

Moving outward, Gen 6:1–8 is also to be read in light of the preceding genealogy and as the backdrop for righteous Noah. Indeed, the textual unit is bracketed by references to Noah, and it falls within his overall story. In Gen 5:28–29 the author interrupts his genealogical formula to focus more closely on the righteous descendent of Lamech and his three sons. But the initial introduction to Noah is brief, and the author quickly turns to narrate the events of Gen 6:1–4.

In verse 8, after describing the judgment on the wickedness of man (vv. 5–7), which is represented as having its culmination in verses 1–4, the author again highlights the patriarch Noah. Virtually all English translations read the ו at the head of verse 8 as a disjunctive, which indicates that a contrast (“but”) is intended. It was already demonstrated that the wickedness

² See Sailhamer, who views Gen 6:1–4 as an epilogue to the preceding genealogy that serves to close it out. J. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (LBI; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 120. He also notes that viewing these verses as a preparatory for the flood has resulted in the various interpretations which are common today.

³ K. Matthews, *Genesis 1–11* (NAC 1a; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 323.

described in verses 1–4 is in some measure causal for God’s judgment in verses 5–7. Now, by zeroing in on Noah by use of a disjunctive, the narrator ensures that a sensitive reader will view Noah against the rampant evil described in the previous seven verses. This is further evidenced by the lexical connections between verses 6–7 and verse 8: Man’s evil has provoked God to grieve (נחם), but Noah (נח) found favor (חן) in God’s sight. Our text is, then, inextricably linked to the material which surrounds it. Its placement here is not awkward, but purposeful, reflecting the author’s intention that the event recorded in Gen 6:1–4 be read in light of the Adamic/Sethite genealogy which precedes it, and as the dark backdrop for righteous Noah (v. 8), in whose account it has been intentionally embedded.

Having established the literary context of Gen 6:1–4 and its relation to what precedes and follows it, we turn now to an analysis of its three most prevalent interpretations.

ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE: THREE MAJOR VIEWS

View One: בני־האלהים as Fallen Angels or Celestial Beings

Proponents of this view argue that the בני־האלהים are fallen angels or celestial beings who married and/or had sexual relations with human women (“daughters of men”), producing the Nephilim of verse 4. It is argued that this is the best way to understand the clear contrast drawn between the “sons of God” and “daughters of men” (sons vs. daughters, God vs. men). The strengths of this view are threefold. First, it reads בני־האלהים in light of the phrase’s other OT occurrences and assigns the same meaning to its occurrence in Gen 6:2.⁴ Both Ps 29:1 and 89:7 both include a reference to בני־אלים (translated “council of the holy ones” by ESV, NASB, ASV,

⁴ So U. Cassuto, *Genesis* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Central Press, 1961), 292–93. He writes: “Hence ‘the sons of God’ must be entities existing outside the sphere of humankind,” because the terms always mean angels, whether בני־האלהים or בני־אלים.

NIV; “assembly of the saints,” KJV), while Ps 82:6 contains an occurrence of אֱלֹהִים and בְּנֵי־עֶלְיוֹן (translated “gods” and “sons of the most high,” respectively, by ASV, NASB, NIV; “children of the most high,” KJV). The book of Job also has the same term in 1:6, 2:1, and 38:7. Here, as in the Psalms, the setting is a heavenly council; hence the meaning celestial or angelic beings, and its application to Gen 6:2. It should be noted that these texts do not contain an exact lexical parallel with our term in Genesis 6, but rather minor variations.

Second, this view is probably also the oldest, occupying a prominent position in both Christian and Jewish early interpretation.⁵ Its acceptance among early Jewish exegesis was widespread, and classic examples are found in the Jewish apocryphal books *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees*. The former (6:1–6) contains what is almost a paraphrase of our text, with the phrase “the angels, the sons of heaven” substituted for “sons of God.”⁶ A very similar interpretation is found in the pseudepigraphical *Jubilees* (“angels of God,” *Jub. 5:1*).⁷ At another place this same work refers to these “angels of God” as “the Watchers,” who defiled themselves by forming unions with the daughters of men, and against whom Enoch bore witness.⁸ This view is also the interpretation of Josephus in the first century. He wrote that in the days of the descendants of Seth “the many angels of God accompanied with women” and produced sons with little concern for gratitude toward God or justice toward men.⁹

⁵ So G. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Waco: Word Books, 1987), 139.

⁶ Cited from H.F.D. Sparks, *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 188. Possibly lending a small degree of strength to the interpretation found in this pseudonymous work is the fact that *some* church fathers, including Tertullian, accepted *1 En.* as canonical. Most fathers, however, rejected the work, including Augustine, Origen, and Jerome. See Sparks, 169–70.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 1.31.

Matthews notes that the influence of Enoch extended into the arena of early Christian exegesis as well, and that the angelic interpretation was, as a result, the predominant view among Eastern interpreters and Latin fathers through the time of Ambrose.¹⁰ Both Clement of Alexandria and Nemesius of Emesa wrote of the angels whose inclinations turned away from God and toward perishable things and fell to earth as a result, both in reference to Gen 6:1–4.¹¹ While Augustine later abandoned this interpretation and favored understanding the בני־האלהים as the godly descendants of Seth,¹² his contemporary Ambrose followed Clement, arguing that the unholy unions between human women and the angels resulted in the birth of the giant offspring described in verse 4.¹³ Like Augustine, later Christian commentators began to favor the Sethite view, including magisterial Reformers like Calvin and Luther. The angelic interpretation fell out of disfavor among Christian and Jewish exegesis in the centuries after the spread of the church, when Judaism began to favor the kingship view (see “View Two: בני־האלהים as Human Judges or Rulers”). Today, while many modern commentators favor the Sethite view, as we will see, a great many have returned to the angelic interpretation. These include, but are not limited to, Sarna, von Rad, Arnold, Cassuto, Morris, Ross, and Wenham.¹⁴ Moreover, many source-critical commentators have followed suit because of the text’s ostensibly mythical character. Drawing on Near Eastern literary parallels describing unions between divine and human beings that produced

¹⁰ Matthews, *Genesis 1–11*, 325–26.

¹¹ A. Louth, ed., *Genesis 1–11* (ACCS 1; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 123–24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 124.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ N. Sarna, *Genesis* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: Jewish Pub. Society, 1989); G. von Rad, *Genesis* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1989); B. Arnold, *Genesis* (NCBC; New York: Cambridge, 2009); H. Morris, *The Genesis Record* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976); A. Ross, *Creation & Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

giant offspring, they conclude that Gen 6:1–4 is an awkward Yahwistic (J) insertion of this well-known myth into the overall narrative¹⁵ to explain to the Israelites the origins of the Nephilim and provide the basis for the moral necessity of the flood.

The third and final strength of this interpretation is that it attempts to reckon seriously with NT texts in 1–2 Peter and Jude which seem to describe the eternal fate of the fallen angelic beings who cohabitated with human women and were later imprisoned.¹⁶ *Prima facie*, these passages do seem to describe what is present in Gen 6:1–4, with Jude 6–7 serving as the example *par excellence*. It describes angels who defied the limits God had placed upon them and instead indulged in what Jude terms “gross immorality” with sexual partners ontologically different from themselves (“strange flesh,” v. 7, NASB). We will read Jude and 1–2 Peter more closely when this interpretation is critiqued. For now, it will be sufficient to note that the angelic interpretation seems to garner significant support from these NT texts.

Criticism of View One: בני־האלהים as Fallen Angels or Celestial Beings

We have seen that the angelic interpretation has much to commend itself. It assigns the most frequent OT meaning of בני־האלהים to Gen 6:1–4, it enjoys a long history of Christian and Jewish exegetical support, and it attempts to reckon with what seem to be NT allusions to the Genesis account.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Skinner, 139–47; and Westermann, 43–45. These critics are right to read Gen 6:1–4 in its ancient Near Eastern literary context, but perhaps misguided to assign the category of “myth” to any section of Genesis, since the author is clearly at pains to set forth his work as theological history. See Matthews, *Genesis 1–11*, 41. Here he writes that it is the function of the recurring *tōlēdōt* formula to unite the founding of the Israelite nation with the beginning of creation.

¹⁶ But see Blomberg, who argues that these texts do not have to support this interpretation of Gen. 6:1–4. C. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation* (Nashville: Baker, 2006), 455, 466.

But this interpretation is not without its share of problems. First, it goes without saying that context is one of the first considerations in biblical hermeneutics, and the setting of the other occurrences of בני־האלהים elsewhere in the OT is radically different from that of Gen 6:1–4. Psalm 89:6–7 declares that God’s greatness surpasses that of the בני־אלים, so the setting is that of God’s heavenly council. The same is clearly the case in Ps 29:1, as well as Job 1:6, 2:1, and 38:7. Nothing in Gen 1–6 has prepared the reader for the introduction to divine beings that Gen 6:2 purportedly provides, and nothing indicates the presence of a heavenly council.¹⁷ Second, בני־האלהים does not always refer to angels in the OT. In Ps 82:6, God takes oppressive human rulers to task for their failure to properly execute justice, and declares that even though they are אלהים (“gods”) and בני־עליון (“sons of the mighty”), they will die like men. It is evident, then, that Skinner is not fully correct when he writes that בני־האלהים in each of its OT occurrences always means either inferior “members of the divine order” or angels,¹⁸ and there is precedent for using the term as a reference to human beings as well.

Third, the immediate context (v. 1) contradicts the angelic interpretation. Genesis 6:1—a temporal clause (כי) in subordination to the main clause in verse 2—should not be discounted, because it describes the situational setting for the marriages in question. It indicates that it was at a time of widespread human (האדם)—not divine-human—procreation that the בני־האלהים married and produced offspring through the בנות האדם. Further, the verbs לקח and בוא are often (though not everywhere: see Gen 34:2) used throughout the OT to depict the normal taking of wives and the related conjugal act, respectively (Gen 4:19 and others). After all, the immediately preceding

¹⁷ Matthews, *Genesis 1–11*, 326–27. He argues, also, that Gen 1:26 and 3:22, with their use of first-person plural verbs, do not support the presence of a heavenly council in Genesis, since the significance of the plural verbs in those passages is not readily apparent.

¹⁸ Skinner, *Genesis*, 141.

material (Gen 5) describes the marriage, procreation, and death of the sons of Seth. It is thus most fitting to think of the activity of Gen 6:2 as a continuation of this activity. There is, then, no lexical support for viewing the action which took place as inherently perverse.¹⁹ Moreover, the angelic interpretation appears to contradict other NT texts, like Matt 22:30, where Jesus describes marriage as a purely human endeavor in contrast to the angels, who do not marry.²⁰ The interpretation of Scripture with Scripture and lose attention to the preceding material, therefore, encourages the reader to view the marriage and procreation of Gen 6:1–4 as normal marriage and procreation between human men and women, a blessing bestowed only upon terrestrial life (Gen 1:28).

Fourth, the NT texts cited above are not directly tied to any specific OT event. The reference in 1 Peter to “the spirits in prison” (1 Pet 3:19–20) describes those who were disobedient during the time of God’s patience while Noah constructed the ark, and thus may not be angels but Noah’s evil, impenitent contemporaries, whom he condemned by his faith (cf. Heb 11:7).²¹ The “angels” of 2 Pet 2:4 are those who sinned and were cast to earth, and their only relation to Noah’s generation is the similarity shared by all three examples of God’s judgment on the wicked and concomitant rescue from temptation for the godly (2 Pet 2:4–9), the illustration of which is Peter’s purpose in citing this account (cf. 2 Pet 2:9). As noted, Jude 6–7, with its

¹⁹ Granted, the vast majority of commentators, regardless of their position on our topic, agree that Gen 6:1–4 is at least preparatory to the flood account in that it illustrates the rapid increase of evil among men after the fall. It has already been pointed out (“The Literary Context and Function of Gen 6:1–4”) that verses 1–4 bear lexical connections with 5–8. Gen. 6:1–4, then, does describe, in some measure, the evil God “saw” (v. 5) and which prompted his plan to flood the earth as divine punishment. Additionally, we will argue that the marriages were sinful insofar as they were intermarriages between the godly and ungodly, but nothing inherently evil in the marriage and procreation itself.

²⁰ Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative*, 120. Matthews, 327, notes that while in the OT angels acquire material bodies and are able to eat (cf. Gen 18:1–2, 8 with 19:1, 5), it is not a short leap to conclude that angels are thereby capable acquiring “sexual properties.”

²¹ The Greek word for “spirits” here is *πνευμα*, not *αγγελος*, the more common reference to angelic beings.

references to unions between angels and “strange” or “other” flesh comparable to the offenses of Sodom and Gomorrah, appears to be a close parallel with Gen 6:1–4. But Jude gives no specific indication that this is his interpretation of our text. Rather, he compares the sins of the rebellious angels with the immorality of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. The question may be asked why, if he cites this specific OT event, he does not cite the narrative of Gen 6:1–4, especially if the latter is the specific event of which he writes, as proponents of this view contend. Thus, these NT texts teach important truths about the fate of evil angels, but they are not directly linked with any specific OT event, and thus need not strengthen the interpretation that the בני־האלהים are angelic or celestial beings.

Finally, the punishment set forth in Gen 6:3 (either the divine limitation of lifespan or the declaration of a period of reprieve before the flood) is directed not at angels but man, further lending support to the idea that the offenders are not divine but human. Moreover, verses 5–8 level a devastating indictment against man and his actions, which prompt the flood. It was earlier contended that the narrative of verses 1–4 sets up an illustration of the wickedness that has increased as man has multiplied, and that its relationship to verses 5–8 is causal in nature. If, then, the offense in view in verses 5–8 is that of man, and verses 1–4 are illustrative of his wickedness, it is difficult to understand בני־האלהים to mean divine beings. Wenham attempts to resolve this difficulty by arguing that the offense condemned in verse 3 is that of the בנות האדם, who cohabitated with the divine beings.²² Skinner, on the other hand, writes that “the guilt is wholly on the side of the angels.”²³

²² Wenham, *Genesis*, 141. He finds in the sin of the “daughters of men” a parallel with Eve’s offense in the garden narrative, that of the transgression of divinely appointed boundaries.

²³ Skinner, *Genesis*, 143.

In summary, this interpretation has much to commend it, but in the end it is less than satisfactory. Still more plausible is the view that interprets Gen 6:2 to refer to human judges or rulers.

View Two: בני־האלהים as Human Judges or Rulers

More convincing than the angelic view is the kingship view, which identifies the בני־האלהים as human judges or rulers (aristocrats).²⁴ According to this view, Gen 4:17–24 is the proper context for understanding Gen 6:1, for there we read of the first cities and civilizations of the Cainites, with their concomitant polygamy and oppressive rule. As a result, proponents argue that verses 6:1–4 describe “how this emerging Cainite kingship achieved its evil endeavors and God’s judgment.”²⁵ The Nephilim of verse 4 are, then, not to be regarded as the offspring of these aristocrats’ union with the בני־האלהים but are their contemporaries.²⁶

The strengths of this interpretation are three-fold. First, as noted above, it is not unprecedented in the OT to find human kings or rulers designated with the title אלהים, such as Ps 82, which compares the mortality of earthly rulers to the eternity of God (vv. 1, 6).²⁷ While it may be argued that the actual formula בני־האלהים does not occur in this Psalm, Kline finds support for this understanding in God’s promise to be a Father to David, his son (2 Sam 7:14).²⁸

²⁴ Matthews, *Genesis 1–11*, 328.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 328–29.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Other such uses of אלהים include Exod 21:6, 22:6, et al.

²⁸ M. Kline, “Divine Kingship and Genesis 6:1–4,” *WTJ* 24 (1962): 187–204. Here Kline argues that the ancient Near Eastern practice of sacral kingship is the best historical context for understanding Gen 6:1–4.

Kline also notes that it was biblical precedent for אֱלֹהִים as a designation for human rulers that led to this understanding becoming so prevalent within Jewish exegesis.

Second, this is an interpretation shared by Jewish scholars for centuries. Pre-Christian Midrashic exposition of the Torah assigned to בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים the meaning “sons of nobles,”²⁹ and rabbinical exegesis followed suit (i.e., R. Saadiah Gaon). The later Medieval Jewish exegete Ibn Ezra understood the phrase to refer to “the sons of the judges who dispensed God’s (*Elohim*) justice.” These men chose women suitable for them and produced “mighty men.”³⁰ The Targumic tradition likely understood בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים in this way as well, referring to them as “sons of the great” (*Tg. Onq.*) and “sons of the mighty” (*Tg. Ps.-J.*).³¹ There is, then, a strong interpretive consensus and precedent among Jewish exegetes for the interpretation of בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים as human rulers or judges. But the interpretation is not altogether uncommon among modern Christian exegetes; the work of Meredith Kline, who articulated a cogent argument for this view, was cited above (see fn. 28).

Third, this interpretation makes more sense of the pericope’s literary context than does the angelic view. The beginnings of civilization and city-dwelling, while nevertheless cast in a negative light by the author by virtue of its close association with the murderous pair Cain and Lamech, make for a somewhat plausible precedent to prepare the reader of Gen 6:1–4 for the

²⁹ H. Freedman and M. Simon, *Midrash Rabbah* (10 vols.; London: Soncino Press, 1939), 213. Here R. Simeon b. Yoḥai actually cursed all who would call these rulers the sons of God. See also M. Linetski, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon’s Commentary on the Book of Creation* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 2002) for a similar interpretation. R. Saadiah Gaon’s observed 1) that man was punished, not the “sons of God,” and 2) it the was evil of man that had increased, not that of the “sons of God”, concluding that the בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים were men and not divine beings (p. 207).

³⁰ H. Strickland and A. Silver, *Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis* (New York: Menorah Publishing Co., Inc., 1988), 93.

³¹ J. Etheridge, trans., *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1862), 176, 46.

concept of kingship (Gen 4:17–22). Moreover, the evil nature of these kings (supposedly observed in their “taking” and evidenced by God’s judgment in verse 3 and verses 5–8) means that, on this view, Gen 6:1–4 falls neatly in place behind the wicked actions of Cain’s descendants in Genesis 4. Despite this, Cain’s descendants are left at the end of chapter four and never heard from again, and the narrative turns quickly to consider the son born to Adam as a substitute for righteous Abel (Gen 4:25), and his lineage (Gen 5:1–9:29). His name is Seth, in whose days men will begin to call upon the name of the Lord (Gen 4:26). In this light, the wicked kings of Cain’s generation seem quite distant by the beginning of Genesis 6, and too much material (indeed, an entire chapter) separates the two accounts.

Criticism of View Two: בני־האלהים as Fallen Angels or Celestial Beings

As anticipated above, this interpretation is not without problems. First, Kline had argued that the ancient Near Eastern practice of sacral kingship, in which rulers were considered to be at least partly divine and were often referred to as “sons” of the various gods, provides the best frame of reference for understanding what is taking place in Gen 6:1–4.³² But Matthews disagrees with Kline, writing that while there are instances in ancient Near Eastern literature where individual kings are referred to as “a son” of the gods, no evidence exists for the grouping of these kings into a collective “sons” of gods.³³ Indeed, Kline appealed specifically to a set of Ugaritic epics which assigned king Krt the name *krt bn il* (“son of El”),³⁴ an individual title, rather than a collective.

³² Kline, “Divine Kingship,” 191.

³³ Matthews, *Genesis 1–11*, 329.

³⁴ Kline, “Divine Kingship,” 192.

Second, nothing in the narrative thus far—from the creation account through the garden and fall narratives down through the genealogies of Cain and Seth—has prepared the reader for the notion of kingship,³⁵ and it may be anachronistic to read into Gen 6:1 the notion of rulers and judges.

Third and finally, it is argued by those who advance this view that verse 2's מכל אשר בחרו suggests polygamy, translating the subordinate clause as variant or another of “whichever they chose.” Only those with the power of kingship, it is argued, would have been capable of taking wives indiscriminately and without regard for their status. Supporting this interpretation is the reading of מן as an explicative (“and they took for themselves wives: whichever ones they chose”).³⁶ But the preposition may also be translated as the partitive, with כל simply serving as the larger group out of which the women were chosen.³⁷ On the other hand, an explicative מן could also support the Sethite view, on the grounds that the Sethites married whoever they chose without regard for their “spiritual status.”³⁸

While we need not go as far as Keil, who dismissed completely this ancient Jewish interpretation,³⁹ it is still not as contextually plausible as the Sethite view, to which we now turn.

View Three: בני־האלהים as the Righteous Descendants of Adam Through Seth

³⁵ Matthews, *Genesis 1–11*, 329.

³⁶ Kline, “Divine Kingship,” 196.

³⁷ E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (2nd English ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1910). Gesenius cites Gen 6:1 to illustrate this, while Williams includes it as an example of the explicative מן, demonstrating the lack of interpretive consensus on even this small element of the text. R. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline* (2nd ed.; Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), 57.

³⁸ L. Birney, “An exegetical study of Genesis 6:1–4,” *JETS* 13 (1970), 48.

³⁹ C. Keil & F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch* (COT 1; Peabody, MA: 2006), 81.

The long history of debate regarding the interpretation of Gen 6:1–4 precludes any exegete from clinging dogmatically to his view regarding the identity of the בני־האלהים. Each has its merits and weaknesses, as has been shown. While the Sethite view is no exception, this paper will argue that it is the best way to understand the identity of the בני־האלהים, and will seek to advance the argument lexically and contextually.

The Lexical Argument

While it is true, as shown above (see “View One: בני־האלהים as Fallen Angels or Celestial Beings”), that בני־האלהים is elsewhere in the OT a designation for angelic beings, it was pointed out that the context of each of those three occurrences is that of a heavenly council, a setting radically different from that of Gen 6:1–4, and that nothing in the narrative from Gen 1:1 up through 6:1 has prepared the reader for such a setting, and the same is true of the kingship view as well. This contextual problem favors a different understanding, namely, that the בני־האלהים are the formerly-righteous descendants of godly Seth.⁴⁰

Lexically, בני־האלהים as a phrase does not occur with the meaning of spiritual sonship, but elsewhere the godly are called the children of God. In Exod 4:22, YHWH declares Israel to be his son, בני בכרי ישראל, while in Deut 32:5 Moses cites the Israelites’ disobedience as the reason they do not occupy the place of the sons of God (בניו). In verses 6–7 of the same chapter, YHWH is their father, while in verses 18–19 he is the “rock” who brought forth (ילדך) his “sons” and “daughters.” A very close lexical parallel to our phrase is found in Hosea 1:10, where YHWH declares that despite the disobedience of Israel, they would one day be called his sons (בני אליהו),

⁴⁰ Keil notes that the angelic interpretation stands only as long as the בני־האלהים admits of no other meaning.

“sons of the living God”). Through Isaiah, YHWH calls for the return of his “sons” and “daughters” from afar. (Isa 11:1). Other such references include Isa 45:11, Jer 31:20, and Ps 73:15.⁴¹ Exegetes debate whether the sonship in view in these texts is spiritual or merely depicts a certain amount of intimate love, care, and guidance on the part of God toward his people.⁴² Regardless, later Israel may have seen themselves in the expression בְּנֵי־אֱלֹהִים in Gen 6:1–4, especially after the giving of Moses’ speech (Deut 32; citations above), and keeping in mind that the Israelites themselves were descended from Seth through Noah, Terah, and eventually Abram.

History & Variety Within the Sethite View

Though this interpretation does not enjoy acceptance from the critical guild like the angelic view or benefit from a long history of Jewish exegesis like the kingship view, the Sethite view does have support from early church history, through the Reformation, and down to the present. Ephrem the Syrian wrote: “[Moses] called the sons of Seth ‘sons of God,’ those who, like the sons of Seth, had been called ‘the righteous people of God.’”⁴³ Augustine agreed with Ephrem’s interpretation,⁴⁴ and Calvin, heavily influenced by Augustine’s writings, followed suit. Much like the thesis of this paper, Calvin understood Gen 6 to relate how the once-righteous descendants of Seth became corrupt, arguing that Moses employed the expression בְּנֵי־אֱלֹהִים to highlight the ungratefulness of the descendants of Seth when they intermarried with the daughters of Cain and other races.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Calvin’s contemporary Luther argued that the

⁴¹ These references were found in Leroy Birney, “An exegetical study of Genesis 6:1-4,” *JETS* 13, 46.

⁴² J. Küh, “בֶּן *bēn* son,” *TLOT*, 244.”

⁴³ Louth, *Genesis 1–11*, 124.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ A. McGrath and J. I. Packer, eds., *Genesis by John Calvin* (CCC; Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 67.

once righteous sons of Seth obeyed for a time Adam's (speculative) command to avoid intermarriage with the wicked Cainites, but after his death indiscriminately took wives from among them. Like Calvin, Luther understood chapters 3–6 of Genesis to teach that in antediluvian times (and after) there were two races of men: those who worshipped God (Sethites) and those who rebelled against him. For Luther, the descendants of Seth were the true church, those “who had the promise of the blessed Seed and belonged to the blessed Seed.”⁴⁶

In more recent times, the Pentateuch volume of the important commentary series by Keil and Delitzsch advanced the Sethite view, arguing that the בני־האלהים must be interpreted theologically as well as philologically. More specifically, its meaning is related to the concept of the *imago dei*; it cannot be restricted to angels alone but must also be applicable “to all beings which bear the image of God.”⁴⁷ Matthews prefers this understanding as well, noting the above-mentioned references to Israel as the children of God.⁴⁸ Significantly, he also argues that the construct form בני has האלהים as a “genitive of quality,” (i.e., “godly sons”) furthering bolstering the argument that בני־האלהים here refers to the righteous descendants of Seth.

Variations of this view have been advanced as well. John Sailhamer has argued that בני־האלהים does not mean angels but rather the descendants of Seth, who innocently married and multiplied upon the earth. The passage, then, is a summary of the “state of affairs” of Adam's descendants at the close of Seth's genealogy. They did not sin by marrying the “daughters of men” but simply continued procreating just as the descendants of Seth were depicted as doing

⁴⁶ J. Pelikan and D. Poellot, eds., *Luther's Works*, vol. 2 (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1960), 10–11.

⁴⁷ Keil & Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 81.

⁴⁸ Matthews, *Genesis 1–11*, 330.

throughout chapter 5.⁴⁹ Lyle Eslinger in 1979 published an article in which he reversed the traditional Sethite interpretation, arguing that the בני־האלהים are the Cainites of chapter 4 and the “daughters of men” are the Sethites of chapter 5.⁵⁰

Despite arguments advanced against it by scholars holding to one of the other two interpretations of בני־האלהים, it has been demonstrated that the view which understands these “sons of God” as the once-righteous descendants of Seth has enjoyed a long history of scholarly support and a recent upsurge in exegetes who argue for its plausibility. A closer look at its literary context will help to illustrate why this is the case.

The Contextual Argument

It was noted above (see “The Literary Context and Function of Gen 6:1–4”) that Gen 6:1–4 is a literary digression at the close of Seth’s genealogy. It comes just as the author has introduced Noah’s three sons through a segmented genealogy (Gen 5:32), and serves to provide a backdrop of unprecedented wickedness (vv. 1–7) against which righteous Noah is to be viewed (v. 8); he alone retains the godliness the previous generations have now left behind.⁵¹ The author does this by contrasting Noah’s righteous standing before God with the behavior of the בני־

⁴⁹ Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative*, 120–21. There are at least two problems with this view. First, if the descendants of Seth did not sin in their unions with the “daughters of men,” this view fails to sufficiently reckon with God’s promise of judgment in 6:3 and vv. 5–7, as well as the entire pericope’s placement as introductory to the flood narrative. Second, by reading 6:1–4 as an epilogue to the genealogy, its transitional nature is overlooked, as well as the fact that Seth’s genealogy does not conclude with the beginning of chap. 5 but continues to 9:28.

⁵⁰ Lyle Eslinger, “A contextual identification of the bene ha’elohim and banoth ha’adam in Genesis 6:1–4,” *JSOT* 13, 65–73. His interpretation derives, in part, from the repetition of בנות throughout chap. 5. But while this view is to be commended for its close attention to the pericope’s literary context, בנות is not the only word that links 6:1–4 with chap. 5, for both בנות and בנים occur in tandem throughout the preceding chapter. Moreover, בן occurs five times from Gen 4:25 through 6:1–4 and not at all in Genesis until 4:25, thus weakening Eslinger’s contextual exclusivity for בנות.

⁵¹ Josephus writes: “Now this posterity of Seth continued to esteem God as the Lord of the universe...for seven generations; but in process of time they were perverted, and forsook the practices of their forefathers...” Josephus, *Antiquities*, 3.1.72.

האלהים, who take center stage in the events of Gen 6:1–4. That the בני־האלהים are the formerly godly descendants of Seth may be demonstrated contextually by three arguments.

First, a contrast is implied in the text between the “sons of God” and the “daughters of man.” When God cursed the serpent, he declared a division of two seeds (זרע): that of the woman, and that of the serpent, and promised that enmity would exist between the offspring of each until the woman’s seed decisively defeats that of the serpent. Later in the narrative, in chapters 4 and 5, the author begins to flesh out this dual seed. After their expulsion from the garden, Eve gave birth first to evil Cain (Gen 4:1) and then righteous Abel (v. 2). Cain’s race of city-dwellers and founders of civilized arts became as evil as he was, beginning with his own act of fratricide⁵² (v. 8) and culminating in the polygamous and murderous life of Lamech (vv. 19–24).⁵³ Eve conceives again, however, this time giving birth to Seth. She declares, in essence, that her newborn son is “another seed” (זרע) to replace Abel.⁵⁴ Then Seth marries and begins to father children, and immediately men begin to call on the name of YHWH (v. 26).⁵⁵ The author has thus deliberately contrasted the lineage of Cain, whose offspring did not worship the true God but instead rebelled against him, with that of Seth, whose offspring for a time worshipped God and called on his name. Cain’s line is born into murder, Seth’s into worship. This contrast, then, is presumably in view in Gen 6:1–4.⁵⁶ The once-godly Sethites, the “sons of God” who once

⁵² Cf. the apostle John’s commentary on the matter: “For what reason did [Cain] slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother’s were righteous” (1 Jn 3:12).

⁵³ Josephus writes: “Nay, even while Cain was alive, it came to pass that the posterity of Cain became exceeding wicked, every one successively dying one after another more wicked than the former.” Josephus, *Antiquities*, 2.1.66.

⁵⁴ Whitelaw notes that Eve’s recognition of Seth as a “son from God” gives the Sethite interpretation “a historical basis.” T. Whitelaw, *Genesis* (TPC, 1; Chicago: Wilcox & Follett, N. D.), 102. A historical basis is also to be found, he argues, in the fact that the Sethites already had begun “to call themselves by the name of Jehovah.”

⁵⁶ Birney, 46, writes: “The Sethite line appears as a distinct entity in the context of this portion of Genesis (as angels do not).” He cites Murray, “Quite naturally, the title ‘sons of God’ can be taken as another specification of the discrimination already established.”

called on his name, have now rebelled against him by choosing wives indiscriminately, without regard to spiritual status or condition.⁵⁷

Second, whereas little in the narrative has prepared the Israelite reader for the concept of kingship or fallen angels, repetition of the term בן has paved the way for an understanding of בני־האלהים as Sethite descendants. The term first occurs in Gen 4:25, not coincidentally at Seth's birth: "Adam knew his wife again, and she conceived and bore a son." It next occurs in Gen 5:29, where the author breaks with his characteristic genealogical formula (which simply provides the verb ילד with subject followed by the name of the son) to declare that Lamech fathered a "son." A few verses later, Noah is said to be a "son of five hundred years" when he fathered his three sons. The next two occurrences of בן are found in our text, בני־האלהים in verses 2 and 4. By associating sonship with the parade examples of the godly lineage, Seth and Noah, the author has sufficiently prepared the reader to understand בני־האלהים as godly (or once-godly) men like those which the author has just set forth in chapter 5.

Third, understanding the בני־האלהים as once-godly Sethites does not require the exegete to ignore the rest of the passage. It is often contended that the union of "sons of God" with "daughters of man" produced the Nephilim of verse 4. But the passage never explicitly makes that connection, but simply states that they were in the earth "in those days." The point of this passage is not that divine beings cohabitated with human women, producing a race of semi-divine giants, but rather that the intermarriage of Sethites with Cainites produced a "community of unprecedented wickedness."⁵⁸ It is this "unprecedented wickedness" that provides the proper

⁵⁷ Ibid., 45.

⁵⁸ So Matthews, *Genesis 1–11*, 330. He writes, "During this period of amazing Sethite expansion (chap. 5), the Sethite family marries outside its godly heritage, which results in moral decline."

backdrop for viewing Noah, who by the time of the flood is, as far as the narrative of Genesis is concerned, the last remaining Sethite who is faithful to the true God.⁵⁹

The Meaning of Gen 6:1–4

Having established a contextual basis for understanding the meaning of the term בני־האלהים, we are now in a position to determine the intended meaning of the passage. Very simply, Gen 6:1–4 at once shows how the once-godly sons of Seth corrupted themselves (through the indiscriminate taking of wives, following “no marriage law but their own lusts”⁶⁰) and sets forth the patriarch Noah as the last faithful son of Seth remaining on earth. Viewing Gen 6:1–8 as preparatory to Noah’s story encourages such a reading; Noah alone “retains his fidelity and purity when all others have followed the pack.”⁶¹ Moreover, viewing Gen 6:1–4 as preparatory to verses 5–8 and the flood account encourage the understanding that God’s anger is kindled not so much toward those who do not know him, but rather those who do. The sin of the “sons of god,” then was that those who knew God did not reflect that knowledge in their behavior.⁶²

CONCLUSION: A GRATEFUL CONSENSUS

⁵⁹ Ross writes: “In the present section the writer is contrasting the fate of Noah with the fate of the rest of the race – he found grace.” Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 179.

⁶⁰ Pelikan and Poellet, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 1, 10.

⁶¹ Matthews, *Genesis 1–11*, 358. He writes that the author’s distinguishing of Noah from his contemporaries (v. 9) continues the contrast between the righteous and unrighteous already drawn in the genealogies of chaps. 4 and 5 and elucidated in Gen 6:1–4.

⁶² Pelikan and Poellet, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 1, 12. “The Flood came, not because the Cainite race had become corrupt, but because the race of the righteous who had believed God, obeyed His Word, and observed true worship had fallen into idolatry, disobedience of parents, sensual pleasures, and the practice of oppression. “

The text of Gen 6:1–4 is at once demanding and puzzling. Is a consensus possible? Perhaps it is, if the exegete recalls that all three views of the nature of the בני־האלהים and the precise way in which they sinned share at least one thing in common: without divine favor, man is helpless, and simply unable to avoid transgressing God’s established boundaries. Derek Kidner expressed this thought when he wrote: “More important than the detail 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.”⁶³

Later Israel would look expectantly for the Promised Seed of the woman (Gen 3:15), who would defeat once-for-all the serpent who deceived their first parents so long ago in the garden (Rev 20:10) and exercise complete victory over sin (Heb 1:3b; cf. 10:12–14), against which they found themselves helpless. In the church age, we may read Gen 6:1–4 and thank God for his faithfulness to save a righteous remnant for himself (though even Noah’s sons proved helpless; cf. Gen 11:1–9). We may also be reminded of our helplessness (Rom 5:6; Eph 2:1–2; Col 1:21), and out of gratefulness to God for our common salvation (Jude 3), live lives worthy of the gospel, and act in keeping with our spiritual status as the elect “sons of God” (1 John 3:10).

⁶³ D. Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Chicago: InterVarsity, 1967), 84.

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